

Once Upon a Time...

See what happens when you reverse the sexes of characters in a well-known story



Complexity



7-13 years



40 minutes



4-30



Democratic
Citizenship



Discrimination



Gender Equality

Type of activity

Story telling, discussion

Overview

Retelling a familiar story with the characters' gender reversed, leading to discussion of gender stereotypes.

Objectives

- To recognise stereotypical gender roles and characteristics in stories and everyday life
- To discuss traditional and non-traditional gender roles
- To encourage gender equality

Preparation

Revise or rewrite a well-known short story (e.g. novel, fairy tale, film), reversing the gender of most of the characters. If necessary, change their names and other details as well. Choose a story where male and female characters behave in a stereotypical way. (See the example of 'reversed' Cinderella below.) The revised story should not take longer than 10 minutes to retell.

Materials

- Board or flipchart and marker
- A copy of the reversed story to read out

Instructions

1. Ask the children to sit comfortably in a circle. Explain that you are going to tell them a story, and they are to listen carefully and take notice of anything unusual in the story. Read the modified story to the children. Stop from time to time to ask, "Do you notice anything unusual about this story?" Once all the children have understood the role reversals, it may be unnecessary to read the rest of the story, or you may wish to jump straight to the conclusion.
2. Discuss the story, asking question such as these:
 - How did you like the story?
 - When did you realise that something was unusual? Ask for examples.
3. Point out that something seems unusual when it differs from our everyday experience and expectations. Ask the children to think of characteristics and activities that they consider typical of males and females in their everyday life. List their suggestions on a table such as the one below.

Chart 1: stereotypical gender roles		
	Men / Boys	Women / Girls
Usual Characteristics		
Usual Activities		

- Compare this chart with the familiar version of the story. Do the characters in Cinderella have “typical” characteristics, like those in the table? (e.g. Cinderella stays at home, cries, is abused, and gets pretty clothes, while the Prince takes action to find a wife, and executes a clever plan to find Cinderella.
 - Ask the children if they can think of other stories where the characters have “typical” characteristics or where they engage in “typical” activities. Make a list of these stories as they are mentioned, and ask the children to explain their suggestions.
4. Ask the children if they think that in real life, women and men or boys and girls always have the kinds of characteristics we have listed as “typical”.

Make a chart, like the one below, and ask the children to record their observations of unusual behaviour, first in the story and then in real life.

Chart 2: non-stereotypical gender roles		
	Men / Boys	Women / Girls
Usual Characteristics		
Usual Activities		

5. Compare and discuss the two charts, asking questions such as these:
- Can you think of other stories where the characters have “unusual” characteristics, or where they take part in non-typical activities? List these stories as they are mentioned and ask the children to explain their suggestions.
 - Do you know of any men and women who have non-typical characteristics, or who do non-typical things?
 - Ask the children to describe any “non-typical” examples from real life and explain how they differ from what people expect.

6. Define the word 'stereotype' and give some examples.
7. Ask the children to look at the first chart they made, of typical characteristics and activities. Ask them to identify any characteristics or activities which express physical or biological facts about men or women, as opposed to beliefs, attitudes or stereotypes.
8. Are there *any* characteristics or activities in the list which are not stereotypes?
9. Point out that roles such as making money, raising children, and doing housework are common responsibilities of both men and women in most societies of the world today.

Debriefing and Evaluation

1. Discuss the activity using questions such as these:
 - How are people treated when they do not behave in a way that is "typical" for their gender? Why are they treated like this?
 - Have you ever acted in a way not typical for your gender? If so, how have other people reacted when you did this?
 - Why are some stereotypes unfair to men and boys? Why are some unfair to women and girls?
 - What can you do to act against unfair stereotypes?
2. Relate the activity to human rights asking questions such as these:
 - Can you make any connection between the expectations placed on boys and girls and human rights?
 - Everyone has a human right to be free from discrimination, including discrimination based on sex or gender stereotypes. Why is this important?
 - The CRC guarantees that boys and girls have the same rights and cannot be discriminated against because of their sex. Is this **True** in our group / school / society? Are there examples when equality is not respected?

End the debriefing by asking the children how they felt about the activity, and reflecting on the feelings everyone had, before closing.

Suggestions for follow-up

Ask the children to look for other stories or films where girls and boys have non-traditional roles and characteristics.

