

## Gender Education in Schools

*Malini Seshadri*



The question of the hour is “*Why should we introduce gender education in schools?*” and the only answer - because it is a step that is long overdue! “*Better now than never*”- this adage completely underlines the need for introducing gender education in our classrooms.

From womb to tomb, in virtually every aspect of life, one’s gender is one’s destiny. A tiny chromosome, **X** or **Y**, determines the life trajectory of every child. The differences that nature has created between the genders, in anatomy and physiology, are profound and very evident. But the differences that human beings, both men and women, have created between the genders are even more profound and life-altering.

These are the differences we attempt to discuss while dealing with gender education in schools.

- *Are all these differences necessary? Are they logical? Are they fair and equitable?*
- *Do they enhance the progress of the human race or hinder it?*
- *Above all, are we sufficiently aware of these issues or do we just take them as inevitable?*

### **Gender study is not sex education**

Too often even teachers confuse *gender study* with *sex education*, and so, one cannot expect a layman to immediately grasp the difference between the two concepts.

While both are necessary at appropriate age-points for a growing child, the ambits of the two are distinct and different. While *sex education* deals with anatomical and physiological differences between the sexes, puberty-related changes, awareness about sexual health, behaviour and activities, *gender study* treads a vastly wider area— self-perception, family dynamics, societal status, employment opportunities, economic equity, legal protection, empowerment, etc.

### Gender study does not mean only women's rights

Too often gender study is assumed to be only a study of women's rights, which is not true. Although the latter is certainly a big part of it, gender study encompasses the rights of both genders, and the need to find equity and a level playing field for everyone.

### Which is the best age to begin gender education?

The earlier children are encouraged to think about the role of gender in their lives, the healthier society will be and the faster we can move towards achieving the goal of gender equity. In fact, experts say gender education should commence in infancy! Even very young children absorb messages from what they see and hear around them, and these form the bedrock of all perceptions that come later.



So when should we begin to talk about gender in schools? **Class 1** would be a good time to start laying the groundwork, with very simple ideas and examples. Thereafter the range and complexity levels can be gradually stepped up.

**Discussion topic examples:**

**Class 1:** *Toys and games for little children:* Should they be different for boys and girls? Why or why not?

**Class 2:** *Taking into account 'natural' differences:* Look at a litter of puppies playing around. Observe them as they grow and explore their surroundings. Watch the mother dog as she looks after them. From their behaviour, can you tell which ones are male puppies and which are females? Why should it be different for human children? Is it only because we wear stereotypically demarcating clothes?

**Class 3:** *Be free to be a 'child' without labels:* Describe yourself in 5 lines without mentioning your gender or name. Then read what you have written. Can it describe any other child? Can you tell whether it describes a boy or a girl?

**Class 4:** *Tackling the concept of intrinsic stereotyping:* If you are a girl, do you want to look pretty, be a good dancer, wear beautiful clothes? If you are a boy, do you want to be good at sports, be brave and never cry, take risks? If you were free to choose, and you were sure no one would think it *odd*, what would you *really* like to be/do?

**Class 5:** *Tackling the concept of imposed stereotyping:* Are boys better at Mathematics and Science than girls? How do you know? Are girls better at art and cooking than boys? How do you know? Are men's brains different from women's? If one feels so, in what way?



From **Class 6** onwards, the ambit may be widened to include the actual situation in our society, and to introduce the concepts of justice and equity in gender relationships.

## Teaching/Learning in the gender study class

Gender study is an ideal topic to encourage participation from the students and expression of their own perceptions. In a co-education setting, this is particularly valuable, as it may throw up a greater variety of insights and the teacher's role is to guide the discussion suitably.

But before the teacher can do that, they must examine their own pre-conceived ideas. After all, teachers are also products of their own upbringing and social environment! Read this story given below, and try to work out the solution. If you need to check, the solution is given at the end of this article.

*A doctor, a lawyer, a stockbroker, and an accountant used to meet every Thursday evening after work to play bridge at a club.*

*One of them happened to be a suspect in a police investigation. The police came to know that a man named Gupta was the one they were looking for, and that he would be present at a certain room in the club on Thursday evening. They knew nothing else about the suspect.*

*So, that Thursday evening, as the four were in the middle of their bridge game, the police walked in. After a cursory glance, they walked up to the doctor and said, "Gupta, you are under arrest as a suspect in..."*

*How did they identify their suspect?*

In the gender education classroom, learning does not take place passively through repeating the materials in the book but by challenging one's own perceptions and those of others. This is the enabling environment that the teacher must provide and regulate. Discussion and dissent are positives because they stimulate thought. The teacher's role is to guide without being judgemental, and to encourage genuine views rather than *politically correct* or diplomatic statements.



