How We Address Gender in the Great First Eight Curriculum

Great First Eight wants all children to feel safe and accepted in child care and school settings. You may remember—from your own education or experiences since then—children being teased because they were perceived as "tomboys," bullied if they had what was perceived as a nontraditional family structure, or subtly or even overtly discouraged from excelling in areas based on their gender. Great First Eight uses research findings to work against these kinds of practices in age-appropriate ways.

Research finds that gender plays a role in children's development at an early age. The tendency to label the gender of others develops in the toddler years, usually between 18-24 months.[i] At this stage, children also begin to engage in gender-typed behavior, or behavior that fits into their ideas about what they "should" or "should not" do according to their gender.[ii] Children develop rudimentary gender stereotypes by age two and internalize them further through the early years of school.[iii]

Unfortunately, these ideas about gender (and the "correct" behaviors based on gender) can create long-lasting harm, with youth who do not fit their classmates' ideas about gender often facing discrimination and bullying in schools.[iv] Historically, schools have reinforced stereotypes about gender (including gender identity, gender expression, and family structures), in part using books and materials that show only traditional ideas of gender and family.[v] It is vital, therefore, that schools are able to offer a vast representation of different identities, interests, roles, expressions, and family structures to expand how children think about gender. This representation can help challenge stereotypes and create a supportive, inclusive environment that values each child and their unique identity.[vi]

The Great First Eight Curriculum seeks to help teachers create such an environment in research-informed, age-appropriate ways. Some key points of our approach are as follows:

- We **do not** address sexuality or sexual orientation with this age group.

- We **do** include a wide range of family structures (for example: an uncle raising a child, a mom and dad raising a child, two moms raising a child) in books and other texts.

- We **do not** emphasize gender in the classroom. For example, we do not address the class as "boys and girls" (instead saying "children," "students," or "classmates"), nor make a "boys' line" and a "girls' line," nor assign children areas of the playground based on gender—the kinds of actions that may actually create and strengthen gender stereotypes.[vii] However, children are welcome to talk about their own gender as they wish.

- We **do** strive to ensure that collectively, the books and other texts we feature in Great First Eight include a wide range of gender expressions and avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example, we ensure that there are many books depicting characters who are likely to be interpreted as females showing interest and aptitude in math and science.

- We **do** encourage teachers to resist reinforcing gender stereotypes in their interactions with children. For example, we encourage teachers to invite all children to visit the construction/block area in the infant and toddler classroom and encourage primary-grade teachers to avoid gender bias in who they call on during class discussions.

- We **do** teach teachers to create safe spaces for all children, and we teach children to show kindness toward all classmates, so phenomena such as bullying based on gender and gender expression are actively resisted.

i   Martin, C. L., & Ruble, D. N. (2010). Patterns of gender development. *Annual Review of Psychology, 61,* 353.

ii   Diamond, L. M. (2020). Gender fluidity and nonbinary gender identities among children and adolescents. *Child Development Perspectives, 14*(2), 110-115.

iii Martin, C. L., & Ruble, D. N. (2010). Patterns of gender development. *Annual Review of Psychology, 61,* 353. Solomon, J., & Henderson, B. (2016). Gender identity and expression in the early childhood classroom. *Young Children, 71*(3), 61.

iv   Formby, E. (2015). Limitations of focusing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic 'bullying' to understand and address LGBT young people's experiences within and beyond school. *Sex Education, 15*(6), 626-640.

v   Baker-Sperry, L., & Grauerholz, L. (2003). The pervasiveness and persistence of the feminine beauty ideal in children's fairy tales. *Gender & Society, 17*(5), 711-726. Gansen, H. M. (2017). Reproducing (and disrupting) heteronormativity: Gendered sexual socialization in preschool classrooms. *Sociology of Education, 90*(3), 255-272.

vi   Solomon, J., & Henderson, B. (2016). Gender identity and expression in the early childhood classroom. *Young Children, 71*(3), 61.

vii Zosuls, K. M., Ruble, D. N., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Shrout, P. E., Bornstein, M. H., & Greulich, F. K. (2009). The acquisition of gender labels in infancy: implications for gender-typed play. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(3), 688.