The activity 'Boys Don't Cry' also addresses gender stereotypes and their effects.

Ideas for action

Ask the children whether people in this class or community are discriminated against because they do not act in the way that people think men / boys or women / girls should act.

Ask the children to roleplay what they might say or do in such a case. How could they oppose or transform the discrimination?

Tips for the facilitator

The Cinderella adaptation can be used as an example, but you should select a fairy tale likely to be very well known by all the children in your group. Instead of Cinderella, you could use a modern fairy tale, a folk story from your own culture, or even a film that everyone is likely to have seen.

Your goal in this activity should be to promote gender equality and encourage the children to question their own and others' assumptions about gender roles. Some children are likely to use the terms 'normal' and 'not normal' to refer to typical or non-typical roles. Discuss with them what we mean by 'normality', and whether what is 'normal' is always right! For example, it used to be normal for children even under the age of 10 to carry out hard labour for very little pay.

Point out that expectations about how males and females should behave can vary from country to country, community to community, and even within a family. Emphasise that equality does not necessarily mean 'the same'. It means being treated similarly, having their rights and dignity equally respected. Throughout the activity, be sensitive to the fact that some children may already be being teased and excluded for non-traditional gender behaviour. Do not let the discussion cause them discomfort. On the other hand, be careful not to force opinions on the children if they are not ready to accept them: for some of them, it may be very difficult to understand and accept that a boy can play with dolls or enjoy ballet, and that girls may want to play football. Try to find examples in real life of men and women who have 'non-typical' roles or professions.

You do not need to use terms such as 'gender' or 'gender roles' with young children; however, developmental research shows that even pre-school children already understand different gender expectations.

Adaptations

For a large group: After reading the story, create small groups of four or five. Give each group a copy of Chart 1 and ask them to record the typical activities and characteristics of men and women. Invite the groups to present their findings and then discuss traditional and non-traditional roles with the whole group. Ask the children to go back to their small groups and complete the second chart with the non-traditional characteristics and activities of men and women, both in stories and in everyday life. End the activity with a discussion with the whole group.

For older children: Instead of a fairy tale, choose a novel or well known film. Start the story with the gender roles reversed and let the children continue telling it themselves. Some older children may be able to retell a familiar story on their own. Then invite each small group to share their story and their reflections with the whole group.



Handout

Sample reversed fairy tale

Cinderella

Once upon a time, there lived an unhappy young **boy**. His **father** had died, and **his mother** had brought home another **man**, a **widower** with two **sons**. His new **stepfather** didn't like the **boy** one little bit. All the good things, kind words and special privileges were only for his own **sons**. They got fashionable clothes, delicious food and special treats. But for the poor unhappy boy, there was nothing at all. No nice clothes but only **his stepbrothers'** hand-me-downs. No special dishes, but only leftovers to eat. No privileges or even rest, for **he** had to work hard all day, shopping, cooking, washing clothes and keeping the whole house clean. Only when evening came was **he** allowed to sit for a while alone by the cinders of the kitchen fire.

During these long evenings alone, **he** used to cry and talk to the cat. The cat said, "Meow", which really meant, "Cheer up! You have something neither of your **stepbrothers** have, and that is beauty".

What the cat said was quite **True**. Even dressed in rags with **his** face grimy from the cinders, **he** was an attractive young **man**, while no matter how elegant their clothes, **his stepbrothers** were still clumsy and ugly, and always would be.

One day, beautiful new clothes, shoes and jewellery began to arrive at the house. The Queen was holding a ball and the **stepbrothers** were getting ready to attend. They were constantly posing in front of the mirror. The **boy** had to help them to dress up in all their finery. **He** didn't dare ask, "What about me?" for he knew very well what the answer to that would be: "You? My dear **boy**, you're staying at home to wash the dishes, scrub the floors and turn down the beds for your **stepbrothers**. They will come home tired and very sleepy".

After the **brothers** and their **father** had left for the ball, the poor **boy** brushed away **his** tears and sighed to the cat. "Oh dear, I'm so unhappy!" and the cat murmured, "Meow".

Just then a flash of light flooded the kitchen and a fairy appeared. "Don't be alarmed, **young boy**," said the fairy. "The wind blew me your sighs. I know you are longing to go to the ball. And so you shall!"

