



Upskilling Course for Childcare Professionals

Training Materials

**Module 2. Gender Identity and Sexual
Orientation: Teaching Unit 2.4.**



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Acknowledgment

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Module 2: Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Teaching unit 2.4. Methods of providing an emotionally supportive environment

Theory Input

Emotionally supportive environments in early years education are settings where children feel safe, valued and nurtured. These environments promote positive emotional and social development by providing children with the security and support they need to explore, learn, and grow.

Key characteristics of emotionally supportive environments include:

- 1. Safe and Secure Atmosphere:** Ensuring that children feel physically and emotionally safe. This involves creating a stable and predictable environment where children know what to expect and feel protected from harm or distress, implementing consistent daily routines and clear expectations.
- 2. Positive Relationships and responsive care:** Building strong, positive relationships between educators and children. This includes showing warmth, affection, and responsiveness to children's needs and emotions. Educators should be approachable and attentive, fostering trust and connection. This involves recognizing and accommodating each child's unique emotional and developmental needs, providing personalized support when necessary.
- 3. Emotional Validation:** Acknowledging and validating children's emotions. Educators should listen to children, empathize with their feelings, and help them understand and express their emotions in healthy ways.
- 4. Social Skills Development:** Teaching and modeling positive social skills. Educators should help children learn how to interact respectfully with others, resolve conflicts, and build friendships. Modeling empathy and compassion in interactions. Educators should demonstrate caring behavior and encourage children to be kind and understanding towards others.
- 5. Inclusive Practices:** Creating an inclusive environment where all children feel accepted and valued regardless of their background, abilities, or identities. This includes celebrating diversity and fostering a sense of belonging for every child.
- 6. Supportive Communication:** Using supportive and constructive communication. Educators should use positive language, avoid criticism, and provide guidance in a way that encourages children.
- 7. Parental Involvement:** Engaging parents and caregivers in the educational process.

Strong partnerships with families help reinforce a child's sense of security and continuity between home and school environments.

- 8. External Support:** Childcare professionals should know when to turn to external experts and specialists when they encounter challenges that need specific interventions that are outside of their area of expertise.

By fostering emotionally supportive environments, early years educators can help children develop a strong foundation for emotional well-being, resilience and social competence, which are crucial for their overall development and future success.

Some of the most forward-thinking approaches which support this kind of environments are:

- 1. Reggio Emilia Approach**
- 2. Montessori Method**
- 3. Forest Schools**
- 4. Waldorf Education**
- 5. HighScope Approach**
- 6. Bank Street Developmental-Interaction Approach**
- 7. Emergent Curriculum**
- 8. Loose Parts Theory**
- 9. Play-Based Learning**
- 10. Attachment-Based Approach**

These innovative theories share a common belief in the importance of nurturing a child's natural curiosity, creativity, and intrinsic motivation to learn.

In order to create a gender-responsive, emotionally supportive environment, professionals should reflect on the following aspects (UNESCO, 2019):

- **Gender biases:** they reinforce stereotypes and thus influence expectations and learning outcomes. Being conscious of own beliefs, attitudes and practices is important for improving educational processes.
- **Implicit and explicit curriculum:** professionals should keep in mind the importance of dismantling gender prejudices and stereotypes in their everyday practice to prevent inequalities. For instance, through the use of thought-provoking questions on gender roles, by checking the implicit messages present in books, songs, posters and rhymes and modifying them when necessary and by planning emotional education activities.
- **Seating arrangements in class:** the way in which the learners and the classroom are arranged influences learners' involvement and learning outcomes. Working in groups is believed to encourage the equal participation of all learners. When children get the chance to play and learn with their peers, they develop skills for interacting effectively

and comfortably with any gender. Girls and boys should be mixed, their participation encouraged, and their specific needs and interests should be considered.

