

Elementary School Lesson (Grades 3–5)

Job Roles without Gender Boundaries

Rationale

This lesson explores the assumptions students have regarding job roles and gender, challenges them to examine where those ideas come from, and encourages them to move beyond narrow gender role expectations as they pursue interests and envision their own professional futures.

Objectives

- Students will participate in a matching game that builds awareness about gender assumptions.
- Students will learn about stereotypes and how they relate to the job roles society assigns to each gender.
- Students will analyze job titles for gender bias and explore the power of language to shape beliefs.
- Students will broaden their ideas about jobs and pursuits open to them in the future.

Time

2 hours or 2–3 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Employment Office Cartoon](#) (one copy)
- [Neutralizing Job Titles Chart](#) (one copy)

Other Material:

- Chart paper, markers, construction paper, sheets of paper, scissors, glue, drawing implements (markers, crayons, colored pencils)
- Magazines and assorted items for making collages
- (Optional) Computer, LCD projector

Key Words

Discrimination
Gender
Job role
Neutral/Neutralize
Prejudice
Stereotype
Traditional
Trait

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Enlist the help of school staff members. Tell them that you are conducting a lesson on gender role stereotypes and need their assistance in gathering examples of gender diversity in career roles. Ask them to tell you about their former jobs, and write down the job titles and a brief description of each position. Gather job descriptions from about 10 people and try to get an even number of male and female respondents. (Optional: Ask each person for a current photo or take/print a photo of each person.)
- Label a sheet of chart paper, “[Name of School] Job Fair,” and divide it into two columns. Write the name of each staff member in the left-hand column (attach photos if available) and assign each a number (e.g., 1. Mr. Smith, 2. Ms. Jones). Select one job for each staff member and write the title/description in the right-hand column (in random order) and assign each a letter (e.g., a. librarian, b. welder). Post the chart where students will be able to view it.
- Prepare the [Employment Office Cartoon](#) to be projected onto a large screen or smart board (see Part II #3). If this technology is not available, make enough copies of the cartoon to distribute to each student.
- Recreate the [Neutralizing Job Titles Chart](#) on to a large sheet of paper. Include only the headings and do not fill in any of the actual examples (see Part II #4).

Techniques and Skills

brainstorming, cooperative group work, creating visual art, critical thinking, forming opinions, large and small group discussion

Procedures

Part I: Exploring Assumptions about Job Roles (30 minutes)

1. Tell students they will participate in a brief matching game, in which they will explore how well they know the adults in their school community. Distribute a sheet of paper to each student. Draw their attention to the “Job Fair” chart and challenge students to match each staff member to their former job. Allow about 10 minutes for students to take an up-close look at the chart and discuss their thoughts with peers. Instruct them to write their final decisions on their piece of paper.
2. Reconvene the class and discuss each of the people on the chart, one at a time. First ask for a few volunteers to share their guesses and their reasoning, and then reveal the correct answer. After you have revealed all of the answers, engage the class in a discussion using some of the following questions:
 - Did any of the matches surprise you? Why?
 - How did you decide who to match with each job? Were there personal traits that led you to believe a particular person worked at a certain job?
 - Did you have certain ideas about people that turned out to be mistakes (e.g., “Mrs. Alvarez is small so there’s no way she was a construction worker”)?
 - Did the gender of each person (whether they are a man or woman) affect the way you matched them to jobs?
 - What other beliefs shaped your predictions (e.g., race, class, appearance, ethnic background, etc.)?

NOTE: This portion of the lesson has been adapted with permission from *Gender Stereotyping* by Mollie Reams, www.tolerance.org.

Part II: Analyzing Language for Gender Stereotypes (40 minutes)

1. Assuming that students made some assumptions based on gender in the activity above, comment that you noticed they had some fixed ideas about what men and women are capable of and interested in doing. Point out some examples (e.g., “many of you assumed that the electrician had to be a man” or “most of you automatically assigned a woman to the flight attendant role”). Ask students if they know what it is called when people hold a belief about a whole group of people—like girls are not tough enough to be football players—that does not allow for each person’s individual differences (stereotype). Ask students why it is important to avoid stereotypes (e.g., they hurt people’s feelings, limit opportunities, lead to prejudice and discrimination, etc.)
2. Ask students to articulate some of the stereotypes inherent in their responses to the “Job Fair” game and chart them (e.g., “women are not mechanical enough to fix things” or “men are not caring enough to be nannies or daycare workers”). Ask students where they think some of these stereotypes about men’s and women’s job roles come from, and add their responses to the chart (e.g., family members, TV, books, magazines, religion, video games, etc.)
3. Project or distribute copies the [Employment Office Cartoon](#). Ask students to describe what is going on and engage them in a discussion using some of the following questions:
 - What does the man behind the desk assume about the person applying for the job?
 - Why does the person applying for the job correct the man behind the desk?
 - Have you ever heard of a woman “lumberjack”? Can women be lumberjacks?
 - What message does the job title send to people looking for jobs?
 - What do you think of the term “lumberjill”? Can you think of a better title for this job?
4. Comment that one way gender stereotypes get communicated is through the language we use and the images we see. Post the [Neutralizing Job Titles Chart](#) prepared in advance. Explain that, like “lumberjack,” many job roles have gender written into the title, and that we are so used to these words that we don’t think about the ways in which they promote stereotypes. Write “housewife” in the first column under “female” and “fireman” in the first column under “male” as further examples. (Leave the other columns blank for now).

