

# Same but different

One award-winning school in London strives to be gender-neutral and help children embrace different family make-ups. By *Nicole Weinstein*

It's the start of the day at Brindishe Lee School in Lewisham, south-east London, and children have chosen to sing the *Finger Family Song*, a particular favourite which goes, 'Mummy finger, mummy finger, where are you? Here I am, here I am, how do you do?' The teacher asks, 'Who's in the family today?' and a child replies, 'A mummy and a mummy and a brother and a sister.'

Teacher Danielle Sanniti says, 'The children are asked to choose the family structure for the song in the first few weeks of joining Reception, and it's during this time that the tone, ethos and language are set.'

This openness to sexual orientation and diversity is embedded into all aspects of the classroom – from the gender-neutral décor to the resources on offer.

'There are little to no "boy" or "girl" types of play in this classroom,'

Ms Sanniti adds. 'Throughout the day, children are actively encouraged to challenge their ideas around gender, not only through the resources on offer but also through role play and storytelling activities.'

## GENDER PLAY

At this forward-thinking school, which is rated Outstanding and is an Educate & Celebrate Best Practice school, an award that has been recognised by the Department for Education for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans inclusion, the classroom is split into seven areas: art, craft and necklace/bracelet-making; small world and small block play; math manipulatives; transient art; role play and large blocks; writing and drawing; and books and computers.

The environment is gender-neutral, with walls painted in pale greys, greens and blues and no bright colours used to display children's work.

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The small-world play area contains non-gender-specific resources such as dinosaurs, cars, Sylvanian family animals, small soft dolls, fairies, gnomes, rocks, wooden pieces, fantasy people and a variety of animals.

Ms Sanniti says, 'Also, we do not cover themes or topics. The Reception classroom is entirely child-led. Children lead their own learning with questions and through their play. Because of this, they are not exposed to things in closed situations. For example, there is no "princesses and knights" theme. To me, this would mean I am telling the children, "You are a princess or a knight – choose."'

## Role play

Role play and storytelling takes place each day at Brindishe Lee School, and children are invited to write or draw a story and choose two friends to act it out. There is often much excitement as the children make their own costumes out of pieces of fabric in the dressing-up box or make jewellery with the beads in the craft area.

Children are encouraged to choose who they want to play the parts in their stories. Ms Sanniti says, 'Right away girls are chosen for "knights" and "baddies" and boys are chosen as "queens" or "helpers". A girl once said she didn't want to play a knight, so she was asked to think about three books that had females as heroes. She then happily played the knight.'

## Block play

Blocks are provided in abundance throughout the setting, indoors and

## EDUCATE & CELEBRATE

Educate & Celebrate is a charity that delivers training to nursery teachers and schools and provides resources through picture books and songs. There are currently 120 schools that have achieved its 'Best Practice Award for LGBT+inclusion', and half of these are primaries with nurseries.

CEO and founder Dr Elly Barnes MBE says, 'The demand is higher for primary than any other phase at the moment, with increasing demand from nurseries, as the benefits of gender-neutral settings

are becoming substantiated as soon as our children enter the education system.'

### Dr Barnes' tips for promoting gender equality in nurseries

- Avoid pink and blue toys or gendered items in pink and blue. Opt for a dressing-up box with no boundaries. Cast roles in plays regardless of gender and very simply through the use of gender-neutral language. For example, avoid phrases such as, 'like a girl', 'man up'.
- Most prejudices, stereotyping and preconceptions happen

- out of habit and social conditioning. Ask yourself what are your own preconceptions. A practitioner used to say, 'Girls, tie your hair back', and now says, 'Children, tie your hair back.' Also, a child told a trainee teacher that they would not like superheroes because they were a girl, so the trainee came in the next day in a Spider-Man T-shirt.
- Try to change habits of segregating by gender. For example, get children to line up according to the month of their birthday.
- What are you reading to the

children? Provide a selection of books about family make-ups including those of different nationalities, ages, disabilities, married or not, pregnancy, genders, gender identities, nationalities, faiths and sexual orientations.

