

Young People and Sex Stereotyping



Women. Men. Different. Equal.
Equal Opportunities Commission

What is sex stereotyping?

Sex stereotyping is making assumptions that women and men should play different roles in society.

Such assumptions restrict individual choice, which leads to wasted talent and unfulfilled potential, to skills gaps and to lower pay for those jobs which are seen as 'women's work'. In short, stereotyping results in discrimination against both women and men.

In October 2001, the EOC mounted a campaign to raise awareness of the cost of sex stereotyping to individuals, the economy and to society.

Our *What's stopping you?* campaign calls on:

Young people to consider all the available subject choices and career options, and not to limit their opportunities because of their sex;

Parents to encourage their children to widen their choices at school and beyond and to provide a home environment where girls and boys are encouraged to share all tasks equally;

Schools to be proactive in encouraging boys and girls to take non-stereotypical options in subject choice and work experience;

Careers Advisers to present positive role models of young people in a wide range of jobs and careers and support those who step beyond traditional roles;

Employers to encourage recruits from both sexes, and actively support those who are in a minority;

The Government to set up a challenge fund to stimulate new initiatives in schools to tackle gender stereotypes.

For further information about the campaign, please see the *What's stopping you?* pack. This can be downloaded from the EOC website and is available free of charge from the EOC.

Ahead of the campaign launch, we commissioned attitudinal research amongst young people aged 11 to 16 years of age. The aim of the research was to focus on their attitudes towards, and experiences of gender roles, and to identify the major influences upon them. Details of the research methodology can be found on page 8.

KEY FINDINGS

- Stereotyping has a huge impact on young people's lives.
- Stereotypes affect what young people do at home and how they are treated, which influences the subjects they choose at school, restricting their choice of future jobs and career, and again contributes to stereotyped views in the home.
- Boys and girls have different attitudes towards computers. Boys, who are more likely to see themselves doing a job which involves computing, describe them as



exciting and fun, whereas girls see them as useful for homework.

- The majority of young people think that the jobs of doctors, head teachers, MPs and research scientists are equally suitable for women and men.
- There is a contradiction between what young people think are suitable jobs for women and men, and the choices they make for themselves which often follow traditional stereotypes.
- Older girls and boys are more egalitarian in attitude than younger children, yet this change in attitude becomes apparent at a time when their own subject choices reflect traditional male and female roles.

FINDINGS

At home

“ I think it should be equal but I’ve always expected the girls to do more than the boys because that’s how it was when I was little. ”

Mother

In the focus groups, parents claimed that girls and boys should be treated in the same way and contribute equally to the household. Yet in reality, girls were expected to help more around the home than their brothers or younger sisters.

Jobs around the home were still strongly sex stereotyped, not only by the children’s parents, but by the children themselves.

The majority of regular household tasks were usually carried out by ‘Mum’ with around 9 out of 10 children claiming that she was responsible for the laundry/washing clothes, supermarket and food shopping, preparing food, cooking and ironing and 8 out of 10 for vacuuming.

3 in 5 children claimed that it was usually ‘Dad’ who carried out DIY with about half the children stating that he usually mowed the lawn, did the gardening, and cleaned the car.

Older girls were very aware of inequality. Less than 2 in 5 of those aged 15 and 16 agreed that: *Boys and girls are treated exactly the same way in families today.* This compared with two-thirds of boys and girls aged 11 and 12. Boys were given more freedom than girls as one daughter complained:

“ I have heard my mum saying to my brother that he will be allowed to do things that I wasn’t able to do because he is a boy and better able to protect himself. I think that is really sexist because it makes you think that you are not capable of doing anything as well as a man. ”

One grandmother commented of her grandson:

“ He gets away with more, he is allowed to stay out later. ”

It is clear that sex stereotyping exists within the family structure and this was reflected in the types of household jobs undertaken by girls and boys. Girls were significantly more likely than boys often to tidy their bedroom (45 per cent as opposed to 35 per cent respectively), whereas boys in social classes C2DE had the highest levels of all children for never tidying their rooms.

Girls were also significantly more likely than boys often to do jobs around the home which were usually carried out by Mum, such as the ironing, the laundry and washing-up or using the dishwasher. In contrast, boys were more likely to do jobs which were regarded as ‘Dad’s’, for example, DIY and mowing the lawn.



Attitudes are changing

“If a man was caught washing the dishes in my generation, they would say ‘How can you do that? Let’s go down the pub for a pint’. My lad’s generation is different, he helps in a way which I never did. I wish I could have my time again so that I could change that kind of thing.”

