

# A TEACHER’S GUIDE TO GENDER SENSITIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

## Preventing and responding to biases and bullying

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### Bullying

When students do not conform to gender stereotypes, they often become the target of bullying and harassment from their classmates. As a teacher, it can be hard to handle these situations. Fortunately,

there are ways to prevent bullying that revolves around gender, and even to make learning opportunities out of bad episodes.

## 4 tips to prevent and respond to bullying

### 1. Challenge gender stereotypes

If you teach your students that gender stereotypes are not true or fair, it will be much harder for bullies to use them to justify their actions.

### 2. Set classroom rules at the beginning of the semester

Let your students draft (with your help) a set of rules and norms they are to follow for the rest of the semester. If bullying occurs, you can go back to these rules and discuss how they have been broken and what should the consequence be.

### 3. Discuss cases from other schools

Before anything happens in your class, you can discuss with your students an event that occurred in another school. This will let them discuss it with some detachment, unpack some of the consequences of bullying, and, hopefully, prevent similar cases.

### 4. Make it a learning opportunity

If bullying does happen, use it as an opportunity to start a conversation on how we behave with each other and why this sort of violence is never ok.

## Gender stereotypes

### What are gender stereotypes?

Adapted from <http://www.aauw.org/2014/08/13/why-stereotypes-are-bad/>

High heels were invented by Persian soldiers and adopted by elite European men around 1600. A century later, they had become women's fashion.

A **stereotype** is a shortcut — that is, it allows your brain to make a snap judgment based on immediately visible characteristics such as gender, race, or age. Your brain is hardwired to make quick calls, and that's ok. The

problem comes when we start to apply those stereotypes beyond that immediate impulse. That's called **bias**, which is basically a belief that a stereotype is true. For example, the stereotype that girls are bad at math can lead to the belief that some innate difference between women and men causes this discrepancy.

Originally, cheerleaders were guys. It wasn't until the 1920s and 1930s that women were really included since the sport was previously deemed too "masculine".

In the 1920, a popular magazine declared: "Being a more decided and stronger colour, [pink] is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl."

## 3 reasons why gender stereotypes are harmful

Gender stereotypes are not facts, nor golden rules. A stereotype is a generalisation and often an exaggeration of a trait. In terms of accuracy, they are far from the truth. But why are they harmful in our classrooms? Here are three main reasons:

### 1. Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat is a well-documented phenomenon. It states that when you hear that you are not supposed to be good at something, you underperform, often unconsciously. For instance, studies have proven that girls are just as capable as boys when it comes to maths. When we eliminate the gender stereotype that girls can't do maths, we prevent half of the class from underperforming.

### 2. Gender bias

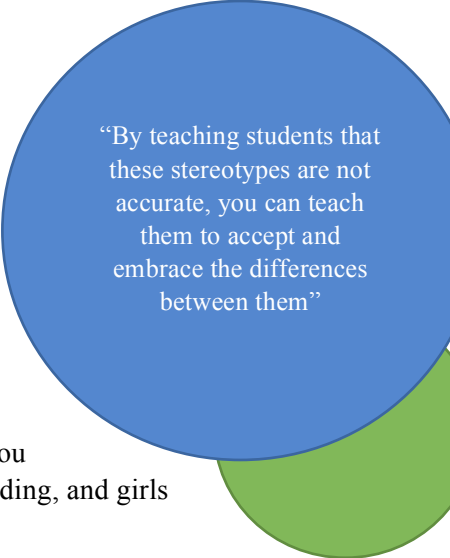
Gender stereotypes drive gender biases in teachers. Subconscious gender bias in teachers has repercussions by disadvantaging some students (more on gender bias in the next sections). Without gender stereotypes, gender bias is likely to disappear.

### 3. Peer pressure & Bullying

Children are so often exposed to gender stereotypes (in their textbooks, through media, etc.) that they start believing that everything else is wrong or not normal. This can result in bullying and harassment directed at students who do not fit the stereotypes. By teaching students that these stereotypes are not accurate, you can teach them to embrace the differences between them and respect each other.

