

2. Abandoning the doll and block corner for the pleasures of diverse realms of experience

## **Claudia Wallner**

### **gender stereotypes**

Contrary to what people believed for many decades, ECEC centres play an important role in the development of gender identity for boys and girls, and they are also places in which gender is present in diverse ways.<sup>1</sup> This begins with the quantitative preponderance of women among ECEC workers and continues with the mothers who are in far more frequent contact with ECEC centres than fathers. It can be found in the arrangement of space and toys— for example when block and doll corners are standard equipment or the dress-up trunk is placed close to the doll kitchen— and does not end with the contacts between (male and female) ECEC workers and parents and children or of girls and boys among themselves. As early as the age of three or four, children correct one another: ‘That dress is for girls; boys don’t play with dolls: girls can’t play football’ or ‘girls love glitter’ are frequently heard statements.

Gender-specific ascriptions and responses also frequently come from ECEC teachers, and include not just obvious comments like ‘You’re wearing an adorable dress today’ or ‘How strong you are already’. These everyday comments appear quite normal, but point girls and boys in the direction of their social genders. Such generally unconscious remarks as ‘The boys can wipe the tables for a change’ or, ‘You’re rather noisy for girls,’ are at least as effective. While both of these responses transcend classic gender role assumptions, because boys are being told to tidy up and girls have clearly been allowed to romp around, at the same time they also contain the message that this is not the behaviour considered ‘normal’ according to gender expectations.

Messages referring to gender are omnipresent and run through the everyday life of ECEC on all levels. It is interesting that many ECEC workers either do not see or deny this phenomenon: ‘We treat all of the children alike or as individuals’ is often cited as a reason why there are no gender-specific ascriptions in ECEC. ECEC workers also frequently mention that the furnishings and toys are ‘neutral’ and thus do not send any gendered messages, or that ‘all children are allowed to play everywhere and with everything’ and the children therefore freely choose what to do without any instruction from teachers. The point here is not to apportion blame or to attribute a lack of competence to ECEC workers.

After all, this very lack of awareness is part of the phenomenon of gender-specific (self-) socialisation. The examples simply make it clear that gender issues first of all influence the ECEC centre as a whole, and second impact everyday conduct and thus are highly

effective. As a consequence, ECEC centres that do not follow gender-conscious concepts contribute to early gender stereotyping of girls and boys instead of guiding and accompanying them in their discovery of the diversity of worlds. And this is an educational as well as a socio-political issue, because children's and youth services have a mandate to help girls and boys to grow up to be self-reliant personalities capable of living in the community, and in the process to avoid disadvantages particularly of a gender-related nature (§§ 1 Abs. 1 and 9 Satz 3 SGB VIII). It is thus not up to the concept or basic direction of an individual ECEC provider whether the work of a ECEC centre is gender-inclusive; rather, this is a professional and statutory mandate for all ECEC centres. To that extent, taking the path to a gender-inclusive ECEC centre is a must and the responsibility of youth welfare service committees, ECEC providers and administrators. This 'must' however also brings significant advantages and relief to ECEC centres and above all to children: girls and boys interact and play with one another more, and there is more diversity in both the layout and furnishings and the children's play, making the teachers' work more fun and rewarding, because girls and boys can enjoy themselves, and increasing its standard.

### **How might it work? Paths to a gender-inclusive ECEC centre**

The gender-inclusive ECEC centre is a conceptual process for restructuring everyday life. The important instruments here are sensitisation, further education, concept development and the reshaping of play activities. In what follows, concrete examples of the steps needed to assist ECEC centres in taking this path will be presented.

#### >> Sensitising ECEC workers

Gender sensitisation exercises give ECEC workers a place to reflect on their personal experiences with gender images and their own embeddedness in gender relations. This implies their own gender-related socialisation experiences and the ideas and unconscious images that result (not only) from them as well as categorisations that determine our thoughts and actions: What do we consider 'feminine' or 'masculine'?

Here is a little experiment: There is a short advertisement on youtube in which Darth Vader<sup>ii</sup> plays the main role (search on youtube for 'The Force: Volkswagen Commercial' or follow the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R55e-uHQna0&spfreload=10>). Watch the film before reading further. Now ask yourself the question: Did I imagine that the child wearing the costume was a little boy or a little girl, or did I not consider the child's sex? And what influenced my thoughts/feelings one way or the other? Did I notice the pink bedroom and how does that fit with my assumptions?