For instance, directly calling a child's statement or opinion *unfair* or *unjust* would be judgemental and would inhibit him or her from expressing opinions freely. When any such opinion is expressed, the teacher could ask, "*Does anyone have an opposite opinion?*" Next, the teacher could describe an example of unfair or unjust behaviour in real life.

*Politically correct* statements are those that the child thinks the teacher wants to hear. These cannot be avoided altogether, as most students are inclined to express opinions which they feel would be pleasant to listen to in a class discussion, moderated by teachers. But if these were to be taken at face value, the message of gender justice would not really be driven home by the child. Unless the child has the confidence (in the teacher and the class environment) to open the door of their own minds, no new message or idea can enter to displace the old, entrenched one.

A good gender education class leaves both teacher and students energised and motivated to explore more together, and learn effectively.

(\***Solution to the mindbender:** *The lawyer, the stockbroker and the accountant happened to be women!*)

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## Lesson Plan on Gender Education (for Class 6)

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*Why can't a girl climb a tree like her brother?*

*Why can't a boy cook a meal like his mother?*

*Why can't a girl choose a truck for a toy?*

*And isn't a skipping rope fit for a boy?*

*Can't sons and daughters be treated the same?*

*Why such injustice, and who is to blame?*

In today's rapidly advancing society, even now in many homes, sons and daughters are still being treated differently -

- A boy may think that his parents are less strict with his sister when it comes to school work.
- A girl may think that her parents are less strict with her brother when it comes to helping around the house.

Both the cases may be right. This is because many parents have fixed ideas about gender roles that they have learnt in their own childhood. As a result, without even being aware of it, they treat their children on the basis of these fixed ideas.

But isn't it time we all stopped to rethink about these old ideas? Are they necessary? Are they fair?

Of course girls are different from boys, but we're all human beings first. Why should anyone be treated unequally by their families and by society? Why should boys and girls be put into separate compartments? Let us read the following story.

## The Chess Tournament

Sakeena was very interested in playing chess. She loved to solve chess problems and was always pleading with her parents and brother to sit and play with her.

Imagine her joy when it was announced in school that there would be a chess competition. Sakeena was one of the first to fill in her application. But when the player's list was announced, Sakeena's name was missing.

She went straight to the teacher who was organising the competition and asked why she had been left out. The teacher said, "You were the only girl applying for the competition. How can we hold a girls' competition if there are not enough applicants? If more girls apply, we can have a separate chess competition for the girls."

Sakeena had to speak out— "Why can't it be a general chess competition for everyone, boys and girls? Why should I be left out only because other girls chose not to join? After all, chess does not call for physical strength or muscles, does it?"

The teacher had never thought of this! Now she looked stunned. "You're right, Sakeena," she said. "There's no reason why you should not participate if you want to. I'll add your name."

The boys were surprised when Sakeena turned up for the competition. Many of them had not known that she could play chess and they were curious to find out how she played. Many of the girls were equally curious. There was a big audience when the competition started. Sakeena won most of her games and ultimately turned out to be the joint winner. Everyone was happy for her, including the boys. After her inspiring win, many of the girls decided to take up chess.

1. Do you admire Sakeena's behaviour? If the teacher had not been convinced, what would Sakeena have done next?
2. Whom did Sakeena help by asking to be allowed to play in the chess tournament with the boys? Only herself? The other girls? The boys? The teachers? Explain your answer.
3. Do you think the school would include girls in the chess tournament from the following year?



*Sakeena* stood up for her rights and pointed out that it was unfair and illogical to keep girls out of the chess competition. But not all girls are in a position to protest about their condition and be listened to. Read about the feelings of a girl like *Lakshmi*, from a poor family.

