

Module 3: The role of gender in bullying

Objectives:

- Help parents understand how gender stereotypes contribute to bullying.
- Provide strategies to promote gender equality at home.

Summary of content:

- Gender norms and bullying. The role of parents in challenging these stereotypes at home
- Help parents understand the role of language in gender stereotypes and how it impacts their teens.
- Sexual harassment and bullying

Lesson 1. The role of parents in challenging gender-based bullying

Gender-based bullying is the highest form of aggression experienced by students, accounting for 80% of school bullying in the USA (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009), and surpassing other forms, such as age-related or ethnicity-related aggression (Adriany, 2019). As a consequence, the students who are victims of such torment experience increased rates of depression, anxiety, academic withdrawal, lowered academic performance, and suicidal ideation (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). To better understand gender-based bullying and take steps toward finding a solution, this lesson will first try to define its components, explain the most important causal factors, and offer some suggestions on how to dismantle it at home.

The first concepts that need an explanation are gender norms, which can be described as “social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society” (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). In other words, they are socially constructed expectations and ideas that a culture has about how men and women should be and how they should act.

Some examples of common gender norms would be:

- „Girls should not be too assertive, they should not talk back to others, and must always be tidy and presentable”
- „Boys must not cry, they should dislike „girly” activities such as art or literature, and focus on sports or other „manly interests.”

These widely accepted social rules associated with masculinity and femininity are not objectively true and are not universally applicable. They are thought to have their origins in childhood, primarily being learned from parents and close family but also benefiting from societal reinforcement (through movies, school, etc.) (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). As a

consequence, such beliefs can lead to negative outcomes, one of which takes the form of gender-based bullying (Abdelrheem et al., 2024).

Gender-based bullying can be defined as threatening and harassing behaviors that are based on gender or the enforcement of gender-role expectations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009), taking the form of different patterns of aggressive expressions (Hellström & Beckman, 2020). From this description, it is understood that gender-based bullying can include sexual harassment, insults, intimidation, assaults, and other forms of aggression regarding the gender of the victim.

- Example 1: A boy is picked on daily because he told his classmates that he takes dancing lessons after school. They start to call him names like „princess”, mocking him for doing a „girly” activity, and even physically grabbing and twirling him as a mean joke. As a result, the boy decides to quit his passion for the sport, and he becomes anxious about sharing personal information with other people, to the point of avoiding most interactions.
- Example 2: A girl who felt good about herself and her short hair moved locations and started going to a new school. Here, to her surprise, her classmates started calling her a boy and gossiping about her, going as far as making Instagram posts about the „new man in class”. This made her very anxious to go to school, affecting her feelings of self-worth and raising concerns about her body image.

A big reason for these aggressive patterns of the bully's behavior lies in the pressure felt by children and adolescents to fit into rigid societal norms regarding masculinity and femininity, or simply put - gender norms. In this sense, boys may face bullying for being weaker, artsy, or not traditionally masculine in general, and girls may encounter aggression for not fitting into conventional appearance or behavior standards.

Reflection question: Can you think of an event when you judged or where you were mean to another person simply because they did not fit into your typical gender norms?

Fortunately, there are many strategies that parents can use to challenge these stereotypes and promote equality and dismantle harmful gender norms in their own homes. It is known that children understand rules as mandatory requirements and thus, they may be less tolerant of gender behaviours that do not correspond to the gender stereotypes and roles they were raised with - this problem is only enforced by the gender representation in textbooks (Brussino & McBrien, 2022).

Therefore, a way to combat these gender stereotypes is to introduce children to books and media that depict people in roles that do not conform to traditional gender roles. You may use media that show women as scientists or interested in math or chemistry and men as nurses or caregivers or engaging in traditional women's activities, such as cooking.

For example: You may introduce your children to female professional soccer players, such as Megan Rapinoe in order to diversify the sports that your children are interested in.

It is also important to engage children equally in play and in physical and mental simulation (UNICEF, 2017). These activities need to encourage children's initiative, sense of self-empowerment and agency.

For example: You may introduce your daughter to carpentry, as in building a birdhouse together, or teach your son how to cook and include him in making dinner.

Multiple studies also highlight the importance of fathers in their children's lives in relation to how gender stereotypes are made (UNICEF, 2017). To avoid the burden of child care being placed only on mothers (often also working) and to bond with their children, fathers first need to remember that they have an innate ability to bond with and nurture their children, an experience rewarding for both the children and the parents. Thus, fathers need to participate in their children's lives.

For example, they may take the children to health check-ups, monitor their nutritional intake and engage with health care workers and their partners about the child's health and wellbeing. They should learn the children's schedule and their body language and „talk often with their children, tell stories, sing and encourage two-way communication”.

Furthermore, parents need to engage in more and longer conversations with their children about their interests, even when they do not comply with their gender-based expectations of their children.