- **Learning through play:** it is important to encourage learners to engage in all kinds of play, without thinking about what is considered socially appropriate for their gender.
- **Play areas and materials:** their set-up influences how attractive they are to different genders and which activities children engage in. Areas and materials should be gender neutral and encourage exploration and discovery of different skills. They should be strategically positioned to encourage the use of every area (e.g., construction area next to symbolic play area). However, advertisements, companies and shops often make toys gender specific, causing some children to avoid playing with materials advertised for the other sex. When play materials appeal to one gender only, all learners miss out because a variety of experiences with different materials will help them learn a wider range of skills and develop holistically. Gender-specific play materials may also influence learners' understanding of stereotyped male and female roles.
- **Gender-responsive language:** the use of language, including non-verbal body language like gestures and facial and eye expressions and the use of preferred pronouns, can make all learners feel respected and valued, which will serve as encouragement and can improve learners' performance. On the contrary, inappropriate use of language can transmit negative gender biases and messages that may prevent learning.
- **Interpersonal interactions:** studies have shown that children prefer to mix with their own gender. However, in most cases, they do not dislike or want to avoid other genders but instead simply favour their own. Young learners begin to believe that some activities are for girls and others for boys through observing older learners and other people who unconsciously pass on their beliefs and behaviours about gender roles. As crossing the gender barrier often takes courage for children, adult encouragement and support in this direction are very important: when children have many different playmates and try different activities, they build skills to interact and function successfully in other situations. Changes in school organization and culture towards gender sensitivity and equality require the action and commitment of all educators, guided by the leadership of the school. Educators' interactions with each other should be also considered as they can either reinforce or reduce stereotypical behaviour: the way educators interact with different genders influences children's perceptions of gender roles in educational environments and in society.
- **Assessment:** it is useful to gather and provide educators, parents and families critical information about a child's development and growth. The information coming from assessment can also be used to adapt the environment and learning activities to the child's specific needs. Doing so can result in more efficient teaching and, eventually, in better learning outcomes. Observation and assessment also offer a chance to positively address gender interactions and to note and praise desired behaviours such as gender-sensitive play behaviour: it is important to keep in mind that receiving encouragement can further motivate children towards equality, empathy and respect.

Resources for further reading

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Activity resources

2.4.1. Activity name	Tina's Dilemma		
Purpose of the activity	The activity will help to create gender-sensitive and emotionally supportive environments by finding possible solutions to real work challenges in early years education.		
Learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the role of childcare professionals in establishing emotionally supportive and safe environments where children can be themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination. • Embrace diversity and challenge own biases in relation to LGBTIQ+ individuals and families. • Engage childcare professionals in open, non-judgmental, and gender-responsive conversations, both with children and colleagues. 		
Interactive method/technique	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Individual work <input type="checkbox"/> Work in pairs <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Work in small groups <input type="checkbox"/> Group work	<input type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstration <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion <input type="checkbox"/> Debate <input type="checkbox"/> Story <input type="checkbox"/> Round table <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Problem solving	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Case study <input type="checkbox"/> Role playing <input type="checkbox"/> Questioner/quiz <input type="checkbox"/> Guided fantasy <input type="checkbox"/> Somatic exercise <input type="checkbox"/> Play <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
Timeframe for activity	45 minutes		
Resources required	Printed case study with four intervention options for each participant, Printed "A" "B" "C" and "D" letters each on A4 paper		
Instructions			
<p>Give each participant a sheet with the following case study and four intervention options: "Clara is an early years educator and works in a nursery. One day, an almost 3 years old little girl, hugging a female friend in class, tells Clara that she loved her friend and that she was her girlfriend. Clara, after having listened to the little girl, stiffens and corrects her, qualifying that statement as nonsense and telling her that at most she could have a boyfriend when she grew up. During lunch break, the incident is told to other colleagues in the form of a funny anecdote and is dismissed with</p>			

general laughter at the absurdity of the little girl's statement. Clara also comments: "it's crazy how they start so young".

Tina, her colleague, asks herself how to approach the situation.

What do you think Tina should do?

A: Tina does not have to intervene in any way because she was not present when the situation occurred. (If you agree, go to corner A)

B: Tina should talk to the little girl about the beautiful gesture of affection she had had for her friend, tell her that love can be directed towards everyone and that she could love whoever she wants, as long as they treat her well. (If you agree, go to corner B)

C: Tina should discuss with her colleagues that spontaneous gestures of affection have no reason to be slowed down or corrected. (If you agree, go to corner C)

D: Tina should suggest a group supervision with an expert to learn how to deal with these situations in the future. (If you agree, go to corner D)

1. Place each printed letter in four different corners of the room.
2. Give participants 5 minutes to read the case study and to picture themselves in the situation.
3. Ask each participant to place themselves in the corner of the room corresponding to the option chosen.
4. Note the most chosen option and explain that it is quite natural for people to have different points of view in the same situation, and that is why we need to educate ourselves on the competences needed to create emotionally supportive environments.
5. Ask participants to explain the reasons for their choice.
6. Facilitate the discussion of different points of view and act as a mediator between opposite opinions.
7. Note that option "D" is the most suitable to create emotionally supportive environments.
8. Explain how, according to recent studies and theories, emotionally supportive environments must satisfy certain characteristics.
9. Show the following characteristics implied in the choice of option D:
 - be aware that the individual's beliefs and mental patterns influence the holistic development of the child
 - be aware that your educational approach can deconstruct or reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, impacting the child's vision of itself
 - reflect on own competences and those of the group
 - know when to turn to external experts
 - structure interventions shared by the whole team
 - acquire and share good practices and gender-responsive conversation methods

Comments	<p>Ask the participants how they felt during the exercise, if there was anything that surprised them and if they empathized with any of the characters and if they feel the need to receive more information on the topic.</p> <p>End the activity by asking participants if any of them want to move to another corner in the room.</p>
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