## 4 easy way to break gender stereotypes in the classroom

1. When you need a student to carry something, do not ask for “a boy”. Most girls are just as capable of helping you out. Instead, ask for “a student”. The first couple of times you might have to actively encourage girls to volunteer. Begin by picking a girl a couple of times in a row, then move towards calling alternately a boy and a girl.
2. The same idea applies with other roles normally assigned to boys (e.g. keeping the class quiet while a teacher is gone) or with roles normally assigned to girls (e.g. keeping the class tidy, decorating things – encourage boys to volunteer for these as well). Mix it up!
3. When you use examples in class, you can be intentional in what actions you assign to what gender. For example, you can mention boys dancing or reading, and girls playing with toy cars or liking soccer.
4. As a teacher, you are the authority figure and a role model for your students. If you show them, through your actions and words, that behaviours outside the stereotypical ones are acceptable and normal, your students will start believing it and act accordingly.



“By teaching students that these stereotypes are not accurate, you can teach them to accept and embrace the differences between them”

## Gender bias

Adapted from: <http://www.education.com/reference/article/gender-bias-in-teaching/>

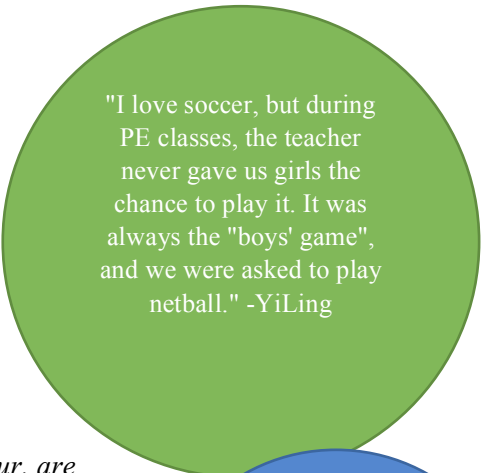
As teachers, we strive to treat all students the same way; however, we all have unconscious biases that, if ignored, can become harmful to the students.

### What is gender bias?

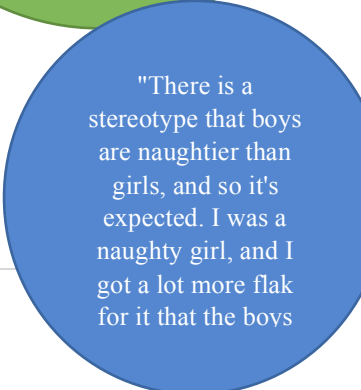
**Gender bias** occurs when we make assumptions regarding behaviours, abilities or preferences of students based upon their gender.

*Common expectations: Boys naturally exhibit boisterous, unruly behaviour, are academically able, rational, and socially uncommunicative. Girls are quiet, polite, and studious, possess better social skills than boys and excel at reading and the language arts.*

### Why is it harmful?



"I love soccer, but during PE classes, the teacher never gave us girls the chance to play it. It was always the "boys' game", and we were asked to play netball." -YiLing



"There is a stereotype that boys are naughtier than girls, and so it's expected. I was a naughty girl, and I got a lot more flak for it than the boys

Because of these biases, we accept more easily certain behaviours from certain students rather than others, or we expect some to succeed in certain fields.

These expectations translate in unfair or biased actions that have detrimental consequences for the students' learning and for the classroom climate.

"When one of my classmates was rough with me and hurt my finger, I cried out in pain, and the teacher said "who asked you to play with him? He's rough and much stronger than you. Of course you'll get hurt." -Rachel

For instance, our assumptions encourage boys to believe that success in science and mathematics should come easily to them. Some males even report dropping out of college science and mathematics programs because they no longer perceived these subjects as easy. On the other hand, unruly girls often receive harsher punishment than their male counterparts do.

## 7 Solutions to gender bias in the classroom

Gender bias can occur within any subject areas and school activity. Here are seven ways to eliminate it.

### 1. Asking and answering questions

#### The problem

Target students typically call out answers to the questions, denying other students the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the teacher.

As teachers, we tend to ask target students more complicated questions and we are often willing to work with them to reach the answer if they do not get it immediately (e.g. by breaking the problem into smaller questions). Conversely, if another student fails to answer the question, we are likely to ask a target student to provide the answer.