"How can I, dressed in rags?" the poor **boy** replied. "The servants will turn me away!" The fairy smiled. With a flick of **his** magic wand, the poor **boy** found **himself** wearing the most beautiful clothing, the loveliest ever seen.

"Now that we have settled the matter of what to wear," said the fairy, "we'll need to get you a coach. A real **gentleman** would never go to a ball on foot! Quick! Get me a pumpkin!" **he** ordered.

"Oh, of course," said the poor **boy**, rushing away.

Then the fairy turned to the cat. "You, bring me seven mice!"

The poor **boy** soon returned with a fine pumpkin and the cat with seven mice **she** had caught in the cellar. "Good!" exclaimed the fairy. With a flick of **his** magic wand – wonder of wonders! – the pumpkin turned into a sparkling coach and the mice became six white horses, while the seventh mouse turned into a **coachwoman**, in a beautiful dress and carrying a whip. The poor **boy** could hardly believe **his** eyes.

"I shall present you at Court. You will soon see that the **Princess**, in whose honour the ball is being held, will be enchanted by your good looks. But remember! You must leave the ball at midnight and come home. For that is when the spell ends. The coach will turn back into a pumpkin, the horses will

become mice again, and the **coachwoman** will turn back into a mouse. And you will be dressed again in rags and wearing clogs instead of these splendid dancing shoes! Do you understand?"

The **boy** smiled and said, "Yes, I understand!"

When the **boy** entered the ballroom at the palace, a hush fell. Everyone stopped in mid-sentence to admire **his** elegance, **his** beauty and grace.

"Who can that be?" people asked each other. The two **stepbrothers** also wondered who the newcomer was, for never would they ever have guessed that the beautiful **boy** was really their **stepbrother** who talked to the cat!

Then the **Princess** set eyes on **his** beauty. Walking over to **him**, **she** curtsied and asked **him** to dance. And to the great disappointment of all the **young gentlemen**, **she** danced with the **boy** all evening.

"Who are you, beautiful young **man**?" the **Princess** kept asking **him**.

But the poor **boy** only replied: "What does it matter who I am! You will never see me again anyway". "Oh, but I shall, I'm quite certain!" **she** replied.

The poor **boy** had a wonderful time at the ball, but, all of a sudden, **he** heard the sound of a clock: the first stroke of midnight! **He** remembered what the fairy had said, and without a word of goodbye **he** slipped from the **Princess'** arms and ran down the steps. As **he** was running, **he** lost one of **his** dancing shoes, but not for a moment did **he** dream of stopping to pick it up! If the last stroke of midnight were to sound... oh, what a disaster that would be! Out **he** fled and vanished into the night.

The **Princess**, who was now madly in love with **him**, picked up **his** dancing shoe and proclaimed that **she** would marry the **man** whose foot the slipper would fit. **She** said to **her** ministers, "Go and search everywhere for the **boy** that fits this shoe. I will never be content until I find **him**!" So the ministers tried the shoe on the feet of all the **boys** in the land.

When a minister came to the house where the **boy** lived with **his** **stepfather** and **stepbrothers**, the minister asked if **he** could try the shoe on the young **men** in the household. The two **stepbrothers** couldn't even get a toe in the shoe. When the minister asked if there were any other young **men** in the household, the stepfather told **her**, "No". However, just then the cat caught **her** attention, tugging at **her** **trouser** leg and leading **her** to the kitchen.

There sat the poor **boy** by the cinders. The minister tried on the slipper and to **her** surprise, it fit **him** perfectly. "That awful untidy **boy** simply cannot have been at the ball," snapped the **stepfather**. "Tell the **Princess** **she** ought to marry one of my two **sons**! Can't you see how ugly the **boy** is! Can't you see?"

Suddenly **he** broke off, for the fairy had appeared.

"That's enough!" **he** exclaimed, raising **his** magic wand. In a flash, the **boy** appeared in a beautiful outfit, shining with youth and good looks. **His** **stepfather** and **stepbrothers** gaped at **him** in amazement, and the minister said, "Come with me, handsome young **man**! The **Princess** awaits to present you with **her** engagement ring!" So the **boy** joyfully went with him. The **Princess** married **him** a few days later, and they lived happily ever after.

And, as for the cat, she just said "Meow!"

Source of the fairy tale: [Cinderella stories www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/cinderella.html](http://Cinderella.stories.www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/cinderella.html)