Such little exercises help us to recognise the gender images we operate with quite unconsciously: Did I see a little boy, then ignore the 'typical girl's room', perhaps

imagining a sister, because the self-presentation as Darth Vader contains so many masculine attributes for me that I could not possibly see the figure as a girl? If I saw a girl, perhaps I have a value system that allows me to associate world conquest, dominion over animals and objects and freedom with being a girl. If I made no gender association, then perhaps the behaviours offered do not match my notions of gender. Learning to observe ourselves in such everyday situations is a key skill of sensitisation through self-reflexion.

ECEC workers can become sensitised to their own socialisation experiences for instance by posing each other guiding questions in dialogues:<sup>iii</sup>

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- >> What kind of a girl /boy were you?
- >> Were there situations in which you enjoyed being a girl/boy?
- >> Did being a girl/boy entail advantages or disadvantages?
- >> Was being a girl/boy important to you?
- >> Were you confronted with expectations in your childhood or youth about how you should act as a girl/boy?
- >> Would you have liked to belong to the other sex?
  
- >> Was something forbidden to you because you were a girl/boy?
- >> What did you like to play and with whom?

Questions for the analysis:

- >> Were there commonalities in the biographical experiences?
- >> What differences became evident?
- >> What surprises or insights emerged?

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### **Our own perceptions of girls and boys**

The next question along the way to a gender-sensitive ECEC centre is: How do ECEC workers see the girls and boys? What do they see? Do they see the whole range of interests and children's hunger for anything new? Or do their own perceptions and gender images already unconsciously filter out all children's questions that don't fit in

with their own ideas? The Tandem Study published in 2014 by Holger Brandes, Markus Andrä, Wenke Röseler and Petra Schneider-Andrich<sup>iv</sup> offers some very instructive insights into our own blind spots. By observing play situations between ECEC workers and children, it shows among other things that it is often the adults who lead the children in gender-stereotypical behaviour, but in retrospect attribute this typical play behaviour to children's own decisions. In the analysis of a play situation, one female ECEC worker reports that the initiative to make a bead necklace came from the girl. However, the ECEC worker did not bother to take up the girl's suggestions for other craft projects. The authors of the Tandem Study however also point out that girls and boys are already gendered when they enter the interaction. To that extent impulses for gendered behaviour come into the interaction from both sides and one can proceed from mutual influences.

The following exercise can help us to analyse our own practice and activate our observations of girls and boys:

ECEC workers in pairs share observations and opinions. After a limited time (5 minutes) the pairs change position. Possible questions include:

- >> Do the girls and boys in your facility prefer different games or activities?
- >> Do the girls and boys express certain emotions such as anger, sadness or joy differently?
- >> Do you think that girls and boys are equally satisfied with the ECEC centre's pedagogical offerings?
- >> Do children refuse to let other children participate in games by specifically referring to their sex?
- >> Is 'being a girl or a boy' an (educational) topic for the children in your group?

Questions for the analysis:

- >> Were there shared observations and assessments?
- >> What differences became evident, and where did they come from?
- >> What follow-up questions or new insights emerged?

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..... A good exercise on the topic of 'perceptions of girls and boys' is shared storytelling based on a photo. To do this you form three groups. Each group receives a photo and has to spontaneously invent a story inspired by it. The participants in each group sit next to one another. Each person can say only one sentence, then passes the photo on to

the next person. In this way, everyone contributes to compiling a story. A moderator writes down the key words of the story.

The three groups receive similar photos, except that in one case the child on the photo is clearly identifiable as a girl (e.g.: <http://www.erziehung.net/informationen/erziehung-allgemein/erziehungsstile.html>), in another as a boy e.g.: [http://de.123rf.com/photo\\_7513853\\_portrait-von-ein-kind-im-wald-an-einem-baum-gelehnt.html](http://de.123rf.com/photo_7513853_portrait-von-ein-kind-im-wald-an-einem-baum-gelehnt.html)) and in a third as ambiguous (e.g.: <http://www.zeit.de/2011/49/L-SM-Louv>). The three stories are told one after the other and afterwards the key words are read aloud. At this point it usually becomes evident that the stories develop clear gender-typical characteristics: of girls who are scared and cry for their mothers, of boys who protect, roughhouse or hunt—and surprisingly few gender stereotypes in the story involving the child who is not recognisable as a girl or boy. In this way, ECEC teams can reflect together on the hidden, unconscious gender images they harbour and the extent to which these images influence their perceptions of the girls and boys.

