

The importance of language



These tip sheets are designed to help all professionals who work with young children to promote respect and gender equity in their work.

Supporting children to have respectful and equitable relationships when they are young can help them grow into resilient, caring and well-functioning young people and adults and is a key step towards preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women. This involves nurturing children and helping them learn the skills to acknowledge and accept difference, resolve conflict and solve problems. It is also about challenging gender stereotypes, so children of all genders grow up feeling heard, valued and respected.

Why is language important?

Words we use with children carry important messages about gender, power and respectful relationships. Language can be used to let children and adults know what we assume is and isn't normal for different genders. These messages can limit how children engage with a particular setting or service and with each other.

Language that reinforces gender stereotypes can make girls feel like it's not okay to build, play sport or get dirty. Similarly it can discourage boys from dressing up, playing with dolls or helping prepare meals. Often these messages are reinforced in other aspects of children's lives at home or through the TV programs they watch.

Sometimes we can be unaware of how our language reflects gender stereotypes and norms when we talk to children. For example, when we compliment girls on their appearance, and boys on their physical ability, we can reinforce the idea that girls should be pretty and boys should be active or strong. Becoming aware of how you use language can help you challenge stereotypes and norms and support children to develop more equal and respectful relationships.



Tips on using language that promotes respect and gender equity

- Use language that suggests girls are strong and active. Try asking girls for help with physical tasks, encouraging them to join in team sports, or complimenting them on their running and jumping
- Use language that suggests boys are caring, gentle and helpful. Try encouraging boys to care for one another when someone is upset. Ask them to help with preparing or clearing up food or compliment them on how kind and thoughtful they are
- Use language that encourages boys to have and express a range of emotions. Ask how they are feeling and try using language that makes them feel heard and understood
- Use language that encourages girls to be independent. Encourage them to try new things on their own and acknowledge their achievements rather than commenting on their appearance
- Be aware of how your language demonstrates expectations about gender. Try not to say to girls 'wouldn't you rather play with dolls?' or 'boys should play with trucks'
- Avoid using gendered terms for occupations. Instead of policeman, fireman, businessman or air hostess, use terms like police officer, firefighter, business person or flight attendant. Avoid adding gender to neutral occupations – there's no need to say 'male nurse' or 'female pilot'
- Use children's names or address groups with 'kids', 'folks' or 'you-all' instead of 'boys and girls'

I need help to pack away this equipment. Are there any strong children who can help?

Jack, Sebastian seems upset. Why don't you ask him what is wrong and see if you can help?

Dimitri, can you tell me what happened and why you are upset?

Wow! Ava that's such a tall tower. Tell me how you made it.

I understand, I can see how that would make you afraid.

City of Melbourne and DVRCV wish to acknowledge Associate Professor Kylie Smith (University of Melbourne) and the educators and families at City of Melbourne run children's centres, whose work these tip sheets are based on. You can find the other tip sheets in this series at www.partnersinprevention.org.au and www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/respectandequity