



Be the Peace Institute and Second Story Women's Centre

Pink Snowsuit Project

June 12, 2017



The Project

Be the Peace Institute, in collaboration with Second Story Women's Centre, has recently received a year of funding from the Nova Scotia Sexual Violence Prevention Innovation Fund for an exciting new project. We will engage groups of parents in conversations about gender—gender stereotypes, social conditioning, gender patterns- and how they influence our parenting decisions and our children's development. **We'd like to know if you will join us! Please read on!**

Introduction

Have you ever grappled with:

- What colour clothes or what type of toys to buy your child, in stores where every product imaginable seems to be divided into "girls" sections and "boys" sections?
- Which extra-curricular activities are appropriate for your son or daughter?
- Whether the many small and large decisions we make every day as parents have any impact at all on who our children become given all the noise and gender-based pressures they are subject to in the wider world??

If so, you are not alone! Worrying about how we parent is universal and sometimes overwhelming. When we gather to talk and share in a non-judgmental space, it often feels more manageable.

The Origin

The project was inspired by a local mom who was shopping at Frenchy's for a snowsuit for her son. She found the perfect suit – size, quality, material- everything was right, except... it was pink. She immediately thought she would buy it for a friend who had a daughter the same age. Then she had a realization-- to her surprise, she had 'bought in' to the automatic recording in her head that "boys don't wear pink." This spawned a whole host of questions and conversations about the gender patterns and stereotypes we unconsciously hold, and how, as parents, they influence our children. (Spoiler: she did end up buying the pink snowsuit and used it for both her young sons!)

The "What"

Over the next 9 months, Be the Peace Institute will host facilitated conversations convened by groups of parents with friends or acquaintances, or by community organizations, to talk about socialized gender norms, gender stereotypes, gender expression, and how these inform our parenting, our children, and their current and future relationships. With a facilitator, articles, and a discussion guide to stimulate the conversation, (and snacks!), small groups of parents (5-8 people) will gather in kitchens, living rooms, or community spaces. They will explore, strategize, validate, and support one another in unpacking dimensions of gender-- how we view gender, what it means, how it shapes our decisions. Ultimately, we will look at how we can influence our children's understanding and navigation of gender roles, relationships, and social pressures to conform to gendered models that they may grow into authentic, free, and whole individuals in a highly gendered and sexualized world.

The "Why"

We have all grown up in a gender-defining culture. Children today live in a complex and highly interconnected world, where they see and hear gendered messages from a very early age-- in extended

families, in school, and in every form of media and consumer goods. These convey what they “should” or “shouldn’t” do, experience, feel or pursue based on their gender. As examples:

- Can girls wear pink, but not boys?
- Can boys play with dolls and be emotionally sensitive? And can girls play with cars and trucks?
- What activities, clothes, toys and aspirations do we encourage in our daughters and sons from a very young age and as they grow and develop?
- When we tell our sons “boys don’t cry,” and “be a man,” do we set them up to stifle emotions and sensitivity to themselves and others?
- When we see clothing for girls with suggestive slogans or tell them they are “pretty” versus “strong” are we affirming the subtle gender-based messages they will receive throughout their lives about what is acceptable for a female person?

Even from a very young age, children internalize these cultural messages. As parents, we can feel uncertain as to how to explain, balance or counteract those influences. Or we may try to bar access - but for how long?

As children grow into youth, the gender issues are compounded by television, music, advertising, movies, video games, and social media, which increasingly portray highly sexualized and also blatantly violent content. In developing brains, this can have a profound impact on their self-expression and relationships.

In the hundreds of micro-decisions parents make in the course of a day- how do we discern what makes sense for our children and/or what we or others feel is “acceptable” gender-conforming behavior? And how can we become more conscious of how those gender dynamics play out within us, and ways we may be unconsciously replicating those patterns with our children?

The Opportunity

In the hectic scheduling of most families, this is an opportunity for parents to:

- Make time for yourself-- to reflect and unpack these issues with peers, resources, and support in welcoming, comfortable, non-judgmental spaces.
- Share and develop perspective, language, strategies to guide your children through the mass of gender pressures they face as they grow and develop.
- Gain perspective and skills to shore up their resilience to develop healthy self-confidence and loving intimate relationships.

And of course, make a contribution to the prevention of relationship violence in our world.

The “How”

We will reach out to parents for interest in participating or gathering a group of friends (5-8 people), in the comfort of their homes or in other spaces offered by community-based agencies. The conversations may be among a group of friends who might relish the opportunity to have some personal time together, with snacks and meaningful conversation. We will offer facilitation assistance, guidelines, questions to ponder, an ongoing collection of resources to stimulate thinking, and if needed, some funds for snacks and child care. Each group will schedule according to their own needs and preferences, meet 2-5 times between now and April 2018, possibly in an ongoing, self-organized way, and offer feedback about the value of these types of conversations for the parents who participate. The first conversation can begin whenever the people, place and time can be arranged.

Will you join us?