One practical example of targeted work with children on their images of girls and boys is a method taken from the Gender Loops workbook (Krabel and Cremers 2008): ‘The Alien MOX questions boys and girls’. The children are questioned with the aid of the hand puppet Mox, who comes from another planet and is visiting Planet Earth for the first time. Mox asks whether it is true that on Earth there are girls and boys, and how one can recognise them. Possible questions include:

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- >> Is it possible to tell whether a child is a girl or a boy?
- >> Is there something that girls/boys are not allowed to do or wear?
- >> Is there something that boys/girls really don't like/like to play?
- >> Is there something that girls and boys equally like to play or do?
- >> Is there something girls are better at than boys?
- >> Is there something boys are better at than girls?
- >> Is there something girls and boys are equally good at doing?

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..... Such questions and similar ones inspire children to express their own ideas, to start talking with one another, to disrupt gender stereotypes and provide ECEC workers with important indicators of the images in children's heads.

### **Toys, play areas etc.**

The arrangement of play offerings and the selection of toys is a key factor in ECEC centres that reveals how strongly and plainly gender messages are sent to children without them having to ask. Not just by colour, but by their mere existence as separate offerings, doll and block corners send girl and boy messages. Dress-up trunks often contain commercially manufactured costumes that also send clear signals: princess and pirate costumes leave children little scope for ambiguities. Industry increasingly marks toys with colours and clear messages: surprise eggs 'just for girls' or Lego's 'Heart Lake City' also especially for girls are just two examples of toys that were unisex only a few years ago, but are now offered in sex-specific versions and send clear, classic gendered messages. Thus the 'girls' eggs' are more likely to contain elves than the construction toys found in the usual surprise eggs, and in 'Heart Lake City' the Lego dolls (only girls live there) are slimmer than usual and city life consists exclusively of shopping and fun. In this way, girls quickly learn what is expected of them. Similar phenomena exist on the boys' side, too, of course: Lego and Playmobil present male working worlds and otherwise the idea is to be a 'wild man' or a 'dangerous monster'. Like children's films and books, the majority of toys nowadays are guides to strictly separate gender worlds. ECEC centres, in which play is after all the heart of children's activities, should thus examine very closely how they promote—or don't promote—gender stereotypes by the arrangement of play offerings and the selection of toys. So what needs to be done in order to avoid falling into the gender trap here, too?

ECEC teams can take a joint critical look at their facilities, toys and opportunities for play and ask themselves the following questions:

- >> Do we have block and doll corners— and if so, why?
- >> Do the separate offerings lead to girls and boys playing separately?
- >> Which toys do we have that send no clear gender messages, and what proportion of the overall play options do they represent?
- >> What gender images do we find in picture books and games?
- >> Where in the ECEC centre is there space for free play and how is this utilised by girls and boys?

Questions for the analysis:

- >> Were there shared observations and assessments?
- >> What differences became evident, and where did they come from?

>> What follow-up questions or new insights emerged?

There are basically three possibilities for dealing with gender-determined toys in such a way that we do not constantly send children gender messages:

>> Reducing the number of toys, books etc.— The fewer toys lumber up the group spaces, the more room in all senses of the word children have for free, imaginative play and the less gender-specific behaviours and ascriptions appear among children. So it is time for a good tidying up!

>> Rearranging the toys beyond the block and doll corners. Thus, for example, the ECEC workers at the fun & care daycare centre in Brunhildengasse in Vienna arranged all of the toys in little cabinets on wheels and set them up in the hallway where they were accessible to all children and organised by type of toy. In the ECEC centre there are play areas marked by monochrome rugs. When the children arrive in the morning, they pull up various cabinets with toys and go together to the play areas. During play, the dolls mix with Legos and cars, cuddly toys and farmyards—and the girls and boys along with them (Frauenbüro der Stadt Wien 2003).

>> Deliberately choosing only those play options that are not marked as gender-specific, disrupt gender stereotypes or provide diversity. One (albeit not yet perfect) example of this is the 'Princess Machine', which addresses girls and integrates the usual pink worlds but also offers a variety of creative play for girls of a kind otherwise reserved for boys' toys. A short film on youtube shows how this works:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4BuUnimp8s> or just search on youtube for 'Princess Machine'.

