19. Once Upon a Time…

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Democracy, Discrimination, Gender equality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of complexity</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>7-13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group size</td>
<td>5-15 children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of activity</td>
<td>Story telling, discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>Retelling a familiar story with characters’ sexes reversed, leading to discussion of gender stereotypes</td>
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| 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 / rewrite a well-known story (e.g. novel, fairy tale, film) not longer than 10 minutes, reversing the sex of most characters. If necessary, change their names and other details as well. Choose a story with characters of both sexes who behave in a traditional way. (See example of reversed Cinderella below.) |
| Materials               | • Flipchart and pens                       |

Instructions

1. Ask the children to sit comfortably in a circle. Explain that you are going to tell them a story; they are to listen carefully and notice 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 understand the role reversals, it may be unnecessary to read the whole story or you may wish to jump to the conclusion.

2. Discuss the story, asking question such as these:
   a. How did you like the story?
   b. Did you find anything unusual in it?
   c. When did you realise that something was unusual? Ask for examples.

3. Point out that something seems unusual to us 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MEN/BOYS</th>
<th>WOMEN/GIRLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USUAL CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>Curious, smart, bold, loud, adventurous, aggressive, ambitious, have short hair</td>
<td>Polite, sensitive, quiet, thoughtful of others, timid, nosey, obedient, wear dresses, have long hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USUAL ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>Like sports, get in fights, go to work, take action, drive trucks</td>
<td>Stay at home, do the housework, cry easily, gossip, like pretty clothes, afraid of bugs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discuss this chart:
   a. Compare this chart with the familiar version of the story. Do characters have typical char-
acteristics and activities (e.g. Cinderella stays 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)?

b. Ask the children if they can think of other stories where the characters have these typical characteristics and activities? List these stories as they are mentioned and ask the children to explain their suggestions.

5. Are these characteristics and activities typical of real women and men today?

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart 2: non-stereotypical gender roles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UNUSUAL CHARACTERISTICS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN/BOYS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the story: Needs help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your experience:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMEN/GIRLS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the story: Commanding, clever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your experience:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **UNUSUAL ACTIVITIES**                |
| MEN/BOYS                              |
| In the story: Cries, does housework, wants nice clothes, stays at home |
| In your experience:                   |
| WOMEN/GIRLS                           |
| In the story: Actively pursues a husband, organizes a search |
| In your experience:                   |

6. Compare and discuss the two charts, asking questions such as these:

a. Can you think of other stories where the characters have such unusual characteristics and activities? List these stories as they are mentioned and ask the children to explain their suggestions.

b. Do you know of any real men and women who have non-typical characteristics and activities? Ask the children to describe their unusual characteristics and activities and to explain how they are unusual.

7. Define the word stereotype and give examples.

8. Ask the children to look at their chart of typical characteristics and activities. Ask them to determine which characteristics and activities are biological facts about men or women and which are beliefs, attitudes or stereotypes.

9. Point out that roles such as making money, raising children, and doing housework are common responsibilities of both men and women today.

**Debriefing and Evaluation**

1. When the children have understood the concept of stereotypes, ask questions such as these:

a. How are people treated when they do not conform to stereotypes of how males are females should behave?

b. Why are stereotypes unfair to men and boys? To women and girls?

c. How do gender stereotypes create inequality between men and women, boys and girls?

2. What can you do to act against stereotypes?

3. Ask the children if they can see any connection between gender stereotypes and human rights? Help them understand that everyone has a human right to be free from discrimination, including discrimination based on sex or gender stereotypes.

4. Ask the children how they felt about the activity.

**Suggestions for follow-up**

- Ask the children to look for other stories or films where girls and boys are more equal and have non-traditional roles and characteristics.
• The activities ‘BOYS DON’T CRY’, p. 78, and ‘WHAT I LIKE AND WHAT I DO’, p. 185 also address gender stereotypes and their effects.

**Ideas for action**

5. Ask, “Are people in our community discriminated against because they do not act the way people think men/boys or women/girls should?”
   a. Ask for examples, especially from the child’s daily life.
   b. Ask the children to role play what they might say or do in such a situation to oppose discrimination.

**Tips for the facilitator**

• Your goal in this activity should be to empower gender equality and encourage the children to question their own and others’ assumptions about gender roles.
• Point out that expectations for how males and females behave can vary from country to country, community to community and even family to family. Emphasize the equality does not necessarily mean ‘the same’.
• When asking the Debriefing and Evaluation questions, be sensitive to the fact that some children may already be teased and excluded for their non-traditional gender behaviour. Do not permit discussion to cause them discomfort.
• 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: Create small groups of four. Give each a copy of Chart 1 and ask them to record the typical activities and characteristics of men and women. Representatives of the groups can present their findings. Discuss traditional and non-traditional roles with the whole group. Then ask the children to go back to their small groups and complete the chart with non-traditional characteristics and activities of men and women in both stories and their everyday life. End the activity with a discussion with the whole group.
• For older children: Instead of a fairy tale choose novel or well-known film. Start the story with sex roles reversed and let the children continue telling it themselves. Some older children may be able to revise and retell a familiar story on their own. Then each small group could share their story with the whole group.
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 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, grocery 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 continually standing 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 in the realm.

“Now that we have settled the matter of what to wear,” said the fairy, “we’ll need to get you 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. You 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 in a month of Sundays 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** ran 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 foot of all the **boys**.

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 ministers said, “Come with us, handsome young **man**! The **Princess** awaits to present you with her engagement ring!” So the **boy** joyfully went with them. The **Princess** married **him** in a few days later, and they lived happily ever after.

And as for the cat, she just said “Meow!”

Source of the fairytale: Cinderella stories: www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/cinderella.html