This happens often in sciences where boys are perceived as having natural talent or being smarter. The same applies for girls in subjects perceived as more feminine (literature, humanities, etc.).

This means that target students get to engage more with the subject and get more practice in tackling complicated tasks.

#### The solution

- ❖ Observe: Which students do you frequently interact with? Who are the target students in your class? Do you ask complicated question to both boys and girls?
- ❖ Do not allow students to call out answer, rather, pick the students yourself, deliberately alternating between boys and girls.
- ❖ Ask challenging question to everyone. If they cannot answer, guide them by breaking down the question in simpler steps.

### 2. Giving feedback

#### The problem

Our gender biases are reflected in the praise and feedback we give to our students. Studies have shown that girls receive less meaningful and less critical praise than boys do. While boys' work is described as unique or brilliant, girls' work

#### TARGET STUDENT

The term "target students" refers to groups of students who dominate the teacher's time and the classroom resources (Tobin & Gallagher, 1987). Target students are typically male but they might vary based on the subject taught. They answer most of the teacher's questions and ask most of the questions.

When you give feedback to girls, do you focus on the content of the work, or on its appearance?

is often undervalued, ignored, or praised for its appearance. This means girls do not receive feedback on their work that could help them improve and learn more.

#### The solution

- ❖ Before praising a girl's work for its appearance, think about its content and put your feedback on that first.
- ❖ You can praise the appearance of students' work, but it should not be the focus of the feedback.
- ❖ Ask yourself, would I give the same feedback if this student were a boy/ a girl? If the answer is no, try to understand why, and change your feedback so that it only reflects the student's abilities, not their gender.

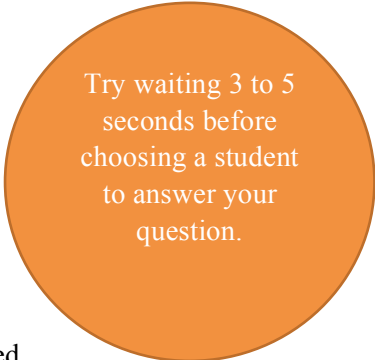
### 3. Pacing the class

#### The problem

Target students are often used to maintain the pace of the class. For example, when posing a question to the class, we may encourage target students to call out answers in order to keep the lesson moving, rather than wait for the other students to process the question and provide an answer. This short "wait time" is detrimental to learning. Target students might also call out answers without direction from teachers, meaning that fewer students, especially girls, engage in the lessons.

#### The solution

- ❖ Wait three to five seconds before choosing a student to answer a question. More students will engage with and improve their understanding of the content.
- ❖ Still ask questions to target students, but prevent them from monopolising the class time.



Try waiting 3 to 5 seconds before choosing a student to answer your question.

### 4. Teacher's authority

#### The problem

Risk-taking behaviour in boys, such as challenging teachers' authority, is expected and at times praised. Conversely, assertiveness in girls is viewed negatively and labelled unfeminine. Similarly, boys who do not exhibit stereotypical masculine behaviours may be ridiculed.


#### The solution

- ❖ Establish a proper consequence for each bad action at the beginning of the year. Deciding as you go makes more room for bias to dictate the punishment.
- ❖ Do not justify unruly behaviours from boys by appealing to their nature.
- ❖ Do not be overly harsh if a girl breaks rule, rather react as you would for a boy.

### 5. Keeping order in the class

#### The problem

Girls are often used as a civilising influence on male students. Disruptive boys are reassigned to sit near or with girls. However, this impacts girls' learning and students' attitudes towards the classroom environment. When we use this practice, it reinforces the stereotype that boys are undisciplined, whereas girls are cooperative and orderly. It also implies that boys need looking after, and that it is the girls' maternal role to do so.



"Boys will be boys" is never a justification for misbehaviour.

#### The solution

- ❖ Make clear that boys, like all students, are expected to exhibit self-control and regulation.

- ❖ Do not justify misbehaviour with “boys will be boys”; rather, place the responsibility on them to behave better.
- ❖ When proposing positive examples, use both boys and girls as role models.

## 6. Looking at textbooks and stereotypes

### The problem

In textbooks, girls are often depicted in passive roles and boys as active participants. Textbooks are also likely to reinforce gender roles: women are seen cooking or caring for children, while men are depicted working or driving.