For example: A parent should share their curiosity and knowledge about space with their daughter, even though they expected this type of interest to come from their son.

Lesson 2. Understanding how language impacts gender stereotypes

Since a big part of a child's perception of gender stereotypes comes from parents (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020), we must understand through which channels it is transmitted and how. One of the most common and influential modes of perpetuating gender stereotypes is language, specifically by repeating stereotypes or by using gendered language (Bigler & Leaper, 2015; European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.).

Activity - try to explain how these texts might influence a child's perception of gender:

- „Don't cry like a girl!”;
- „I need to see the doctor, is he here?”;
- „She looks so muscular for a woman”;
- „Man up and deal with it!”;
- „Boys will be boys”;

- „Nice ladies never talk back”.

Simply by hearing these types of expressions and implicit suggestions, especially if they are coming from their parents, children are unconsciously taught harmful stereotypes, which tell them that women can't be strong and successful, that men can't show vulnerability, that it's ok for boys to fight or for girls to be invisible, and many other damaging lessons.

Another way that language affects gender stereotypes comes from how parents attach labels to their children's actions. This is seen for example in how people address ideas differently based on the gender of the child, with women's ideas being seven times more likely to be labeled as „cute” or „pretty” compared to men, whose ideas are called „innovative” or „brave” (Edelman, 2024). Such language discourages girls from expressing their ideas and diminishes their significance.

In regards to boys, if parents are comparing them to girls when they are showing emotions, with phrases like „don't be such a girl”, they are actively teaching them two very harmful ideas: girls are weak and boys should suppress their feelings. These lessons help create in a child a false view of how gender roles should be, perpetuating stereotypes.

These ideas that children learn from their parents about how they should act based on their gender, even if it was not intended, is a large contributor to a variety of problems: higher male suicide rates, low self-esteem in girls and issues with body image, the choices they will make later in life regarding what careers to choose, etc. (Birmingham City University, n.d.).

We prepared **a short guide for parents** on how to model their language to not only be more inclusive, but to also avoid perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes.

- Example 1: Instead of saying “Don't cry like a girl”, parents may reassure their children that it is okay to feel upset and they can freely express their emotions.
- Example 2: Parents should avoid comments such as “She is strong for a girl”, they should simply praise the child without pointing out the gender of the child.
- Example 3: In order to cultivate assertiveness in children, parents need to reinforce that speaking up when we know we are right is something that everyone should do, actively counteracting phrases such as “Nice girls never talk back”. This will also encourage children to stand up for their peers when they are being bullied.
- Example 4: Along with teaching assertiveness, parents should also teach accountability, avoiding phrases such as “Boys will be boys”. Rather, they should give punishments and rewards according to the children's actions, not in regard to the gender expectations they have of their children.

Lesson 3. How gender-based bullying can lead to sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is defined by The U.S. Department of Education (Ali & Duncan, 2010) as “an unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which may include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature”. In schools, sexual harassment often arises from the same dynamics that drive bullying but is intensified by gender and power imbalances reinforced by societal stereotypes.

As for the connection between gender based bullying and sexual harassment, it's important to note that sexual harassment is driven by cultural stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Boys and girls are often socialised into roles that reinforce hierarchies—dominant versus submissive—which underpin bullying behaviours (Elboj-Saso et al., 2020).

For example, boys who conform to traits associated with dominance often assert their status through behaviours like teasing, aggression, and harassment, particularly toward girls or boys seen as "weak" or who don't fit stereotypical masculine roles. Moreover, adolescents often admire traits associated with dominance, particularly in boys. Research shows that aggressive behaviours, including sexualised teasing or harassment, may even enhance social status, creating a toxic environment where harmful actions are normalised and rewarded.

Studies have found a clear progression: bullying in early adolescence often predicts sexual harassment perpetration by later years (Gruber & Fineran, 2015). This escalation is linked to an increase in sexualised behaviour during middle school, where dominance starts to take a more gendered and sexualised form. Bullying rooted in enforcing gender norms—for instance, calling someone “gay” or mocking gender expression—transfers into behaviours aimed at controlling or objectifying others.

There is also an underlying homophobic undertone in sexual harassment among school students - among boys, being called "gay" and among girls, being called “butch” has been found to have particularly severe psychological impacts, leading to increased anxiety and depression, greater alienation from school, and a more negative perception of the school environment. This specific form of gender-based bullying enforces rigid gender expectations while isolating those who are perceived to deviate from them.

Nonverbal and physical harassment are also present, students reporting unwanted touching, suggestive gestures, or invading personal space, often excused as “just joking,” further contributing to an unsafe environment. Social harassment, like spreading rumours about a student's sexual activity, “outing” someone without consent, or excluding peers based on rigid gender expectations, isolates victims and reinforces harmful stereotypes.