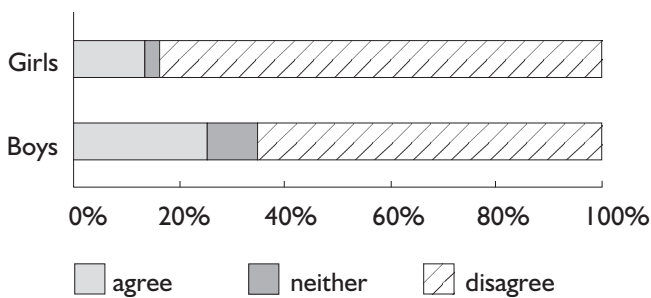
Grandfather

Men now take a more active role in the home than did their fathers, but generally they are still unwilling to take on certain tasks such as the laundry and cleaning. Although these attitudes and behaviour can be seen in their children, some of whom continue to show stereotyped views towards the roles of women and men, more egalitarian views now prevail.

Most children, around 82 per cent of girls and 64 per cent of boys, disagreed that: *A man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family*, although around a quarter of boys agreed with the statement.

Older girls and boys were far more likely to disagree than younger children: similarly those in social classes ABC1 compared with those in C2DE.

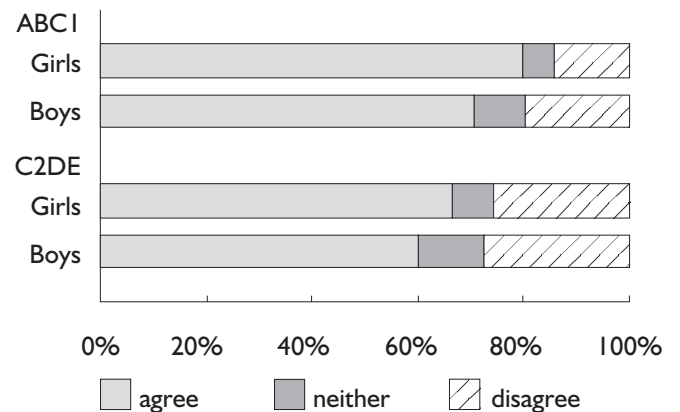
Attitudes towards the statement that men should earn money, women look after the family and home



Although most children agreed that: *It is okay if the father stays at home and looks after the children and the mother goes out to work*, social class was very important as an indicator of

attitudes, with children from social classes C2DE less willing to agree with the statement.

Attitudes towards the statement about father staying at home and mother working, by social class



At school

Subject choice

A gender divide in subject choice is still very prevalent, despite the National Curriculum in England and Wales and a broad based curriculum in Scotland.

Children were asked to name their three favourite subjects in school and significant differences were found between the sexes, although for some subjects there was a high level of agreement. For example, a similar percentage of girls and boys listed Maths as one of their top three subjects: the proportion of girls and boys aged 13 to 16 being almost identical.

Favourite school subjects, top three choices

	Per cent	
	Girls	Boys
English	47	29
Art/Design	40	25
Maths	30	33
PE/Games	24	41
ICT	22	36



37 per cent of both boys and girls aged 13 and 14 listed English as one of their favourite subjects, in sharp contrast to the 15 and 16 year old group where it was mentioned by over 50 per cent of girls but only 20 per cent of boys. Other subjects were obviously of far greater interest to one sex or the other regardless of age: PE and ICT appealed to boys, Art and Design to girls.

Computers

A higher proportion of boys than girls and younger children rather than older children thought that computers were **fun and exciting**.

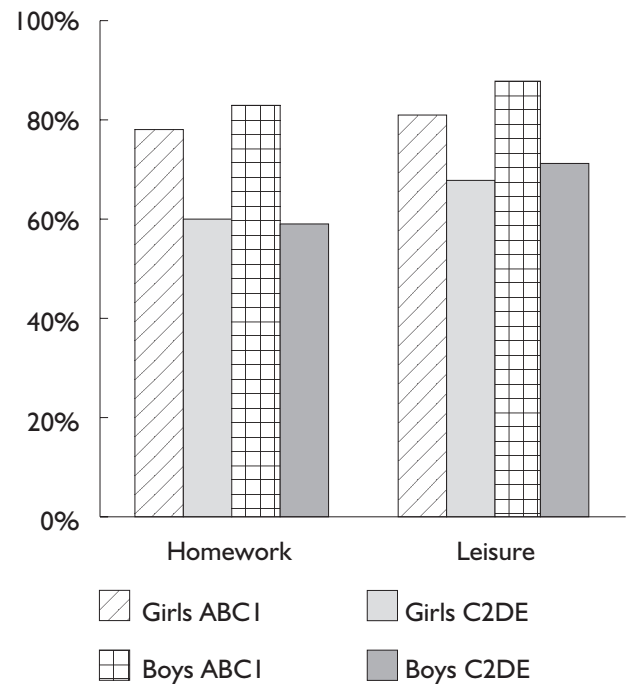
Girls tended to have a more practical view and were significantly more likely to regard computers as a useful tool for school work: 47 per cent of girls aged 15 and 16 compared with 34 per cent of boys of the same age.