### **Gender as part of the ECEC centre concept**

An essential aspect of dealing with gender in ECEC centres is establishing the gender-related objectives in a written concept for the centre's work. This allows for transparency towards parents, but also new colleagues, and the teams reach a consensus, which the ECEC provider supports through the concept.

At the end of 2013, the ECEC centres in Hessisch Oldendorf, which belong to the Südweser region, developed such a concept within the framework of a further education series in the 'MEHR Männer in Kitas' (MORE Men in ECEC Centres) programme, an example of which we present here:

1. Girls and boys have equal opportunities in accessing rooms, materials and activities.
2. Boys and girls receive equal attention from ECEC workers.
3. Girls and boys are treated the same in everyday practical areas and situations.

4. Boys' and girls' differences are perceived in their individuality.

Belonging to a gender means differences and commonalities

Developing an identity entails coming to grips with one's gender

Exploring one's environment without the influence of belonging to a gender

Breaking through role ascriptions through knowledge and acceptance of diverse life models

Taking the different distribution of roles in families seriously

Reflecting upon one's own attitudes and experience with respect to gender

Source: unpublished concept paper Südweser - Hessisch Oldendorf (December 2013)

Translator's note: In the original German, the first letter of each line is in bold and together they spell out the word 'gender'.

### **The gender-sensitive ECEC centre is a reorganisation process**

Working in a gender-sensitive manner is not an extra project, but rather a process of altered perception, sensitisation and changing attitudes. This leads to reflexions on the arrangement of spaces, games and occasions. To that extent, gender sensitivity is a task for administrators, which they should tackle together with the ECEC workers. If this succeeds, children can develop their own inclinations and interests accordingly, without having to give in to the pressure of gender images. This is a worthy objective: for children, teachers and parents. Everyday life in ECEC becomes more colourful and diverse because games and toys blend more, leading to new games and occasions for play: dolls can ride on trucks and are transformed from babies into digger operators or tractor. Boys engage in more role-playing games, which for example fosters their imagination and linguistic abilities, if the stories are not only about families or princesses and the dress-up trunks provide the corresponding material. Girls and boys do not separate so strictly into single-gender groups when shared games are encouraged, and can at once learn from one another and expand their gender images. ECEC workers get to know the children better with their entire range of interests and can also expand their own repertoire of play and support. And parents can be sure that their daughters and sons receive attention and encouragement for all aspects of their abilities and interests.

Such a gender-pedagogical orientation and reflexion moreover promotes a more differentiated view of children and their strengths and limitations. ECEC workers who have gained the sensitivity and qualifications to notice those sides of children that do not conform



to gender-typical behaviour can also be more readily sensitised to other differences and to rethinking their own ideas, for instance about boys from migrant backgrounds or girls from poor families. A good gender concept always also affords access to diversity-conscious concepts and is, to that extent, also more than ‘mere’ encouragement for girls and boys.

### **Literature:**

Frauenbüro der Stadt Wien (eds.) (2003). *Geschlechtssensible Pädagogik im Kindergarten. Projekt-bericht aus dem Kindertagesheim fun & care Brunhildengasse*. Vienna.

Krabel, Jens and Cremers, Michael (eds.) (2008). *Gender Loops. Praxisbuch für eine geschlechterbewusste und -gerechte Kindertageseinrichtung*. Berlin.

‘Unveröffentlichtes Konzept Südweser’ (December 2013). Hessisch Oldendorf.

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<sup>i</sup> Thus for decades, work with girls and boys scarcely addressed gender questions with regard to preschool children, and with few exceptions (notably the publications of Martin Verlinden in the 1990s) research and practical reflexions only began after 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> Central character in the Star Wars films who goes over to the dark (evil) side of the Force.

<sup>iii</sup> The following exercises are used by Michael Drogand-Strud and the author in their joint further training courses for ECEC workers. They are also described in part in an article published by Michael Drogand-Strud and the author in spring 2014 in the ECEC journal *Kita aktuell*.

<sup>iv</sup> The first findings of the Tandem Study were published online in 2013: ‘Männer in Kitas - Was machen sie anders und wie profitieren die Kinder von ihnen?’ [online] [http://www.erzieherin.de/assets/files/forschung/brandes\\_andrae\\_Roeseler\\_Schneider-Andrich.pdf](http://www.erzieherin.de/assets/files/forschung/brandes_andrae_Roeseler_Schneider-Andrich.pdf).