# Module 3. The role of gender in bullying

Gender stereotypes play a significant role in bullying behaviors among children and adolescents. This module explores how gender norms contribute to bullying, provides strategies for promoting gender equality at home, and examines the connection between gender-based bullying and sexual harassment. By understanding these dynamics, parents can help create safer environments for their children and contribute to dismantling harmful gender stereotypes that fuel bullying behaviors.

Throughout this module, we'll explore practical approaches parents can take to challenge gender stereotypes, use inclusive language, and prevent gender-based bullying from escalating into sexual harassment. Each section provides concrete examples and actionable strategies that can be implemented at home to foster respect, equality, and healthy relationships.

# Understanding Gender-Based Bullying

Gender-based bullying represents the highest form of aggression experienced by students, accounting for 80% of school bullying in the USA and surpassing other forms such as age-related or ethnicity-related aggression. The consequences for victims are severe, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, academic withdrawal, lowered academic performance, and suicidal ideation.

At the root of gender-based bullying 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." These socially constructed expectations dictate how men and women should behave and present themselves.

### Common Gender Norms

"Girls should not be too assertive, they should not talk back to others, and must always be tidy and presentable"

### Harmful Expectations

"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 or universally applicable. They originate primarily in childhood, learned from parents and close family, and are reinforced through societal channels like media and school environments. Such beliefs often lead to negative outcomes, particularly in the form of gender-based bullying.

Gender-based bullying encompasses threatening and harassing behaviors based on gender or the enforcement of gender-role expectations. This can include sexual harassment, insults, intimidation, assaults, and other forms of aggression regarding the victim's gender. The pressure children and adolescents feel to conform to rigid societal norms regarding masculinity and femininity drives these aggressive patterns of behavior.

> **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?
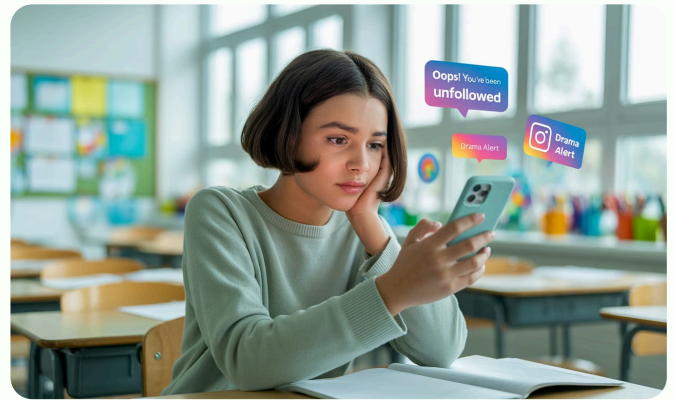
# Real-World Examples of Gender-Based Bullying

### Example 1: The Boy Who Danced

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: The Girl with Short Hair

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.





These examples illustrate how gender-based bullying operates in real-world settings. Boys may face bullying for being perceived as weaker, artsy, or not traditionally masculine, while girls may encounter aggression for not fitting into conventional appearance or behavior standards. The psychological impact of such bullying can be profound, affecting children's self-esteem, academic performance, and social development.

The underlying cause of these aggressive behaviors is the rigid enforcement of gender norms. Children who don't conform to expected gender roles become targets, creating a cycle where both victims and perpetrators are trapped by harmful stereotypes. Understanding these dynamics is the first step toward creating more inclusive environments where children can express themselves authentically without fear of ridicule or harassment.

# Strategies for Parents to Challenge Gender Stereotypes

Parents play a crucial role in dismantling harmful gender norms and promoting equality at home. Children understand rules as mandatory requirements and may be less tolerant of gender behaviors that don't correspond to the stereotypes they were raised with–a problem further reinforced by gender representation in textbooks and media.

## Diversify Media Exposure

Introduce children to books and media that depict people in roles that do not conform to traditional gender roles. Show women as scientists or interested in STEM fields and men as nurses or caregivers engaging in traditionally feminine activities like cooking.

