

19. Once Upon a Time...

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

Themes	Democracy, Discrimination, Gender equality
Level of complexity	Level 2
Age	7-13
Duration	40 minutes
Group size	5-15 children
Type of activity	Story telling, discussion
Overview	Retelling a familiar story with characters' sexes reversed, leading to discussion of gender stereotypes
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 understood 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 questions 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

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

4. Discuss this chart:
 - a. Compare this chart with the familiar version of the story. Do characters have typical char-

Source: Adapted from the activity Gender-bender, *ABC Teaching Human Rights, Practical activities for primary and secondary schools*, United Nations, OHCHR, New York, Geneva, 2004, and Myra Sadker Advocates: www.sadker.org



- 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.

Chart 2: non-stereotypical gender roles

	MEN/BOYS	WOMEN/GIRLS
UNUSUAL CHARACTERISTICS	In the story: Needs help In your experience:	In the story: Commanding, clever In your experience:
UNUSUAL ACTIVITIES	In the story: Cries, does housework, wants nice clothes, stays at home In your experience:	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.



SAMPLE REVERSED FAIRYTALE

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 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!"



SAMPLE REVERSED FAIRYTALE

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