Cyberbullying has added a new dimension to sexual harassment, with students facing issues such as the non-consensual sharing of explicit images, body-shaming, and unsolicited sexual messages through social media.

Additionally, gender-based dominance behaviours—where boys are ridiculed for appearing “weak” or uninterested in sports, and girls are harassed for being “bossy” or excelling in male-dominated fields—reinforce rigid norms about masculinity and femininity. Even casual behaviours, such as “locker room talk” or public humiliation through sexualised declarations, contribute to a toxic school culture. These behaviours, often seen as harmless teasing, reflect deeper societal issues where aggression and dominance are rewarded, particularly for boys, while submission is expected of girls.

Parents can employ several strategies to make sure that their children are safe from sexual harassment based on gender and also prevent their children from becoming perpetrators themselves. These strategies include ample conversations with children, discussing consent, showing models of healthy relationships with peers of any gender, encouraging accountability and creating a safe space of communication.

- Example 1: In order to educate the children about consent and respect, a parent may explain that teasing someone by invading their personal space or making unwanted comments about their body is not permitted. They may use an age-appropriate language book or video to explain how consent and boundaries work.
- Example 2: When they notice that their child is mocking a girl for liking soccer, they may have a discussion about how interests are not limited to gender and encourage their child to engage in conversation about the hobby with the girl in question.
- Example 3: To ensure that children have healthy models of human relationships, parents should avoid interrupting each other, listen actively to what their conversation partner is saying and resolve conflicts calmly, with respect.
- Example 4: To encourage accountability, when someone makes a sexist comment, parents need to calmly point out why that comment was hurtful and ask the children to apologize and reflect on why some words or actions can be harmful to others.
- Example 5: In order to create a safe space for communication, parents should ask their child open-ended questions about how their day was, including how classmates and friends treat each other. They also need to reassure them that they are there to listen and help them resolve uncomfortable experiences without judging them. They can recount their own experiences with bullying. They may say „How was school today? Did you have a good time with your friends? It’s good that you get along with your peers, when I was your age, my classmates made me uncomfortable so many times and I swore I will be there for my child if they go through the same thing so you can always count on my help in case you face difficulties”.

We also encourage parents to monitor their children’s online activity and explain to their children that not everyone on the internet has good intentions so in case someone makes them uncomfortable, they should report it to the parents.

Activity: Can you imagine a scenario where your child is sexually harassed in school because of their gender? Come with an action plan on how you and your child should act and who to inform in order to stop this.

References

- Abdelrheem, S. S., El-Gibaly, O., & Khairy, H. (2024). Perception of gender norms and its association with bullying behavior among adolescent students. *Journal of the Egyptian Public Health Association*, 99(1), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42506-024-00151-1>
- Adriany, V. (2019). 'I don't want to play with the Barbie boy': Understanding Gender-Based Bullying in a Kindergarten in Indonesia. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-019-00046-2>
- Anagnostopoulos, D., Buchanan, N. T., Pereira, C., & Lichty, L. F. (2009). School Staff Responses to Gender-Based Bullying as Moral Interpretation: An Exploratory Study. *Educational Policy*, 23(4), 519–553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807312469>
- Bigler, R. S., & Leaper, C. (2015). Gendered Language: Psychological Principles, Evolving Practices, and Inclusive Policies. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2(1), 187–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732215600452>
- Birmingham City University. (n.d.). *Gender stereotypes in childhood: What's the harm?* Retrieved December 12, 2024
- Brussino, O. & McBrien, J. (2022). Gender stereotypes in education. *OECD Education Working Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a46ae056-en>
- Cislaghi, B., & Heise, L. (2020). Gender norms and social norms: Differences, similarities and why they matter in prevention science. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 42(2), 407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13008>
- Edelman. (2024). *Play Well* report. LEGO Group. <https://www.edelmandxi.com/work/play-well>
- Elboj-Saso, C., Iñiguez-Berrozpe, T., & Valero-Errazu, D. (2020). Relations With the Educational Community and Transformative Beliefs Against Gender-Based Violence as Preventive Factors of Sexual Violence in Secondary Education. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(1-2), 578–601. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520913642>
- European Institute for Gender Equality. (n.d.). *Stereotypes: How language manifests gender-related stereotypes*. Retrieved December 12, 2024
- Gruber, J., & Fineran, S. (2015). Sexual Harassment, Bullying, and School Outcomes for High School Girls and Boys. *Violence against Women*, 22(1), 112–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215599079>
- Hellström, L., & Beckman, L. (2020). Adolescents' perception of gender differences in bullying. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 61(1), 90–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12523>

UNICEF (2017). Tip Sheets On Gender-Responsive Parenting. Retrived from https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/16446/file/Tips_on_Gender_Responsive_Parenting.pdf