Findings from the qualitative work and the kids.net 5 survey, carried out by NOP Family in December 2000 suggest that boys and girls use computers in different ways. Boys like to play and download games on the internet, whereas girls prefer to use e-mail and visit chat rooms.

In this study, a large proportion of both girls and boys made use of computers. School use was particularly high: from 82 per cent of girls aged 15 to 16 to 98 per cent of boys aged 11 to 12. The highest levels were seen by younger children of both sexes, largely, no doubt, because at the time of the survey, ICT was part of the National Curriculum for this age group. In addition, school provision of computers cuts across the socio-economic divide.

There were no significant gender differences found when children were asked about their use of computers for homework or for leisure. What did make a difference was social class.

Use of computers, by social class



Not only is ICT more likely to be a favourite subject for boys rather than girls, but significantly more boys than girls would prefer a job with a lot of computer use: 35 per cent compared with 27 per cent respectively. The same proportion (just over half) of girls and boys would like a job with some use of computers but girls were more likely than boys (13 per cent compared with 7 per cent) to opt for work with no computer use.

Sport

Children's attitudes towards, and participation in, different sports both within and outside of school, were often strongly stereotyped. Outside of school, boys were more likely than girls to take part in sport.

Around 95 per cent of children thought that athletics/running, swimming and tennis were equally suited to both sexes. A majority also thought that keep fit/aerobics, hockey, gymnastics and dance were equally suited to both sexes, although a sizeable minority felt that they were more suitable for women.



Around three-quarters of children thought that both rugby and cricket were sports for men, a similar percentage thought that netball was for women. Around half the children felt that basketball and football were best suited to men whilst a similar proportion felt they were best suited to both sexes.

Boys were significantly more likely than girls to have played football, rugby and cricket at school whereas the reverse was true for netball, dance and hockey, showing that stereotyping of sport within school is still happening.

Careers and work

Certain occupations remain heavily dominated by either men or women. For example, men hold over 90 per cent of engineering jobs, even in software engineering¹, whereas 84 per cent of primary school teachers in England and Wales and 93 per cent of those in Scotland, are women^{2,3}.

When asked whether certain jobs were thought to be more suitable for both sexes, or for women or for men, children felt that many jobs were equally suited to both.

The vast majority of girls and boys thought that the work of a doctor or general practitioner, a head teacher, a Member of Parliament and a research scientist were equally suitable for women and men. In reality, women comprised 38 per cent of doctors, 59 per cent of primary and nursery headteachers, 28 per cent of secondary headteachers and only 18 per cent of MPs.

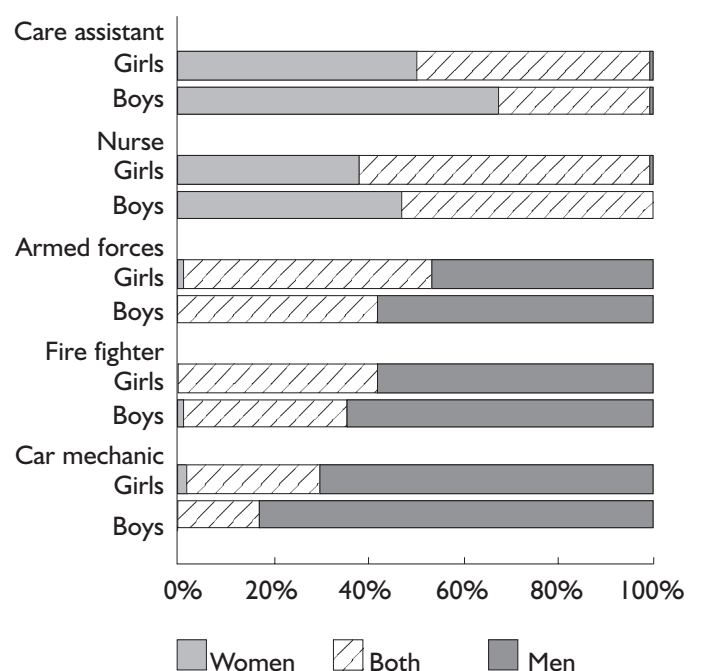
Some jobs were seen in a fairly stereotypical way by both girls and boys. Around half thought that the work of an airline pilot or a train driver was best suited to a man, whereas a similar or slightly smaller percentage thought these jobs were suitable to both sexes. Generally, older children and those in social groups ABC1, especially girls, were the most egalitarian.