- Ensure that all activities are promoted for all children. For example, sports, toys, clothes, jobs are for everyone.
- Mount displays of 'LGBT+' heroes, including scientists, musicians, artists, authors, and a general display about how we are all different but are all special on classroom walls, corridors, in the library





 **MORE INFORMATION**

● *The Common Inspection Framework: education, skills and early years* (section 1.4) states that in making judgements, inspectors will pay particular attention to the outcomes of lesbian, gay and bisexual children and learners. It also states that inspectors will assess the extent to which the provider 'promotes equality of opportunity and takes positive steps to prevent any form of discrimination'. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-inspection-framework-education-skills-and-early-years-from-september-2015>

Ms Sanniti says, 'Boys do not say, "That's a doll, I can't play with that." They say, "That's the mummy at the museum with her baby." Girls do not say, "That's a car, I can't play with it." They say, "There's a traffic jam on the way to the museum."

'Children often build houses with families and are heard saying things like, "It's a house with two daddies and two children", or, "It's a house with just a mummy and a baby." This is very usual for us.

'Children are so open-minded and ready to listen. They have no set views and they are fluid in their ideas and understanding and readily accept, given the opportunity to do so. To support them, teachers need to be ready with songs, books and examples in their repertoire and jump at any opportunity to challenge preconceived views in young children.'

**RECOMMENDED BY BRINDISHE LEE**

**Blocks** 'An endlessly open-ended resource. We use blocks from Community Playthings' – [www.communityplaythings.co.uk/products/wooden-toys/blocks](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/products/wooden-toys/blocks)

**Small-world figures** 'We mix and match the Wooden Small World Diversity Multicultural Family dolls [pack of 16, £41.95, pictured bottom left, page 12], which are great because the clothing colours are so neutral' – [www.tts-group.co.uk/wooden-small-world-diversity-multicultural-family/1007826.html](http://www.tts-group.co.uk/wooden-small-world-diversity-multicultural-family/1007826.html)

**Books**

**The Worst Princess** by Anna Kemp (Simon & Shuster, £6.99)

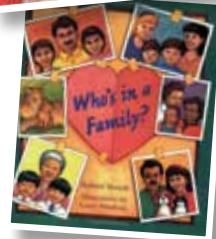
'Sue is a princess, but doesn't want to be locked in a tower. This book challenges the princess idea that they need to be saved by a prince.'

**This Day in June** by Gayle Pitman (Magination Press, £9.95)

'This book is a great discussion point, especially if you pose the question, "I wonder what these people are doing?" You can really unpick misconceptions and have open discussions and just be brave and talk about it.'

**Who's in a family?** by Robert Skutch (Tricycle Press, £7.50)

'This includes various family structures, including those in the animal kingdom. It's easy to read and very friendly – possibly a good choice for those who want to start this journey.' ■



out, large and small. According to Ms Sanniti, blocks are the most 'gender-neutral resource' on offer.

There are no pre-made structures like dolls houses, garages or pirate ships in the classroom, and children are encouraged to make the structures they need for their play.

Boys and girls make museums, parks and houses and use a variety of small-world resources to relive their own experiences. A popular choice of model is a museum, which is made by groups of boys and girls. The blocks are used to make the structure and then items are placed inside – dinosaurs, animals, rocks and shells – and children use the cars for the car park and the people for the visitors. The area is also filled with pictures of their families and LGBT books, as well as books about different cultures and ways of life.

and reception. This is key to increasing visibility around the whole school environment.

- Invest in a variety of books:
    - **PRIDE in Early Years Book Collection**, [www.educateandcelebrate.org/product/featured-book-3](http://www.educateandcelebrate.org/product/featured-book-3)
    - **PRIDE in Primary Education Book Collection**, [www.educateandcelebrate.org/product/featured-book/25](http://www.educateandcelebrate.org/product/featured-book/25)
  - Use the songs on this web page to go with the above book collections: [www.educateandcelebrate.org/resources/#86](http://www.educateandcelebrate.org/resources/#86)).
- For more information, see [www.educateandcelebrate.org](http://www.educateandcelebrate.org)