### The solution

- ❖ Show your students that both girls and boys can do great things by highlighting girls' and women's achievements.
- ❖ Draw students' attention to these stereotypes and ask whether they are always true and if their experiences are different.
- ❖ Ask students to re-draw or re-write problematic images and passages to eliminate the stereotypes in them.

Do the textbooks you use portray boys in an active role and girls in a passive one?

## 7. Removing bias from the assessing methods

### The problem

The style and type of assessments can also be gender-biased. For instance, girls are not encouraged to explore risk-taking behaviours and often do not guess on a multiple choice test, even if they are not penalised for incorrect answers. On the other hand, if boys are uncertain or do not know, they will guess an answer. This means that girls are less likely to complete multiple-choice exams than their male peers.

### The solution

- ❖ Use tests with a variety of question types (short answer, problem solving, and multiple choice) to eliminate gender differences in student achievement.

## Final tips to eliminate gender bias

Unconscious biases are extremely common, and we all have our own, so do not worry if you start noticing that some of your behaviours are similar to those described above. Once you have noticed a pattern, you can start reversing it.

### 1. Tackle the problem at its root

Gender bias is the direct result of gender stereotypes. By reducing your own bias, you are neutralising the effects of some of those stereotypes. However, you can take a step further and break the stereotypes themselves. In this way, you tackle the deeper roots of gender bias and create a better environment for your students.

### 2. Get help

You can invite a colleague you trust to sit in one of your classes and help you identify your biases. External observers can often provide additional information and insights.

### 3. Be ready for the consequences of changing your practices.

Girls are conditioned to receive less of a teacher's attention, and they do not usually cause discipline problems if they are not receiving their fair share, but boys can react negatively to losing a teacher's attention, causing disruption to lessons and becoming discipline problems.

# What is gender?

Adapted from <https://www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender/>

We tend to use the terms “gender” and “sex” interchangeably; this idea is so common that we rarely question it. We are born, assigned a sex (“It’s a girl!” “It’s a boy!”), and sent out into the world. For many people, this causes no problem. Yet, biological sex and gender are different; gender is not necessarily nor solely connected to physical anatomy.

## GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is our innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither, it is how individuals perceive themselves. Gender identity is developed in children by the time they are 3 years old, and rarely changes thereafter. Some people’s gender identity might not match what we would expect: for instance, a kid we consider male might report feeling or being a girl. It is important to remember that this is not something they will outgrow: by the time kids are old enough to articulate these thoughts, their gender identity is already well established.

## GENDER

Gender, on the other hand, refers to behaviours, roles, expectations, and activities in society. We talk about gender when we talk about how people act and interact with each other. Women/girl and Man/boy are genders. Though these two are the most common, other genders exist, for instance some people are agender: they are neither feminine nor masculine.

## SEX vs GENDER

Determined by biology

Assigned at birth

Female, Male, Intersex

Influenced by society

Develops throughout life

Woman, Man, Agender, etc.

## GENDER EXPRESSION

Refers to the ways in which we express our gender through behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice, etc. For instance, having long hair or wearing dresses is considered feminine, while fighting or wearing ties is considered masculine.

## GENDER ROLE

Gender roles are the set of activities and behaviours that society expects from females and males. Our culture recognizes two gender roles: masculine and feminine. Usually, men are expected to work and provide for the family, while women are expected to stay at home and raise the children. People who do not fulfil these expectations often face difficulties and backlash.

Our culture thinks of gender as a binary concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female, which require us to behave in certain ways and play a certain role in society. When someone does not express their gender as expected (a girl with a very short haircut), plays a role that is not normally associated to our gender (at dad staying at home with the children), or identify with a gender different from what society expects, they often face discrimination and pushback.

This pushback can be especially traumatising in school. Children who do not fulfil the expectations tend to have a very hard time growing up. They often face pressure from their family to change; they become the target of jokes by their friends. These pressures have a negative impact on learning: students are not able to focus on their studies and their performance might decrease substantially. As teachers, we have the power to make the classroom a space where children feel accepted and are free to focus on their studies.

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