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FEELING SAFE TO FEEL:

**A SPARK MANUAL
FOR INCLUSIVE
SCHOOL
MENTAL HEALTH**



SPARK



SPARK

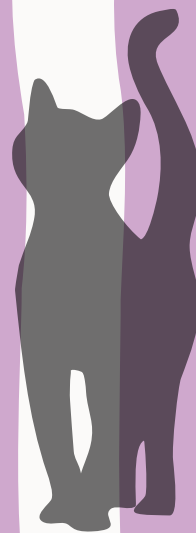


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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS MANUAL MATTERS?

Mental health is not a luxury. It is the foundation of learning, safety, and belonging—especially in childhood. When a child is emotionally regulated, they can learn. When they are seen and supported, they thrive.

Yet in many schools, well-intentioned routines and everyday habits unintentionally reinforce harmful gender norms. These norms can narrow children's emotional vocabulary, discourage help-seeking, and stigmatize those who do not conform to expected gendered behaviour.

The SPARK project, led by IPES (Gender Equality Research Institute, Maribor, Slovenia), and funded by the European Union, was created in response to urgent questions facing educators and children:

- Why do boys in particular avoid asking for help, even when distressed?
- How can school environments support all children—especially those with migrant backgrounds, neurodivergent identities, or disabilities?
- What practical and sustainable actions can schools take to bridge the gap between awareness and real support?

This manual is a direct answer to those questions. It helps educators understand and disrupt the invisible ways gendered expectations influence children's mental health every day—from who is called "brave" to who is allowed to cry.

"We treat everyone the same" is not enough.

Equality without awareness of difference risks reinforcing inequality. That's why this manual adopts a gender-sensitive, intersectional approach focused not on intentions, but on outcomes.



ABOUT THE SPARK PROJECT

SPARK: Strengthening Psychological Awareness and Resilience for Kids

The SPARK project addresses children's mental health through a gender-sensitive, inclusive lens—particularly within the school environment. It is based on the understanding that emotional well-being is not separate from identity, and that systemic change starts with what we model, allow, and encourage in our schools.

Key pillars of the project include:

- **Mental health awareness:** Recognising and naming emotional struggles without stigma
- **Gender sensitivity:** Addressing emotional expression, help-seeking, and behaviour through a gendered lens
- **Whole-school approach:** Involving all staff—from teachers to janitors—in creating emotionally safe environment
- **Creative engagement:** Using tools like escape rooms, multiverse games, and storytelling to build resilience
- **Cross-sectoral collaboration:** Linking educators, psychologists, public health experts, and families

By equipping schools with tools to address both emotional and social dynamics in children's lives, SPARK lays the foundation for resilient, fair, and mentally healthy learning environments in Slovenia and Serbia.

Project Lead: Gender Equality Research Institute Slovenia (IPES)

Partners: University of Maribor, Centre for the Sustainable Society

Development: ALFA Center, Kragujevac Institute of Public Health, Branko Pešić Primary School

Funded by: European Commission (Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values Programme)

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WHO THIS MANUAL IS FOR?

This manual is designed for every adult who interacts with children in the school space. That includes:

- Teachers and assistants
- School leaders (principals, counsellors, pedagogical teams)
- Non-teaching professionals (janitors, receptionists, security, librarians)
- School nurses, social workers, and psychologists
- Parents and community liaisons

Each group plays a vital role in shaping a child's mental health, whether directly through conversation or indirectly through norms, expectations, and culture.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS MANUAL?

The manual includes **six core chapters with exercises, activities and reflection sheets at the end of each chapter**. Each chapter is built to be practical, theory-based, and immediately applicable. You'll find:

-  **Real data** from SPARK pre-testing in Slovenia and Serbia
-  **Cutting-edge theory**, translated into classroom-friendly language
-  **Activities and tools** you can implement right away
-  **Printable materials** and scripts for teachers and staff
-  **Reflection prompts** for personal and team growth
-  **Adaptations for diverse learners**, including multilingual, neurodivergent, and marginalized pupils

Look for icons throughout the manual:

 Theory link |  Activity |  Data |  Reflection |  Toolkit file

WHY GENDER & MENTAL HEALTH CAN'T BE TREATED SEPARATELY?

Emotional well-being is shaped by what children are allowed to feel and express—and those permissions are gendered.

