



## **Argumentation aids in favour of gender-conscious education**

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### **Gender-conscious education increases the educational opportunities for your children**

Education is becoming increasingly important. Education influences people's paths and their opportunities in life, and scientific research over the past years has emphasised again and again that early childhood educational centres are important educational bodies in this respect. In order to be able to already provide children access to educational processes in early childhood centres, it is helpful to understand education not only as a process which is applied from the outside, but also see it as the children's self-education.

Children familiarise themselves with their world actively and inquisitively in this self-education process. They form an image of the world and learn how to find their way about in it. Children make their decisions and orientate their behaviour against this background. The more manifold the images of the world are which children take on board in this self-education process and the more inquisitive they can be about their images of the world in their physical-sensual experiences, the more their educational opportunities improve.

Gender-conscious education aims to support girls and boys in taking on board as many different images of the world as possible. It aims to motivate children to approach very different games, activities and interests as openly and as inquisitively as possible and to try these out. Gender-conscious education also aims to enable children to overcome gender boundaries and stereotypes. (Because) gender stereotypes and clichés narrow down one's view of the world and prevent children from being interested in as many different areas as possible. Gender-conscious education increases the educational opportunities of children and promotes the development of their own personalities.

### **Gender-conscious education helps children to find their way about "in a culture of two sexes"<sup>1</sup>**

Children already learn at a very young age that adults are divided into men and women and that men and women apparently differ fundamentally from one another. At the age of 3, children begin to understand that they are divided into boys or girls and most children assume this division for themselves. In addition, from this age onwards, children notice that the sexes are assigned different attributes and modes of behaviour. These assigned attributes and modes of behaviour are not uniform, however, and even contradict themselves a lot of the time, for example, when it is said that women are bad at parking, and yet are nevertheless supposed to be the better drivers (because they drive more safely). What is more, children always see in practice that the attributes assigned to women and men are not consistent with their everyday experiences; for example, when they are told that boys do not play with dolls, but their own brother does. For children, it is not that simple to find their way about in this "two-gender culture" and it is not easy for them to come up with an idea of appropriate gender behaviour. Rabe-Kleberg also says that children themselves are "researchers in a culture of two sexes". Gender-conscious education aims to ease this research for children by taking up the children's questions concerning gender and going

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<sup>1</sup> See also the text on the subject of: "understanding doing gender"

through these with them. Gender-conscious education also aims to contribute towards the children's ability to integrate manifold and, to some extent, contradictory images into their image of their own sex (because the simple stereotypes assigned by society now correspond less and less with the complex and differentiated lifestyles of women and men, because they are outdated).

### **Gender-conscious education "helps" children to have more androgyny. Androgyny encourages children and helps them to cope with difficult situations in life**

Renate Niesel writes that the new educational approaches in early childhood educational centres means that the skills children need so that they can cope with the world of tomorrow are being redefined. She identifies the ability to be androgynous as an important factor which makes it easier for children to deal with the complex demands that modern society makes of them. Androgyny means "going beyond the typical gender-specific role and showing modes of behaviour which are actually assigned to the other sex in situations in which this is appropriate." (Niesel 2001). Here, Renate Niesel draws reference to different research projects which were able to demonstrate that children who have interests and who carry out activities which cross over the gender boundaries are also generally able to cope well in difficult situations in life (ibid. p4).

### **Encouraging gender-untypical interests helps children to have more self-confidence**

Educational work with pre-school children starts with the interests and topics of the children: In their book, "Künstler, Forscher, Konstrukteure. Werkstattbuch zum Bildungsauftrag von Kindertageseinrichtungen" (Artists, researchers, constructors. Workshop book on the educational mandate in early childhood educational centres), Hans-Joachim Laewen and Beate Andres make clear that educators should pick up on the developmental and educational topics of children so that they can then work through these with the children. This also applies unrestrictedly to so-called 'gender-untypical' topics among the children. If parents and educators pick up on these gender-untypical topics of the children, then they enable the children not only to follow their own interests and to make interesting experiences, but they also convey to the children: I recognise your wishes and needs and I value them

### **Gender-conscious education is set down in law**

Gender-conscious education is based on various regulations, laws and guidelines. For example, the German Social Security Code (SGB), book eight (VIII) - Child and Youth Services Act (KJHG) – stipulates that, when designing the services and fulfilling the tasks [of the social services], the different situations in which girls and boys live must be taken into consideration, disadvantages must be done away with and equal opportunities for girls and boys must be promoted.

### **In other areas of working with children and youths, gender-conscious education is already far better established**

Gender-conscious education can already look back on a long tradition in Germany. In the extra-curricular social work with children and youths as well as in the educational and career opportunities work with young people, many different approaches and experiences have been made in work with girls and boys as well as with gender-conscious education in the co-educational group setting. The area of early childhood education is still a little behind in its development here and therefore has a great need to catch up.

### **Gender-conscious education can contribute towards reducing conflicts between the children**

Gender-stereotypical attitudes and "drawing boundaries" in and by children can lead to conflicts among the children in early childhood educational centres. For example, conflicts may come about if children make fun of other children who are acting in a gender-untypical

way or if stereotypical gender images lead to the fact that children exclude other children from taking part in certain activities ("Go away, girls are not allowed to play in the building corner") or if children place themselves above other children ("Boys are stronger than girls"). Experience has shown that gender-conscious education which actively deals with stereotypical gender images together with the children can reduce gender conflicts of this kind among them (see also Toolbox, p ...).

### **A gender-conscious view improves the quality of early childhood education**

Gender-conscious education requires an examination of gender-stereotypical perceptions and it means going into the different needs of the children. Gender-conscious education which perceives the children in their manifold interests and wishes and which meets their needs can lead to children being more satisfied with what education has to offer them. For example, Gabi Lass, manageress of the "Schneidemühler Weg" early childhood educational centre writes: "By placing traditional 'girls' play corners' (such as dolls' corners) together with games, activities and toys which are also attractive for boys (dressing up, playing doctors, being knights, etc.) we have been largely successful up to now in encouraging girls and/or boys to make more use of everything we have to offer and they are no longer so restricted in their play. The same applies for the traditionally classic 'boys' play corners' (such as the building corner), which were put together with the dolls' house and creative building materials, thus making new areas of play accessible for both girls and boys. (see Gender Mainstreaming – a subject for early childhood educational centres? p 17)

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