

Lifting Limits and Camden Early Years Pilot Project

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“All children should be able to play with whatever they like, free from judgement.”

Camden Early Years Practitioner

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Context

Lifting Limits is a charity dedicated to challenging gender stereotyping and promoting gender equality, in and through education. Our vision is a world in which every child is free to make their own path in life, unconstrained by the limiting effects of gender stereotyping on their choices and aspirations.

From January 2022 until October 2022, Lifting Limits worked with three Early Years settings in the London Borough of Camden. Having previously worked with 3-11 year-olds in primary schools, this was a pilot project to explore opportunities for partnership in the Early Years context. Training was also given to a wider group of Early Years Professionals in Camden that worked in a range of different roles. This was to further disseminate the project and to support the identification of the three participating settings.

A wide range of literature and research shows that the early years of a child’s life are not only a key time for general development and well-being, but also when children are making sense of gender. Our 2019 pilot evaluation, ‘We can all be who we want to be’ showed potential to challenge gendered assumptions related to activities and objects from a young age. Young children may learn, sometimes inadvertently, that their gender and societal stereotypes will both create and block opportunities and experiences for them. Families, peers and adults in their settings have the opportunity to challenge or perpetuate these stereotypes.

Aims of the pilot

An exciting, collaborative project to co-develop resources and whole-setting approach to gender equality in the early years.

- Recognise and correct unintentional **gender bias** that can go unnoticed in the setting environment, curriculum and routines;
- Start to **recognise and question with children**, in age-appropriate ways, gender stereotyping as children encounter it; and
- Work with families and wider services linked to settings, wherever possible, around the importance of early intervention to address gender stereotyping.

Settings

Regent’s Park Nursery and Children’s Centre- situated near Regent’s Park, Camden. Approximately 53 children aged 2-5 and 22 staff. The setting serves a wide and diverse community.

Langtry Nursery- situated in Kilburn, Camden. Approximately 35 children aged 2-5 and 11 staff. The setting serves a wide and diverse community. 85% of the children have English as an additional language and 90% are eligible for free school meals.

York Rise Nursery- situated in Dartmouth Park, Camden. Approximately 30 children aged 2-5 and 6 staff. York Rise Nursery closed in July 2022.

Gender Champions were appointed in all settings to support the project. These were usually Senior Early Years Practitioners with two settings appointing more than one Gender Champion. Their role was to lead on this project in their rooms or setting and to liaise with Lifting Limits.

Support from Lifting Limits

Lifting Limits provided the following training and support to the three settings and the wider Camden Early Years team-

- Virtual twilight training session 1 (approximately 2 hours)
- Virtual twilight training session 2 (approximately 2 hours)
- Virtual refresher training for Langtry Nursery (due to staff changes and challenges arising from Covid)
- In person visit by a Lifting Limits team member at the beginning of the project
- Visit to a Stay and Play session at Regent's Park Nursery
- In person visit by a Lifting Limits team member at the end of the project
- Three virtual network meetings for Gender Champions (approximately 1 hour each)
- Resources and activity ideas specific to the early years shared with the three settings, including an Early Years audit to support in identifying focus areas for the project
- Some resources were co-created through discussions with practitioners including Nursery rhyme 'twists' and some possible responses to common challenges

"You should embrace the Lifting Limits training as it's a real eye-opener."

Camden Early Years Practitioner

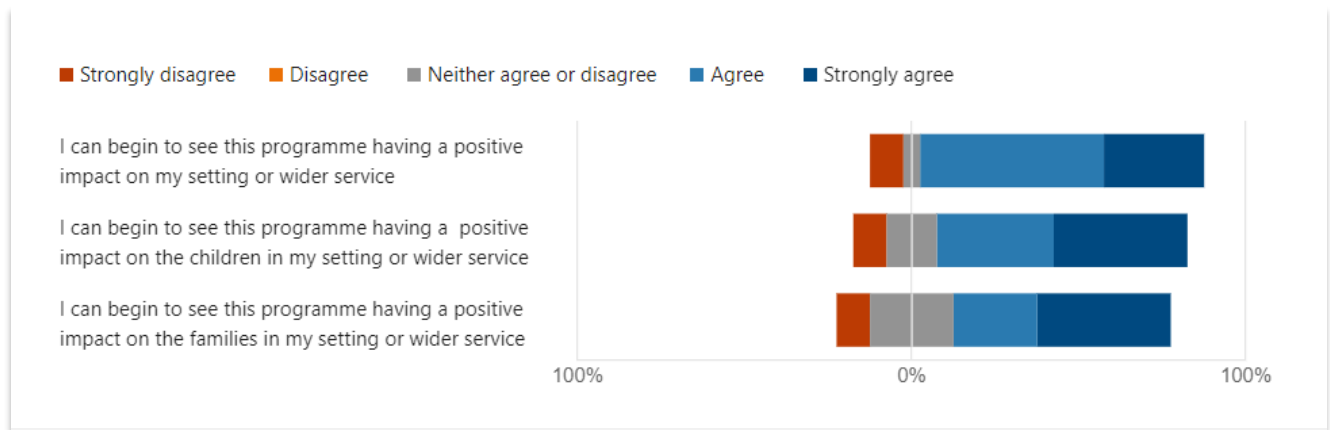
Outcomes and evaluation

Staff awareness and confidence

All Camden Early Years staff that received the initial training completed a post-training survey. At the end of the pilot, 22 Early Years Practitioners from the three settings completed a post-pilot evaluation survey to close the project. Gender Champions and Centre Leads were also interviewed throughout the pilot.