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement: *There is no reason why men can't be nurses and women can't be airline pilots*, most of the children in the sample agreed: 87 per cent of girls and 76 per cent of boys. Age was again influential with 82 per cent of older boys agreeing compared with 68 per cent of 11 and 12 year olds.

3 in 5 children thought the work of a secretary best suited to a woman: a little over a third of both girls and boys thought it was equally suitable for either sex. Interestingly, older boys were more likely than younger boys to view the job as a woman's.

A number of other jobs were also viewed as men's or women's work but with noticeable gender differences. Yet even in the case of a car mechanic which is so firmly viewed as 'men's work', 17 per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls (36 per cent of those aged 15 and 16) thought it was equally suitable for both sexes.

Suitability of certain jobs for women, men or both sexes





Stereotyped attitudes were recorded in the focus groups, particularly by the younger children:

“ You don’t get male nurses ”

Girl, 12

“ It wouldn’t look right to me, I can’t see men looking after old people ”

Boy, 13

“ There are some things that women are better at, like making beds, things like that, men are better at fixing the car ”

Girl, 12

Sadly, such narrow views limit the opportunities which children see open to them, and are willing to grasp.

The Future

“ Nowadays women have got more courage, if they are determined to do something they will go out and do it. In the past they wouldn’t have had the security, support or enough confidence. ”

Daughter

Young people in the focus groups were optimistic about the future. They knew that they had more opportunities than earlier generations and expected equality as a right:

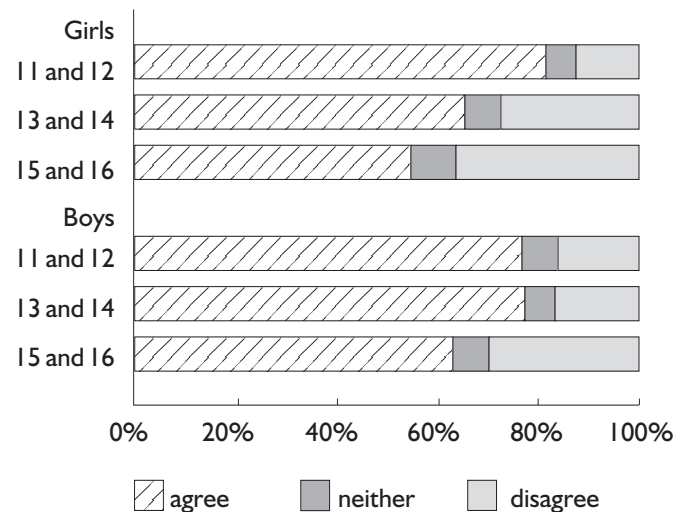
“ The difference between Mum and Nana is that our role as a female in society has changed because Nana would be expected to get married and stay in the house, to be a mother without having the opportunities to go to university and get a job like most women do now. ”

Daughter

A majority of children across all age groups and social classes agreed that: *I want to go to university when I leave school.* Younger children were more eager to attend university than older ones: around three-quarters of girls and boys aged 11 to 12; 3 in 5 of those aged 15 to 16. There was a greater difference between boys than girls in terms of class: 4 out of 5 boys and three-quarters of girls from social groups ABC1 wished to attend university. This compared with only half the boys and two-thirds of the girls from social groups C2DE.

Children from the focus groups believed that if they were good at their job then their gender would be irrelevant, but some children in the survey were more circumspect. Although a majority of them agreed that: *Men and women have exactly the same opportunities in work today,* there were substantial variations by age group.