## Encourage Equal Participation

Engage children equally in play and in physical and mental stimulation. These activities should encourage children's initiative, sense of self-empowerment, and agency regardless of gender.

## Promote Father Involvement

Fathers should actively participate in childcare, taking children to health check-ups, monitoring nutritional intake, and engaging in two-way communication. This helps avoid placing the burden of child care solely on mothers.

## Support Non-Conforming Interests

Engage in meaningful conversations with children about their interests, even when they don't align with gender-based expectations. Show genuine curiosity and support for all pursuits.

For example, you might introduce your children to female professional soccer players like Megan Rapinoe to diversify the sports they're interested in. You could teach your daughter carpentry by building a birdhouse together or involve your son in cooking dinner. These activities help break down artificial barriers created by gender stereotypes.

Studies highlight the importance of fathers in children's lives in relation to how gender stereotypes are formed. Fathers have an innate ability to bond with and nurture their children–an experience rewarding for both parties. By actively participating in their children's lives, fathers can help challenge traditional gender roles and provide positive role models.

# The Impact of Language on Gender Stereotypes

Language is one of the most powerful channels through which gender stereotypes are transmitted and reinforced. Since a significant part of a child's perception of gender stereotypes comes from parents, understanding how language perpetuates these stereotypes is crucial. This happens primarily through repeating stereotypes or using gendered language in everyday conversations.

### Harmful Phrases

"Don't cry like a girl!"

"I need to see the doctor, is he here?"

"She looks so muscular for a woman"

### Reinforcing Stereotypes

"Man up and deal with it!"

"Boys will be boys"

"Nice ladies never talk back"

By hearing these expressions and implicit suggestions, especially from parents, children unconsciously learn harmful stereotypes: that women can't be strong and successful, that men can't show vulnerability, that it's acceptable for boys to fight or for girls to be invisible, and many other damaging lessons.

Another way language affects gender stereotypes is through how parents attach labels to their children's actions. Research shows that women's ideas are seven times more likely to be labeled as "cute" or "pretty" compared to men's, whose ideas are called "innovative" or "brave." Such language discourages girls from expressing their ideas and diminishes their significance.

For boys, comparing them to girls when they show emotions, with phrases like "don't be such a girl," teaches two harmful ideas: girls are weak, and boys should suppress their feelings. These lessons create a false view of gender roles, perpetuating stereotypes that contribute to higher male suicide rates, low self-esteem in girls, body image issues, and limiting career choices later in life.

# Guide for Parents: Using Inclusive Language

Parents can model language that is not only more inclusive but also avoids perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. Here's a practical guide with examples of how to transform common gendered phrases into more supportive and inclusive language.

## Instead of Saying...

- "Don't cry like a girl"
- "She is strong for a girl"
- "Nice girls never talk back"
- "Boys will be boys"
- "Man up and deal with it"

## Try Saying...

- "It's okay to feel upset and express your emotions"
- "She is strong and capable"
- "It's important to speak up when you know you're right"
- "Everyone is responsible for their actions"
- "Let's find a way to handle this situation"

By reassuring children that it's okay to feel upset and freely express their emotions, parents can counteract harmful phrases like "Don't cry like a girl." Similarly, praising a child's strength without referencing their gender ("She is strong" rather than "She is strong for a girl") acknowledges their abilities without reinforcing stereotypes.

To cultivate assertiveness, parents should reinforce that speaking up when we know we're right is something everyone should do, actively counteracting phrases like "Nice girls never talk back." This approach also encourages children to stand up for their peers when they're being bullied.