Leaders from all three settings spoke of an **increased awareness** from staff with respects to routines and practices related to gender equality. One Gender Champion talked about the phrase *'that's not very Lifting Limits'* that staff members say to one another if they spot something that they believe is unequitable.

Graph to show responses from the end of pilot survey regarding the impact of the project



A new role model display at Langtry Nursery

Curriculum and wider setting

The **curriculum, displays and visitors** were also considered with one Nursery specifically asking if a female Police Officer could visit the children as part of their 'People Who Help Us' topic. All settings used the audit tool and the recommended book lists to look at their book areas and the texts that were on offer to children.

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“I think the language aspect of the project has been the most transformative. We think about how we are addressing children and their interests, and we challenge each other as a staff team.”

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Gender Champion

All three settings looked more closely at their learning environments and which children played in which areas. Two settings experimented with joining areas of learning together, particularly involving the construction area. Staff commented that children of all genders were observed to be engaging in different play and in a wider choice of environments. Staff spoke of breaking habits and patterns for themselves and children when it came to the learning environment, such as expecting boys to be more active and boisterous and girls preferring quieter activities at a table. Staff noticed increased mixing between boys and girls because of the changes made and a growing awareness of gender stereotyping by staff.

Working with families

Working with families was a continued area for discussion during the project. The settings shared a range of good practice, with two settings talking to families about gender stereotyping during Stay and Play sessions. All three settings used entrance displays to engage families in discussion and questions around this pilot project. One setting ran a very successful session for male caregivers to visit the Nursery. All three settings identified that they would like to do further work with their families around this topic.

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“It’s good to weave it into conversations whenever you can. We have drip fed it to families in different ways, being mindful of different cultures and backgrounds.”

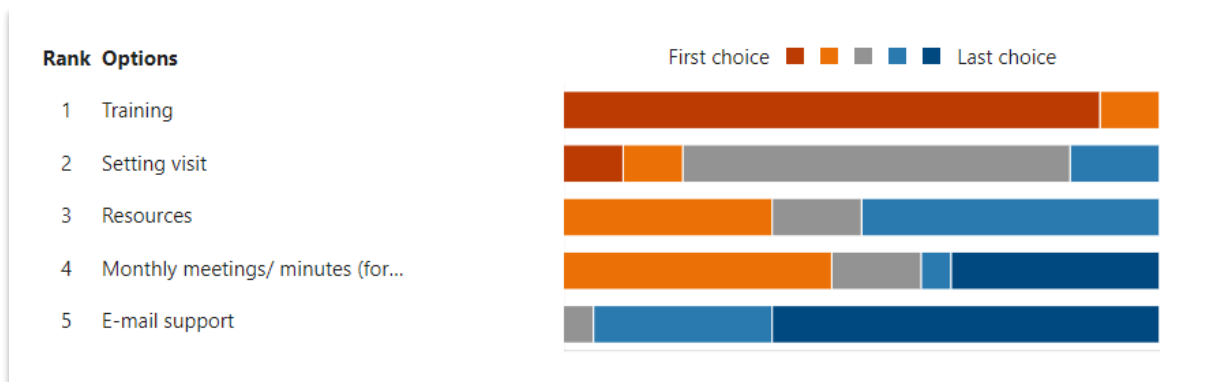
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Gender Champion

Below are some comments from practitioners around impact.

Positive impact on the setting	Positive impact on the children
“More varied book area and books that challenge stereotypes”	“Children have become more open to try all activities in the Nursery, regardless of their gender”
“Rethought role play and dress-up clothes”	“Girls are builders and boys are pretending to be nurses”
“We’ve looked at the curriculum and how it reflects gender equality”	“More positive relationships between children”

Practitioners were asked to rank aspects of the project in order of most helpful, as depicted below



Moving Forward

The settings spoke of continuing to embed this work through their policies, environments, curriculum and when working with families. One setting was planning a face-to-face session with their parents and another was redesigning their outside area with what they have learnt from the pilot project in mind.

At a Local Authority level, it would be useful to explore links between Early Years settings and Primary Schools who have worked with Lifting Limits. As part of further embedding this work in the middle-tier, a review tool for leaders would be helpful for monitoring good practice and identifying next steps at a strategic level.

In the evaluation, practitioners mentioned the importance of the training, particularly for settings that are new to this work. Lifting Limits would be very interested in working with more Early Years settings and organisations. Please get in touch at info@liftinglimits.org.uk if you would like to find out more.

Thank you

Lifting Limits would like to extend thanks and appreciation to the teams, families and children at Regent's Park Nursery and Children's Centre, Langtry Nursery and York Rise Nursery. We would also like to thank the wider Early Years team at Camden, particularly Liz Andrew and Sue Mannering-Thorne for supporting this pilot project.

Further reading

Culhane, L. and Bazeley, A. (2019) *Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood – A Literature Review* available at [Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood: A Literature Review | The Fawcett Society](#)

Heywood, S. and Adzajlic, B. (2022) *Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years*. Oxon: Routledge

Lifting Limits (2019) *We Can All Be Who We Want To Be- pilot evaluation* available at [Pilot evaluation - Lifting Limits](#)

Rawstrone, A. (2022) *All About Tackling Gender Stereotypes-* from the June edition of Nursery World magazine



The Lifting Limits display at Regent's Park Nursery and Children's Centre