### The Dreams of Lakshmi

My last day at school. Ma says sixth class is enough. I am eleven years old now, and she wants me to help at home with the baby... and to fetch the water and feed the hens and... and things like that. My teacher says I'm a smart student. I want to stay in school, I want to, I want to! But who will help poor Ma? Pa says it's my duty because I'm a big girl now. But my Bhaiya will be going to the city for Plus Two. It's not fair! I wish I were a boy! But I mustn't cry now. It is time to make the rotis because Nana and Bhaiya will be coming in soon to eat. I'll have to do the cleaning only after I clear away the dinner. I wonder whether there will be any rotis left over for Ma and me tonight...

Oh, there's no water left in the pot! Ma is busy with the baby. I have to run to the well and fetch at least one pot of water before Ma scolds me.

When all the work is done I can curl up in my sheet in the corner. I must cry quietly because I must not wake up the others. When I can't cry any more I will sleep. And in my dreams I will do everything I want to do. I wish dreams could last forever...

1. In what ways was Lakshmi treated differently from her brother? Why?
2. In what way will her life be affected because she dropped out of school?
3. What can be done to help millions of girls like Lakshmi?



Does this mean that boys always have an easy time in the family? Not necessarily, as sometimes they are given burdens that are too heavy for a child to handle.

### Boy or Man?

When I was twelve years old, my whole life turned upside down. My father died suddenly and the whole family was in shock. I am a boy and the eldest child in the family. I was sitting in a corner of the hall and sobbing when my uncle came and pulled me to my feet. "Look at me," he told me sternly. "Stop crying like a girl, Prashant. You are the man of the house now. You must look after your mother and sisters." I was stunned. I felt a great weight settling on me. Me? How was I going to look after the family? I didn't know what to do. I was so terrified... how could I become a man overnight when I still felt like a child?





1. Why do you think Prashant felt *terrified* by what his uncle said?
2. Do you think it is fair to expect a sad child not to cry just because he is a boy?
3. What should Prashant's uncle have said if he was truly sensible and understanding?

We must try to build a society in which men and women share rights as well as responsibilities. They must be partners in the family as well as in building the nation. If this is to happen we must start by allowing equal opportunities and showing equal consideration to boys and girls from their childhood.

The children too should become aware of the importance of gender justice. They have the right to equal treatment, equal rights, and equal rewards.

Every child has the right to grow to their full potential as a human being and lead a full life.

### **Exercises:**

#### **A. Tick the correct phrase.**

1. Many girls have to drop out of school because *they are not clever at studies/their parents don't allow them to go to school.*
2. It is *natural/not natural* for a boy to cry when he is sad or hurt.
3. Doing well in studies is *as important for girls as it is for boys/less important for girls than it is for boys.*

#### **B. Mark as True or False.**

1. It is always the man's responsibility to earn enough money for the family.
2. It is always the woman's responsibility to look after the children.
3. It is fair to ask a boy to help with tasks in the kitchen.
4. It is fair to allow a girl to play football.

## **Activity:**

### **Initiate a class discussion-**

- What do you feel about gender discrimination?
- If you are a girl, do you think boys are being treated better?
- If you are a boy, do you think girls are being treated better?
- Do you think both boys and girls should be treated better?
- Do you think both boys and girls should be treated the same? Give reasons for your answers.

### **Lesson Plan for the Teacher**

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this lesson the children should be able to-

- understand that:
  - sons and daughters should be equally loved and valued by their families,
  - it is unfair to deny education to girls,
  - it is wrong to thrust heavy responsibilities on young boys' shoulders,
  - it is illogical to have different kinds of toys and entertainment for boys and girls,
  - each child, boy or girl, has a unique personality which must be allowed to express.
- Discuss their ideas about how boys should behave and girls should behave.
- Discuss whether they think their gender is being treated fairly.
- Select two things that upset them the most about differential treatment of boys and girls and let them explain why they felt hurt.



#### **Step 1: Introduction**

- Tell students that they are going to learn about the importance of gender equality and justice.
- Ask one student to read the introduction. Let them tell you whether they liked the verse and why.

### **Step 2: Story**

- Explain that now they will read a story about how a girl helped change an unfair rule in her school.
- Ask one of the students to read the story *The Chess Tournament* aloud.
- Allow the children to answer the questions that follow the story. Guide the discussion appropriately.

### **Step 3: Scenarios**

- Ask a student to come forward and read out the first scenario (*Dreams of Lakshmi*). Lead a discussion and encourage students to answer the questions that appear after the scenario.
- Repeat with the second scenario (*Boy or Man?*). Encourage them to answer the questions that appear after the scenario.
- Make sure that the main points about gender justice are understood.