Along with teaching assertiveness, parents should teach accountability, avoiding phrases like "Boys will be boys." Instead, they should give punishments and rewards according to children's actions, not based on gender expectations. This consistent approach helps children understand that their behavior, not their gender, determines how they're treated.
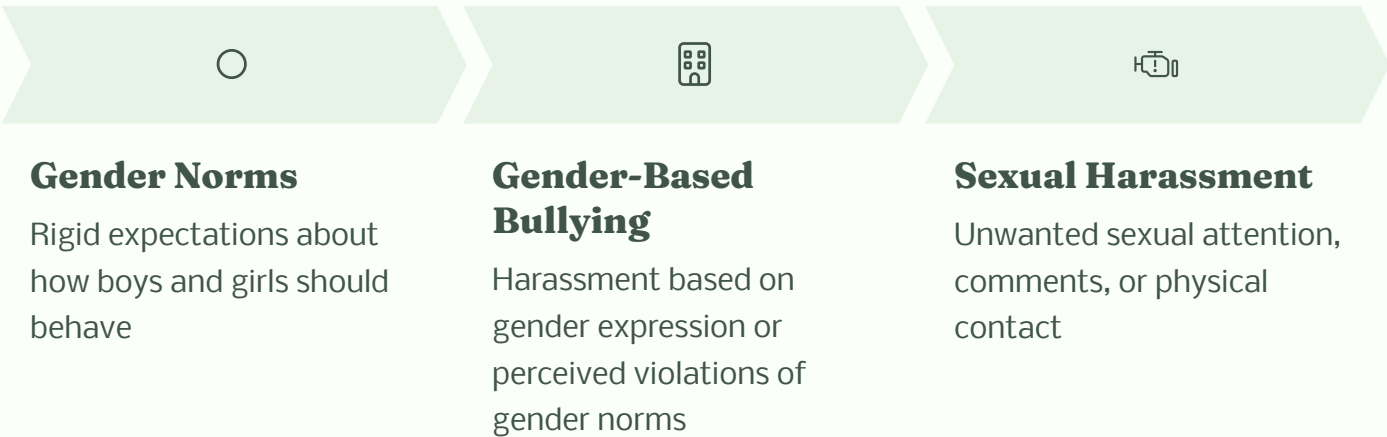
# The Connection Between Gender-Based Bullying and Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is defined by The U.S. Department of Education as "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.

Sexual harassment is driven by cultural stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Boys and girls are often socialized into roles that reinforce hierarchies–dominant versus submissive–which underpin bullying behaviors. Boys who conform to traits associated with dominance often assert their status through behaviors like teasing, aggression, and harassment, particularly toward girls or boys seen as "weak" or who don't fit stereotypical masculine roles.

Adolescents often admire traits associated with dominance, particularly in boys. Research shows that aggressive behaviors, including sexualized teasing or harassment, may even enhance social status, creating a toxic environment where harmful actions are normalized and rewarded. Studies have found a clear progression: bullying in early adolescence often predicts sexual harassment perpetration in later years.

### Gender Norms
Rigid expectations about how boys and girls should behave

### Gender-Based Bullying
Harassment based on gender expression or perceived violations of gender norms

### Sexual Harassment
Unwanted sexual attention, comments, or physical contact

This escalation is linked to an increase in sexualized behavior during middle school, where dominance starts to take a more gendered and sexualized form. Bullying rooted in enforcing gender norms–for instance, calling someone "gay" or mocking gender expression–transfers into behaviors 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.

# Forms of Sexual Harassment in Schools

Sexual harassment in school settings takes various forms, all of which can have serious psychological impacts on students. Understanding these different manifestations is crucial for parents to recognize warning signs and address problems effectively.
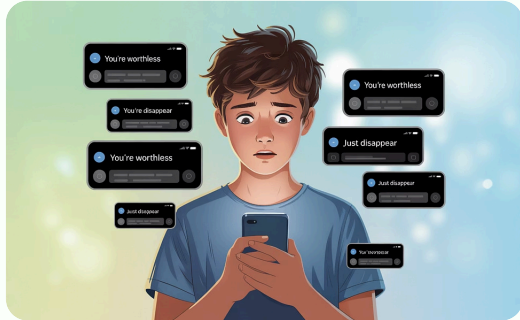


### Cyberbullying

Non-consensual sharing of explicit images, body-shaming, and unsolicited sexual messages through social media platforms.



