



Breaking down gender stereotypes online

Find tips to help children and young people understand gender stereotypes in their online spaces, encourage conversations and respect differences and uniqueness online.



The online world is an essential part of young people's lives as it's a space for learning, leisure, information, and communication. With an increase in cyberbullying, gender-related harmful content, and online abuse, children and young people may find it difficult to form independent, unbiased opinions and attitudes about genders, differences, and equality.

From online gaming to social media, children and young people encounter gender roles and stereotypes in various ways, so it is important for them to develop their critical thinking. Parents, carers and educators can provide initial support by demonstrating empathy and openness, and creating opportunities for children and young people to share their experiences and discuss any concerns.

To help children and young people understand the way they think about gender, including stereotypes, discrimination, sexual and/or violent content, here are five tips to support them.

5 Top Tips to support children and young people



1. Have open and transparent conversations

Online platforms can present unattainable standards where children and young people believe that they must conform to a certain behaviour or look a certain way online in order to be accepted. Children and young people need to be able [to speak openly about what they are experiencing online](#) so that they can understand gender stereotypes and how to identify them in online spaces. If you are unsure or uncomfortable with the topic, [do your own research](#) so that you can best support a child in an open and transparent conversation.



2. Discuss the impact of gender stereotypes online

Gender stereotypes can promote unhealthy and old-fashioned attitudes that do not allow for different expressions of self. Children and young people may believe that they have to be a certain way to fit the 'girl' or 'boy' box and these gender stereotypes may further pressure them to act in harmful ways to themselves and towards others. Some gender stereotypes may lead children and young people to have negative body images or even [engage in self-harm](#). Open and transparent discussion to counter these stereotypes and [promote positive body images](#) is crucial.

3. Explain how to be an upstander and when it is safe to do so

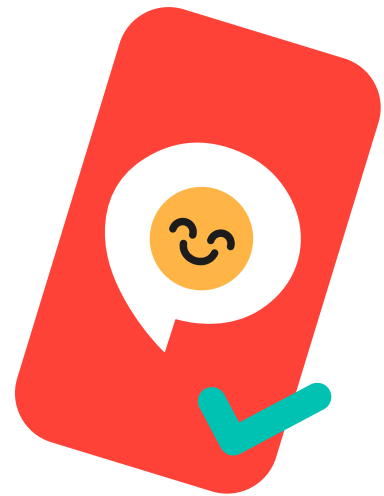
Whether harmful behaviour is bullying, harassment or gender inequality, **children and young people can offer support by being an upstander when it is safe to do so**. Some ways they can do this are - shifting the focus away, calling out the person on their harmful actions, blocking or reporting them (if necessary), supporting the victim, leaving the online situation (and then acting on it later), or [by asking for help from a trusted adult or mentor](#).



4. Encourage them to respect differences and celebrate uniqueness online

As soon as children are old enough to engage online, **they should be encouraged to know that they have a right to feel safe and respected online**, as well as a responsibility to respect others.

You can [teach digital resilience](#) and [provide strategies for being respectful online](#) to everyone including others who are different or unique. There are age-appropriate strategies for children to adopt if they are exposed to or witness harmful behaviour online, but also to act as responsible digital citizens.



5. Continue the conversation and your support

Once you have begun to [have conversations](#) with children and young people, **do your best to keep these ongoing and provide opportunities for them to discuss any questions or concerns that they have**. The best approach is to start early and have regular conversations while using age-appropriate language for the situation.

Here are some examples of conversation starters. Feel free to adapt them to a child's age and level of maturity. After each statement, have an open and transparent conversation with them about respecting differences and accepting people for who they are.

- "Girls are ballerinas and boys are soldiers."
- "Is that a boy or a girl?"
- "Boys are smarter than other groups of people."
- "Boys are not as nice as girls."

As a parent, carer, or a trusted adult working with young people, you are able to model empathy and understanding which will help children understand gender equality in their online spaces. Your support in gender equality conversations will aid children and young people to respect differences and uniqueness online.



Helpful glossary of terms

When you are introducing this concept to younger children it is important to make sure they have a good understanding of words they may not understand. Here is a short glossary of terms that can help explain some of these terms.

Sex

UK government defines sex as:

- Referring to the biological aspects of an individual as determined by their anatomy, which is produced by their chromosomes, hormones and their interactions
 - generally male or female
 - something that is assigned at birth

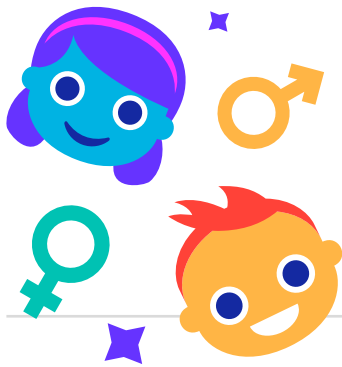
Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>

Gender

UK government defines gender as

- a social construction relating to behaviours and attributes based on labels of masculinity and femininity; gender identity is a personal, internal perception of oneself and so the gender category someone identifies with may not match the sex they were assigned at birth
- where an individual may see themselves as a man, a woman, as having no gender, or as having a non-binary gender – where people identify as somewhere on a spectrum between man and woman

Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>



Stereotype

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. For example, "All girls like pink".

Avatar

An icon or figure representing a particular person in a video game or internet platform.

Non-binary

Someone who does not identify with the sex that was assigned at birth.

Hate speech

Speech (or comments online) that is intended to insult, offend, or intimidate a person because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability.

Gender equality

The concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realising their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development.

Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female.

Source: <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Gender%20glossary%20of%20terms%20and%20concepts%20.pdf>