

The Power of Parents

Snapshot report



Background

As long as women are not seen as equal to men and considered less worthy of respect, violence against women will continue in Australia. This means that as a nation, we need to promote equality and respect to all, and we need to do this right across the life course. Parents of young children have a unique opportunity to contribute to this whole-of-society approach. They can model equality and respect in their relationships, challenge rigid and harmful gender stereotypes and promote diverse interests, opportunities and experiences for their children.

In early 2017, Our Watch commissioned a survey and desktop research to understand attitudes towards gender equality and gender stereotypes amongst parents of 0-3 year old children. Research company Ipsos Australia conducted the online survey in January 2017. This summary is an initial snapshot of this research, and focuses on the power of parents to challenge stereotypes. Our Watch will release a report on the broader research findings in early 2018.

Methodology

Our Watch developed the survey, drawing from existing questionnaires including a parent survey administered by Zero Tolerance, a Scottish non-profit organisation.¹

The survey included questions about how parents divide key household tasks and childrearing responsibilities within their family, and whether they believe that gender stereotypes have an impact on their children. The survey received a total of 858 valid responses, from across all states and territories in Australia.¹

Simultaneously, Our Watch commissioned a desktop review of existing initiatives and resources that support parents to promote non-violence, respect and gender equality with their young children.² The review included both academic literature from the field of child development, as well as evidence and knowledge from practice. It drew on over 90 references which were primarily academic journals, reports and evaluations, but which also included relevant website content from non-government organisations and government agencies.

What are gender stereotypes?

Gender stereotypes refer to the behaviours and roles that a society or social group typically expects from women and girls, and from men and boys. In childhood, these include different expectations about boys' and girls' behaviour. For example, the idea that boys shouldn't cry or that girls shouldn't be bossy. They include common assumptions about the kinds of attributes and interests that girls and boys have, and the types of activities they like to engage in and are good at. For example, they include the idea that girls are naturally gentle, sensitive, passive, and cute, enjoy playing with dolls and are good at caring for others; while boys are inherently active, boisterous, adventurous, and noisy, enjoy playing rough and are good at figuring out how things work. Such gender stereotypes then extend to later stages of life, with similarly contrasting assumptions commonly made about the appropriate or expected behaviour and attributes of men and women.

Gender stereotypes do not just set up 'different' ideas about girls and boys, or men and women, they reflect and reinforce gender inequality, because the traits, roles and expectations associated with boys and men are typically more highly valued than those associated with girls and women. They support for example, the assumption that men will earn more, and hold more leadership positions than women, and that women will do the majority of unpaid household tasks.

For both genders, these kinds of stereotypes also limit ideas of what they can do, or be, in life. The familiar saying, 'You can't be what you can't see' shows the power of stereotypes to limit young children's dreams and visions for their own futures.

Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children also points to evidence demonstrating that where there is strong adherence to stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity there is a higher probability of violence against women.³

¹ While the survey was conducted over a cross section of the population it was not representative of all groups.

Survey sample

The 858 survey respondents had the following characteristics:

- The majority were mothers, with 65% of respondents identifying as female and 34% as male. Close to three quarters (74%) of respondents lived in major cities.
- They were drawn from across Australia with representation from all states and territories.
- Close to half (48%) of respondents were aged between 25 and 34 years and just over a third (36%) were aged between 35 and 44 years.
- All respondents had at least one child aged between 0 - 3 years, however total number of children varied, with 38% having one child, 41% having two children, and 21% having three or more children.
- 87% of respondents identified as living in a “two parent household, male and female partners, with children” while 9% identified as a “single parent with children”. Same sex partnered parents made up 2% of respondents, with a further 2% reporting that they and their child/ren also lived with others (such as friends or grandparents).

Key findings

The survey showed that the vast majority of parents value equality very highly. They want girls and boys to be treated the same in their early years, they want to challenge the restrictive gender stereotypes that surround them, and they want to promote non-violence to their children.