### Social Harassment

Spreading rumors about a student's sexual activity, "outing" someone without consent, or excluding peers based on rigid gender expectations.



### Physical Harassment

Unwanted touching, suggestive gestures, or invading personal space, often excused as "just joking."

Gender-based dominance behaviors also manifest when boys are ridiculed for appearing "weak" or uninterested in sports, and girls are harassed for being "bossy" or excelling in male-dominated fields. These behaviors reinforce rigid norms about masculinity and femininity and contribute to a toxic school culture.

Even casual behaviors, such as "locker room talk" or public humiliation through sexualized declarations, reflect deeper societal issues where aggression and dominance are rewarded, particularly for boys, while submission is expected of girls. These behaviors, often dismissed as harmless teasing, can have lasting negative effects on students' psychological well-being and academic performance.

The advent of technology has added new dimensions to sexual harassment, with cyberbullying becoming increasingly prevalent. Students now face harassment not only in physical spaces but also in digital environments, where the audience can be much larger and the content can persist indefinitely, magnifying the harm caused.

# Strategies for Parents to Prevent Sexual Harassment

Parents can employ several strategies to protect their children from sexual harassment and prevent them from becoming perpetrators. These approaches focus on building healthy relationships, understanding consent, and creating open communication channels.

### Discuss Consent and Respect

Explain that teasing someone by invading their personal space or making unwanted comments about their body is not permitted. Use age-appropriate books or videos to explain how consent and boundaries work.

### Challenge Gender Limitations

When you notice your child mocking someone for interests that don't align with gender stereotypes, discuss how interests aren't limited by gender and encourage conversation about the hobby instead.

### Model Healthy Relationships

Demonstrate respect in your own relationships by avoiding interrupting each other, listening actively, and resolving conflicts calmly and respectfully.

### Encourage Accountability

When someone makes a sexist comment, calmly point out why it was hurtful and ask them to apologize and reflect on why certain words or actions can harm others.

