

Five ways parents can help kids avoid gender stereotypes

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In the last century, significant progress has been made in advancing gender equity in the United States. Women gained the [right to vote](#), fathers have become [more involved parents](#) and more [people](#) and [institutions](#) recognize gender identities beyond the binary categories of male and female.

However, persistent gaps remain. Women hold [only a quarter](#) of U.S. congressional seats, only [a handful of states](#) mandate paid paternity leave and state legislatures are introducing bills that discriminate against [transgender people](#).

The majority of Americans believe there is [more work to do](#) on [gender equality](#). As a genderqueer sociologist, a parent of a kindergartner and the author of a book on [gender creative parenting](#), I study the importance of disrupting sexism in childhood. Here are five ways I've found that parents and caregivers can fight [gender stereotypes](#) in kids' lives.

1. Acknowledge that a child may be LGBTQI+

Gender identity and sexuality are [diverse and personal](#) experiences. However, medical institutions and parents commonly [assign a sex](#) to newborns based on [physical characteristics](#) and [socialize children](#) as one of two binary genders. For example, children with vulvas are assigned female and raised as girls and children with penises are assigned male and raised as boys.

Most children are cisgender—meaning their [gender identity](#) aligns with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. However, the percentage of [young people](#) in the U.S. who identify as transgender—meaning their

gender does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth, or who are [nonbinary](#) – meaning their gender is neither strictly male or female – [is growing](#). And an estimated [one in every 1,500 to 2,000](#) babies born in the U.S. are intersex, meaning their sex chromosomes or reproductive anatomy may be different than what is typically categorized as male or female.

Additionally, nationwide, [more than 11%](#) of high school students say they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning their sexuality. Young LGBTQ people are [coming out to their families earlier](#) than older generations did. [Research shows](#) that family acceptance of young LGBTQ people is associated with greater mental and physical health and protection against depression, substance abuse and suicide.

2. Be aware of gendered marketing

Children's toys and clothes are [increasingly divided by gender](#), and many people blame the [profit-driven exploitation](#) of [gender-stereotyped marketing](#).

For example, [building toys and small vehicles](#) are marketed to boys, and [dolls and makeup](#) to girls. In children's clothing stores, primary colors, transportation and sport graphics are often on one side, and pastels, flowers and sparkles on the other.

Children learn important social, emotional and physical life skills through play. Playing with a [variety of toys](#) provides opportunities to develop and build upon well-rounded skills, including [spatial awareness](#) and [empathy](#). Gender-stereotyped marketing can limit the kinds of toys and experiences children are exposed to.

Parents and caregivers can shop all the aisles of a toy or clothing store to show children that gendered marketing boundaries are arbitrary and can

be crossed. They can let kids explore what is available and choose for themselves.

[Counterstereotyping](#) – explicitly reversing a stereotype—is also a powerful way to disrupt gender stereotypes in play. For example, a caregiver can look at dolls with a boy and say things like, "Boys like dolls" and "Daddies are really good at caring for babies."

3. Disrupt gender stereotypes at home

Parents and caregivers are children's first models for how gender is performed. Adults can model language and behavior that challenge binary and harmful sexist stereotypes, such as the belief that women should [do more housework](#) – even when they have full-time employment. For example, in households with more than one parent, and especially in different-gender couples, parents can [share parenting responsibilities](#) and household tasks.

Actions speak louder than words, and children are [more likely](#) to reject the idea of traditional gender norms when their parents exhibit fairness and divide domestic labor equitably, not just mention it as something they value.

Parents can switch up children's chores so they learn about housekeeping in a nongendered way. Boys can do dishes, and girls can take out the garbage. Parents can also ensure allowance is equitable, as the gender pay gap can start at home. Research suggests [girls earn less allowance](#) even when they do more chores.

4. Use gender-neutral language

Using gender-neutral pronouns and other words can reduce gender bias

and [increase positive regard for women and LGBT people](#). For example, using anatomical language instead of gendered words, like "vulva" instead of "girl parts," teaches children that not all people who have vulvas identify as girls. This doesn't erase cisgender girls, but is inclusive of many transgender boys and nonbinary kids. Similarly, replacing "moms and dads" with "parents and caregivers" is not only inclusive of [same-sex](#) and nonbinary parents but also acknowledges single [parents](#) and the [millions of grandparents and nonrelative](#) guardians.

In children's books, where boy characters [far outnumber girls](#) and other genders, caregivers can change he/him pronouns to she/her and they/them. Adults can also choose books and media that represent kids in diverse and inclusive ways, and call out stereotypes when they come up in stories.

5. Encourage mixed-gender play

Gender segregation is deeply embedded in social structures and can have negative implications, such as [sexist attitudes](#) toward people of other genders. Children are often categorized in gendered groups, sometimes casually ("boys line up here, girls line up there") and other times explicitly, like in [single-sex schools](#).

[Research shows](#) that children who have close friendships with children of other genders hold more positive and less sexist attitudes toward their friend's gender.

Parents and educators can create opportunities for kids to interact with children of different genders. They can stop segregating children by gender, choose sports teams and other organized [extracurricular activities](#) that are open to all genders and host mixed-gender birthday parties, for example. All-gender activities help children recognize their [similarities and celebrate their differences](#) and are inclusive of [children](#)

who don't identify as a girl or boy.

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