Attitudes towards the statement that men and women have the same opportunities in work, by age



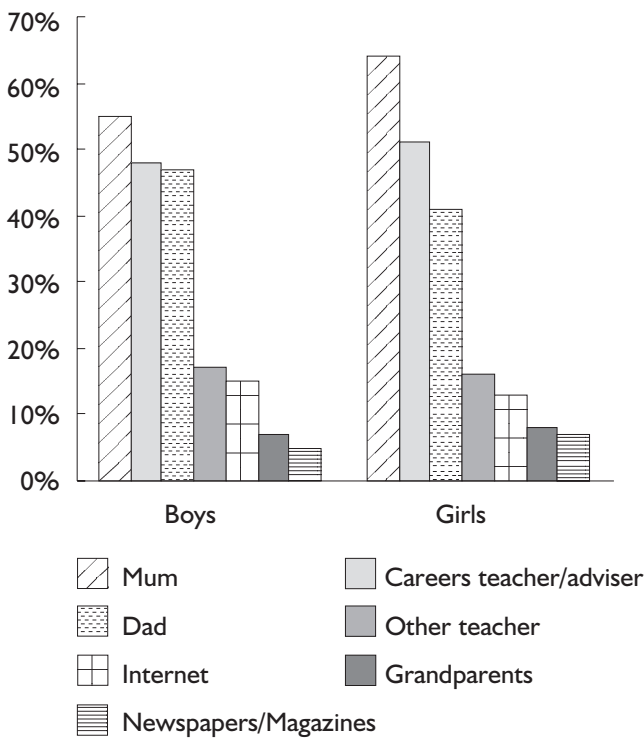
Boys were more likely than girls to agree that: *It is important for me to choose a job where I will earn a lot of money.* The greatest difference was between children aged 15 and 16: 58 per cent of girls compared with 82 per cent of boys.



Careers advice

Children went to a number of different sources for advice on careers or jobs. Older children were less likely than younger children to consult with their parents: three-quarters of 11 and 12 year old girls would go to their mother, but only half of those aged 15 to 16. 3 in 5 boys in the youngest age group would consult with their fathers, compared with 2 in 5 of the older boys.

Sources of advice on careers or jobs



Likely careers

The children in the survey were asked: *What career/job do you think you will do when you leave school?* A vast array of possible careers and jobs were listed and some very stark gender differences emerged, both between the occupational groups, but also between the different types of jobs to which children aspired. This is despite the following comment from one girl in a focus group:

“ I think it is good that we get the choice of job we get, we’re not told that we can’t have a job because we are female. ”

The most popular occupational groups for girls were:

- culture, media and sports including actresses and designers (14 per cent);
- health professionals and associate professionals such as doctors, vets and nurses (13 per cent);
- teaching professionals (12 per cent);
- leisure and other personal services such as hairdressers, beauty therapists and working in the travel industry (10 per cent).

For boys:

- culture, media and sports including professional footballers or sportsmen, the music industry or graphic design (18 per cent);
- science and technology professionals such as computer programmers, web designers and engineers (14 per cent);
- protective service occupations such as the police and fire services and armed forces (13 per cent).

Boys were far more likely than girls to expect to end up in skilled manual work e.g. in the construction, metal and electrical industries.

In an ideal world, a number of occupations became less appealing as shown by answers to the question: *And if you could do any job you wanted when you leave school, what would it be?*

The number of children wishing to become science and technology or teaching professionals, or to work in the protective



services or, for boys, in skilled manual work, all dropped compared with the number who thought they would end up in those occupations. In contrast, increased numbers aspired to work in culture, media or sports, as pilots or astronauts, even as prime minister!

Implications

Attitudes are changing, but the EOC would like to see it made easier for young people to make choices, both in their careers and home life, which do not conform to the old stereotypes.

Log on to our website for further information about the *What's stopping you?* campaign:

www.eoc.org.uk

Notes

1. EOC (2001) Women and Men in Britain: Professional Occupations.
2. Statistics of Education (2000) Teachers in England and Wales, The Stationary Office: London
3. Scottish Executive website:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>

Please contact the EOC's Research and Resources Unit on 0161 838 8340 or at research@eoc.org.uk for the data used in the charts or for further information about EOC research and statistical work.

Methodology

NOP Family carried out this research in the winter of 2000/2001. A combined methodological approach involving both group discussions and survey research was used.

Group discussions

Discussions were held with four family groups in November 2000 which had two children aged 11 to 16. There were interviews with the mother and father (if present), individual interviews with each of the two children, then the whole family was brought together for a final discussion.

The study also drew on six family discussions which provided background information for the EOC's 25th anniversary. During December 2000, two group discussions were held in England, Scotland and Wales. Each group contained three same sex members of the same family across three generations i.e. daughter/ mother/ grandmother or son/father/grandfather.

Survey research

569 interviews amongst 11 to 16 year olds in Great Britain were carried out through the Young Generation Omnibus in January 2001. Face to face interviews were held in the street, after obtaining the consent of the child's parent or guardian. The sample was nationally representative with quotas being set for age, sex, class and region.

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