Creating a safe space for communication is essential. Parents should ask open-ended questions about their child's day, including how classmates and friends treat each other. Reassure them that you're there to listen and help resolve uncomfortable experiences without judgment. Sharing your own experiences with bullying can help normalize these conversations.
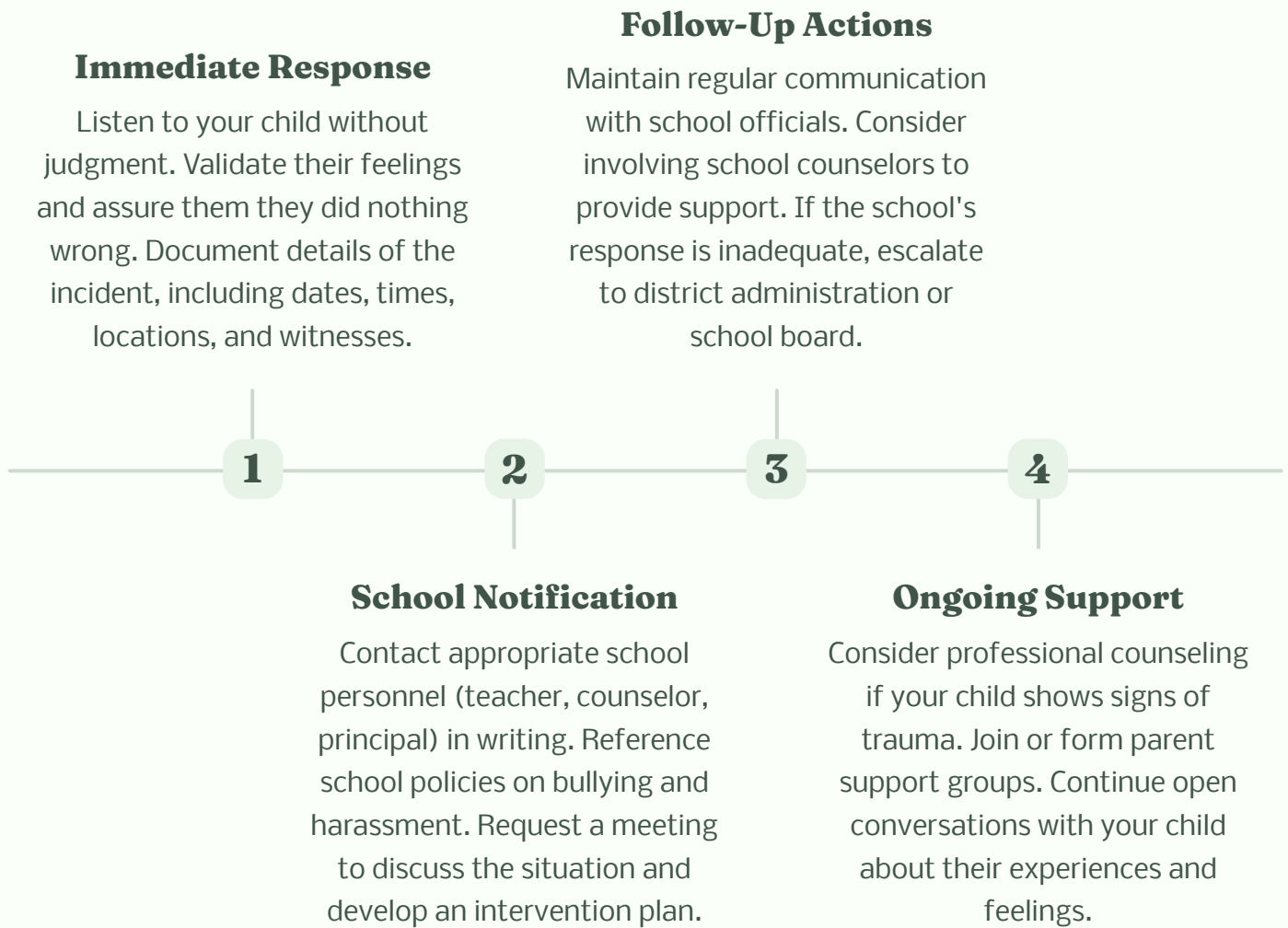
For example, you might say: "How was school today? Did you have a good time with your friends? It's good that you get along with your peers. When I was your age, my classmates made me uncomfortable many times, and I swore I would be there for my child if they went through the same thing, so you can always count on my help if you face difficulties."

Additionally, parents should monitor their children's online activity and explain that not everyone on the internet has good intentions. Children should know to report uncomfortable interactions to their parents immediately.

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

# Creating an Action Plan for Responding to Harassment

When faced with gender-based bullying or sexual harassment, having a clear action plan can help both parents and children respond effectively. This proactive approach not only addresses immediate incidents but also helps prevent future occurrences.

### Immediate Response

Listen to your child without judgment. Validate their feelings and assure them they did nothing wrong. Document details of the incident, including dates, times, locations, and witnesses.

### Follow-Up Actions

Maintain regular communication with school officials. Consider involving school counselors to provide support. If the school's response is inadequate, escalate to district administration or school board.

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### School Notification

Contact appropriate school personnel (teacher, counselor, principal) in writing. Reference school policies on bullying and harassment. Request a meeting to discuss the situation and develop an intervention plan.

### Ongoing Support

Consider professional counseling if your child shows signs of trauma. Join or form parent support groups. Continue open conversations with your child about their experiences and feelings.