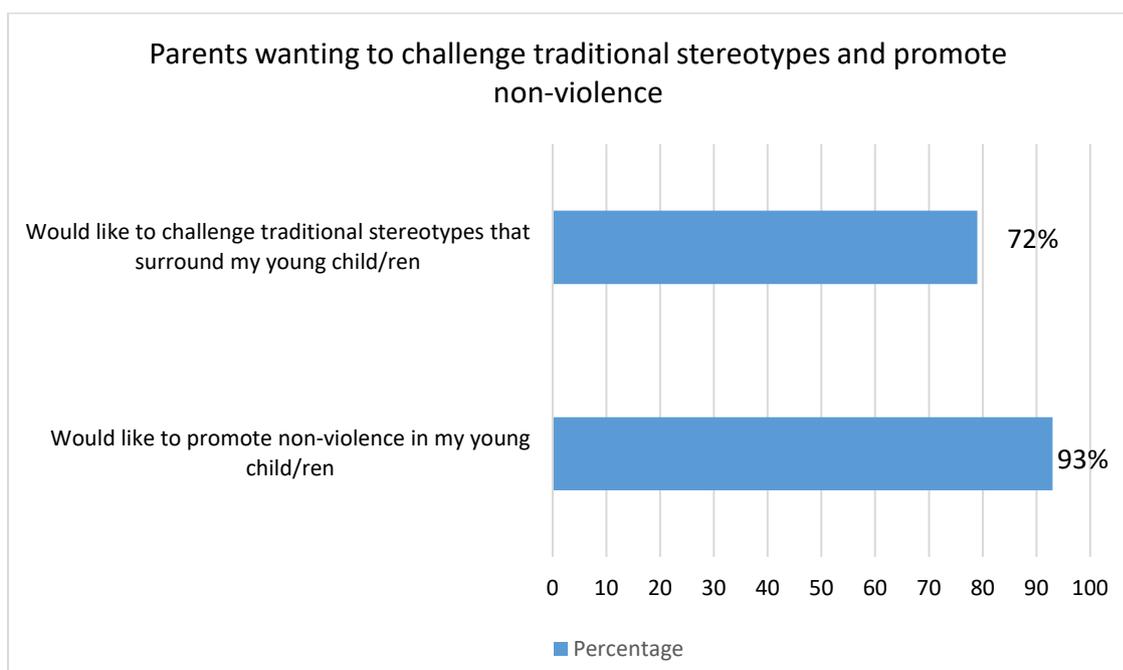
“Stereotypes are never good. They limit natural behaviours. Boys should be able to cry, play with dolls, hold hands with other boys, [and] wear nail polish as much as they should be able to not love dirt or trucks or ‘boy’ things.” – Mother of one

Specifically:

- 92% of parents agreed that it is important to treat girls and boys the same in their early years;
- 79% of parents want to take action to challenge traditional gender stereotypes; and
- 93% want to promote the idea of non-violence to their young children.

“Yes they [girls and boys] should be treated the same and given the opportunity to find out what they like and dislike without any pressure” – Father of one

“I don't want to pigeonhole my child and by treating them as a boy or girl it may set them down the path of I can only do girl things or boy things. They are both able to do whatever they want regardless of historical gender roles.” – Father of two



These survey results show very strong support among parents for the principle of gender equality, together with a desire to take personal, practical action to challenge the kinds of gender stereotypes that create inequalities for their children.

Parents' aspirations to positively influence their children's experiences are supported by the desktop research undertaken alongside the survey, with child development literature showing that it is parents who provide their children with their first 'lessons' about gender.⁴ This literature also shows that children start learning 'gender appropriate' and 'gender-role' behaviour by the age of two,⁵ and develop their understanding of ideas about gender-related characteristics during their toddler and preschool years.⁶ This child development research suggests that children who understand and identify gender labels earlier tend to express stronger gender-typed preferences and use gender stereotypes to guide their attitudes and behaviours.⁷

These findings suggest that parents have a significant opportunity to positively influence their children's understanding of stereotypes during this early period of their learning and development. Parents can do this not only through their interactions with their young children, but also through role modelling within their parental relationships, and in their interactions with other family members. In such ways, parents can play an active role in challenging the gender stereotypes that surround their children, and promoting gender equality. In doing so they can support their children to freely explore their own interests and preferences.

Implications and next steps

The findings from the survey and research review suggest not only that most parents want to challenge the negative impacts of rigid gender roles and stereotypes on their young children, but also that the period of early childhood provides a significant window of opportunity for them to do so, as it is the time when children's ideas about gender are first developing.

By supporting parents to challenge gender stereotypes and model and promote equality for their children, we can all help create a society that provides the widest possible range of experiences and

opportunities for boys and girls, one in which our youngest generation can grow up being free to be who they want to be.

Recognising parents' appetite to challenge gender stereotypes in their children's lives, and their significant power to do so, Our Watch will continue to work to support parents to promote gender equality. We will develop further research, tools and resources for parents, to be released in 2018.

¹ Zero Tolerance (2016). *The default setting: What parents say about gender stereotyping in their children's early years*. Shirley Henderson (Ed). Zero Tolerance: Edinburgh.

<http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/default-setting-what-parents-say-about-gender-stereotyping-their-children%E2%80%99s-early-years?destination=node%2F333>

² Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth (2015) *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

³ See note ii

⁴ Leaper (2014)

⁵ Cook, R. & Cusack, S. (2010) *Gender Stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspectives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁶ Martin, C. & Ruble, D. (2004) Children's Search for Gender Cues: Cognitive Perspectives on Gender Development, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol.13: 2), pp.67-70.

⁷ Halim, M. & Lindner, N. (2013) Gender Self Socialization in Early Childhood, *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, retrieved 5 January 2017 from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/gender-early-socialization/introduction>