

Children at Swedish 'gender-neutral' preschools are less likely to gender-stereotype

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A new study from Uppsala University in Sweden has indicated that the norm-conscious practices used by teachers at preschools termed "gender-neutral" are associated with reductions in children's tendencies to make gender-stereotypical assumption. The practices are also associated with children's increased interest in playing with unfamiliar peers of the opposite sex.

A number of Swedish preschools have attracted international attention for their pedagogical practices aimed at reducing differences in the opportunities available to children of different genders. These practices include de-emphasising gender differences, for example by using the recently coined Swedish gender-neutral pronoun, and avoiding behaviour towards children that traditionally would be gender specific, for example not complimenting girls on their clothes.

Despite this international interest, till now there was no study evaluating the effects of these practices on children's behaviour by comparing them with children attending more traditional preschools but matched in other demographic factors.

When shown pictures of unfamiliar peers by the researchers, children attending a gender-neutral preschool made fewer gender-stereotyped assumptions about them, and were less likely to show no interest in playing with them when they were of the opposite sex.

Because gender-neutral schools are rare even in Sweden, the sample size

was small, meaning that although there is statistical confidence in the effects' existence, it is not possible to estimate with confidence how strong they are. Children's families had chosen the preschools their children attended, raising the issue of whether differences in family background caused the effects. However, when families who reported choosing their preschools because of gender-related aspects of pedagogy were removed from the sample, the effects remained.

Children at the gender-neutral [preschool](#) were not less likely to notice the gender of unfamiliar children, however.

'Together the results suggest that although gender-neutral pedagogy on its own may not reduce [children](#)'s tendency to use gender to categorise people, it reduces their tendency to gender-stereotype and gender-segregate, which could widen the opportunities available to them', says Dr. Ben Kenward, researcher at Uppsala University and Oxford Brookes University.

More information: Kristin Shutts et al. Early preschool environments and gender: Effects of gender pedagogy in Sweden, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2017.04.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.04.014)

Provided by Uppsala University

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