NOTE: If students question the idea that gendered job titles are problematic (e.g., “What’s wrong with calling someone a

housewife if the person is a woman?"), emphasize that such titles send messages to all of us about what jobs are open to which people, and that these messages can limit our goals and the choices we make. For example, a boy who loves to sew but has only heard "seamstress" attached to that job might feel ashamed of his interest and believe that there will never be an opportunity for him to pursue it.

5. Divide the class into small groups of 4–6 students and select a volunteer from each group to be the recorder, providing them with a sheet of paper. Instruct each group to come up with as many examples of "gendered" job titles as they can think of (see [Neutralizing Job Titles Chart](#) for some examples that you can use to help groups along if needed). Tell the recorders to list the group's examples on the paper and to add them to the class chart when they are done. Ask recorders to avoid listing job titles that have already been listed by another group; instead, they can indicate that their group also identified this job title by writing a check mark (✓) by the title. Allow about 10 minutes for groups to complete this task.
6. Have students remain in their small groups, but draw their attention to the chart and review all of the examples they generated. Ask students if they have additional examples to add.
7. Tell students that their challenge is to now rewrite as many of the job titles as they can to make them more neutral, so that they do not support gender stereotypes. Building on the examples offered in step #3, suggest that "housewife" might be changed to "homemaker" and "fireman" to "firefighter." Write these alternatives in the blank spaces next to each of the original terms. Allow 10–15 minutes for groups to work and have the recorders add the new job titles to the class chart when they are done.
8. Reconvene the class and discuss the following questions:
 - How do the changes in these job titles change the message that is sent to people about who these jobs are open to?
 - Do any of the new titles sound "weird" or "wrong"? Do we sometimes confuse what's familiar with what's "right"? How can we make the new titles seem more familiar and "right"?
 - Are any of the jobs on the list ones that interest you, but that you thought you could never achieve because of your gender? Have you changed your mind as a result of this activity?
 - What other ways, besides changing the language we use, can we challenge gender stereotypes that we hear from friends, family, on TV, online etc.?

Part III: Consideration Future Options (30 minutes)

1. As a follow-up to this lesson, have students (either in class or for homework) create a collage that answers the proverbial question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Have students paste a photo of themselves in the center of a sheet of construction paper. Direct them to surround the photo with magazine cut-outs, drawings, artifacts (e.g., a button to represent sewing/fashion design), etc. that reflect their different interests and the careers that they dream of pursuing someday.
2. Encourage students to think beyond gender stereotypes and to label their collage with gender neutral terms for the jobs they depict.
3. Allow students to share their collages with the class. Hang their art around the classroom and celebrate each individual's aspirations.

NOTE: The purpose of this project is not to force students to consider job roles simply because they are gender non-conforming, but rather to broaden students' notions about the choices open to them. The boy who dreams of becoming a baseball player and the boy who wants to be a ballet dancer should be equally celebrated, without judgment.

Employment Office Cartoon



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Neutralizing Job Titles Chart

| Female | | Male | |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| TRADITIONAL | <i>GENDER NEUTRAL</i> | TRADITIONAL | <i>GENDER NEUTRAL</i> |
| housewife | homemaker | fireman | firefighter |
| saleswoman | salesperson | airman | flier/pilot |
| barmaid | bartender | guardsman | guard/soldier |
| maid | housecleaner | garbage man | waste removal engineer |
| comedienne | comic | stable boy | stable attendant/assistant |
| ballerina | ballet dancer | mailman | letter carrier/postal worker |
| actress | actor/performer | policemen | police officer |
| waitress | server | lineman | line person/guard |
| usherette | attendant/guide | foreman | foreperson/boss |
| stewardess | flight attendant | busboy | assistant server/table attendant |
| hostess | greeter | salesman | salesperson/salesclerk |
| seamstress | sewer | repairman | repairer/repair person |
| lunch lady | lunch server | actor | performer |
| | | chairman | board chair |
| | | businessman | business person/executive |
| | | waiter | server |
| | | usher | attendant/guide |
| | | comedian | comic |
| | | fisherman | fisher |
| | | lumberjack | logger |