### **Step 4: Time to Think**

Conduct a general discussion to relate it to the students' daily lives. Ask questions such as:

- Do you wish you were of the opposite gender? Why?
- How did you feel about the village girl who had to stay at home while her brother went to school?
- How did you feel about the little boy who was asked to dry his tears and behave *like a man*?

### **Step 5: Reinforcing**

Ask students to complete the exercises at the end of the lesson.

### **Step 6: Activity**

Carry out the activity given in the lesson or any other suitable activity that will focus on gender equality and justice.

### **Step 7: Closure**

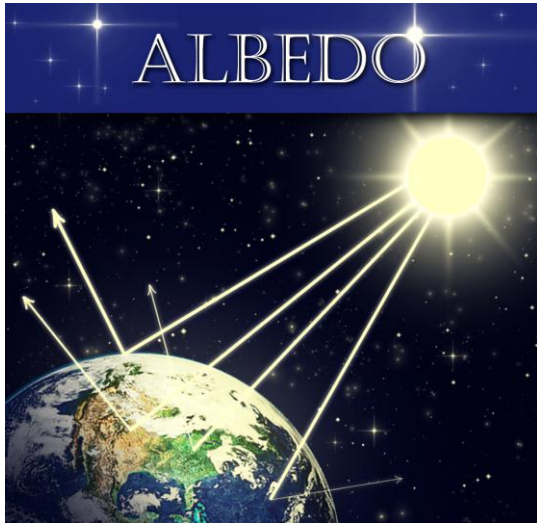
- Review the main points of the lesson.
- Reinforce the gender sensitivity issues learnt from the lesson.

- In the next *value education* class, ask students to share their experiences of gender justice issues and take a note of their reactions.



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## Words Section



### **Albedo (noun)**

#### **Meaning**

- The proportion of the incident light or radiation that is reflected by a surface, typically that of a planet or moon. This definition can be generalized to any object, such as a part of the Earth's surface or atmosphere, a leaf, a soil element, etc. (*Oxforddictionaries.com*)

**Origin (and additional information)** ~ The term's first known use was in the mid 18th century: from Latin *albedo*, meaning *whiteness*, which in turn is derived from ecclesiastical Latin *albus*, meaning *white*. It is also known as *reflection coefficient*.

The term *albedo* was introduced into optics by *Johann Heinrich Lambert* in his 1760 work ***Photometria***. Its dimensionless nature lets it be expressed as a percentage and is measured on a scale from zero for no reflection of a perfectly black surface to 1 for perfect reflection of a white surface.

The albedo is an important concept in climatology, astronomy, geography and calculating reflectivity of different surfaces. The average overall albedo of Earth or its planetary albedo is 30 to 35% because of cloud cover, but widely varies locally across the surface because of different geological and environmental features.

Ice, especially with snow on top of it, has a high albedo: most sunlight hitting the surface bounces back towards space. Water is much more absorbent and less reflective. So, if there is a lot of water, more solar radiation is absorbed by the ocean than when ice dominates. Albedo is not important at high latitudes in winter as there is hardly any incoming sunlight. It becomes significant in spring and summer when the incoming radiation can greatly increase the melting rate of the sea ice.

Albedo affects climate and drives weather conditions. All weather is a result of the uneven heating of Earth caused by different areas of the planet having different albedos. Essentially, for the driving of weather, there are two types of albedo regions on Earth: *Land* and *Ocean*.



## **Words Section**

Forests are generally attributed a low albedo, as the majority of the ultraviolet and visible spectrum is absorbed through *photosynthesis*. Through the *evapotranspiration* (it is the sum of evaporation and plant transpiration from the Earth's land and ocean surface to the atmosphere) of water, trees discharge excess heat from the forest canopy. This water vapour rises resulting in cloud cover which also has a high albedo, thereby further increasing the net global cooling effect attributable to forests.

The direct or the albedo effect of *aerosols* (very fine particles/droplets in the atmosphere) contributes to Earth's radiative balance by cooling the planet.

### **Usage ~**

- i. *Decades of photometry have been interpreted to derive maps of Pluto's surface reflectance, or albedo.*
- ii. *These aerosols are reflective and increase the albedo of the planet.*
- iii. *Albedometer is an instrument used to measure the albedo of a surface.*

### **Derivatives ~ *albedos*, plural**