Teaching children assertive communication skills can also help them respond to harassment. Role-play scenarios where they practice setting boundaries with phrases like "Stop, I don't like that" or "That comment is inappropriate." Emphasize that they have the right to remove themselves from uncomfortable situations and seek help from trusted adults.

For severe cases, parents should be aware of legal protections. Title IX prohibits sex-based discrimination in schools receiving federal funding, which includes protection against sexual harassment. If school-level interventions are ineffective, parents may need to file a formal complaint with the school district's Title IX coordinator or the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

Remember that addressing harassment is not just about responding to individual incidents but also about changing the culture that allows such behavior to occur. By advocating for comprehensive anti-bullying programs and gender-inclusive policies at your child's school, you can help create a safer environment for all students.

# Monitoring Online Activity and Digital Safety

The digital world presents unique challenges when it comes to gender-based bullying and sexual harassment. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including the non-consensual sharing of explicit images, body-shaming, and unsolicited sexual messages through social media platforms. Parents need specific strategies to help their children navigate these online risks.

## Digital Safety Strategies for Parents

- Establish clear guidelines for internet use, including which platforms are appropriate and time limits

- Use parental controls and privacy settings on devices, apps, and social media accounts

- Regularly check in about online interactions without being invasive

- Teach children about digital footprints and the permanence of online content

- Discuss the risks of sharing personal information or images online

- Explain that online harassment should be reported immediately

- Model healthy digital habits in your own behavior

Open communication is key—children should feel comfortable coming to parents if they encounter troubling content or interactions online. Create an atmosphere where they won't fear punishment or having their devices taken away if they report problems.



When discussing online safety, focus on empowerment rather than fear. Help children understand that they have agency in their digital lives and teach them how to recognize and respond to inappropriate behavior.

Parents should also be aware of warning signs that their child may be experiencing online harassment, such as sudden changes in device use, emotional distress after using technology, or reluctance to discuss online activities. If you notice these signs, approach the conversation with empathy rather than accusation.

For teens, discussions about sexting and image-based abuse are particularly important. Explain the potential legal and social consequences of sharing explicit images, even within relationships. Emphasize that pressuring someone for such images is a form of harassment and that consent is essential in all interactions, both online and offline.

By combining technical safeguards with ongoing conversations about digital citizenship and respect, parents can help their children develop the skills they need to recognize, avoid, and respond to online harassment while still benefiting from the positive aspects of digital connectivity.

# Conclusion: Building a Foundation for Gender Equality

Addressing gender-based bullying requires a multifaceted approach that begins at home. By understanding how gender stereotypes contribute to bullying, parents can take proactive steps to promote equality and respect in their children's lives. The strategies outlined in this guide provide a foundation for creating environments where all children can thrive without the constraints of rigid gender expectations.

## Mindful Language

Using inclusive, non-gendered language that avoids reinforcing stereotypes and encourages all children to express themselves authentically.

## Equal Opportunities

Providing children with access to diverse activities, interests, and role models regardless of traditional gender associations.

## Ongoing Education

Continuously learning about gender equality and sharing age-appropriate insights with children to build their understanding.

## Open Communication

Creating safe spaces for children to discuss their experiences and feelings without judgment or gender-based expectations.

Remember that dismantling gender stereotypes is an ongoing process that requires consistency and self-reflection. Parents may need to examine their own biases and assumptions about gender to effectively model equality for their children. By challenging harmful norms in daily interactions, parents can help create a more inclusive society where bullying based on gender becomes less common.

The connection between gender-based bullying and sexual harassment highlights the importance of early intervention. By teaching children about consent, respect, and healthy relationships from a young age, parents can help prevent the escalation of harmful behaviors and protect their children from becoming either victims or perpetrators.

Ultimately, the goal is to raise children who recognize the value of every person regardless of gender expression or identity. By promoting empathy, respect, and equality at home, parents contribute to a broader cultural shift away from rigid gender norms and toward a more inclusive society where all children can develop their full potential free from the constraints of gender-based expectations and bullying.