Consider these patterns:

- Girls are praised for caring and helping but discouraged from showing anger.
- Boys are allowed to show anger but shamed for expressing sadness.
- Neurodivergent and migrant pupils may be hypervisible when they “don’t conform,” yet completely invisible when they quietly struggle.

These dynamics lead to measurable consequences:

- 🧠 **Underdiagnosed anxiety in boys**
- 😡 **Burnout in girls due to emotional over-responsibility**
- 🚫 **Punitive discipline for Roma boys with behavioural challenges**
- 😞 **Silent withdrawal in migrant girls, often misread as compliance**

Mental health is not just about diagnosis or crisis. It is about the everyday **permission to be seen**, express freely, and be supported—across all identities.





SPARK MANUAL WORKING PAPER: CHAPTER 1

Mental health starts with how we see children

Quick recap: What this chapter taught us

- Mental health is foundational to learning, safety, and belonging.
- Gender norms deeply shape how children express (or hide) distress.
- Equality isn't sameness: a gender-sensitive approach considers how norms affect different children unequally.
- Emotional permission is gendered – and intersecting identities (e.g. migrant status, neurodivergence) further influence that.
- Schools must move from awareness to structural, visible action.

 Personal reflection prompts (choose one or two)

- When I think of a child who “struggles emotionally,” what is the first image or stereotype that comes to mind? Where might that idea come from?
- Whose emotions are most “acceptable” in my classroom or school? Are some children allowed to cry while others are quietly expected not to?
- What assumptions have I absorbed about “strong” boys or “helpful” girls? How might that shape my support?

 Pattern spotting in my school (observe over 1–3 days)

- Who receives verbal praise for being emotionally regulated?
- Are some children allowed to be angry, while others are told to calm down?
- Whose emotional struggles are labelled as problems, and whose are seen as natural responses?
- Do we assume that silence = well-being?

 Record a few examples or surprising moments below:

 Action commitment (small, doable shift for the next week)

"One way I will challenge gendered expectations around emotions this week is:"

 Ideas:

- Invite boys to talk about feelings using open prompts.
- Affirm assertive behaviour in girls with neutral language (e.g., "That was clear" vs. "You're bossy").
- Check in with a quiet student I usually assume is "fine."

 Follow-up (in 2 weeks)

- What did I notice after making this shift?
- What was easy or hard?
- What will I continue doing — or do differently?

 **Optional: Share reflections with a peer or use them to spark a staff conversation.**



CHAPTER 2: STAFF AWARENESS AND THE POWER OF IMPLICIT BIAS

Understanding the invisible forces that shape children's mental health and sense of belonging

WHY THIS CHAPTER MATTERS?

Before we focus on classroom dynamics, peer support, or school-wide programming, we must begin with the often-unexamined foundation: ourselves. Adults—teachers, assistants, support staff, school leaders—are not neutral participants in school life. Our reactions, expectations, and language are shaped by our own experiences, cultural messages, and unconscious assumptions.

This chapter explores how implicit bias—especially gendered bias—can unintentionally impact children's emotional safety and mental health. It offers both theoretical grounding and practical strategies for staff to become more aware of the messages they send and the environments they shape. The goal is not perfection, but conscious practice.

 *Mental health is not just about how children feel. It's about how they are seen.*

WHAT IS IMPLICIT BIAS?

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. These are not necessarily aligned with our declared values—and they often run counter to our best intentions.

In school environments, implicit bias may show up in quiet but powerful ways:

- Who we expect to lead or disrupt
- Who we comfort, discipline, or ignore
- Whose emotions we validate—and whose we rush



These patterns are shaped by:

- Social norms around gender roles
- Media portrayals of “typical” behaviour
- Personal upbringing and social context
- Cultural and linguistic expectations

Bias is not a moral failure—it is a cognitive shortcut. But it becomes a mental health issue when it determines who feels safe, seen, or supported.



WHY IMPLICIT BIAS IS A MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE?

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. These are not necessarily aligned with our declared values—and they often run counter to our best intentions.

Mental health is not only about crisis prevention. It is about a **child’s sense of belonging, identity, and emotional permission**. When children receive consistent, biased signals—such as being treated as a “problem” or feeling they must suppress emotion—they may internalize distorted beliefs about themselves.

Examples of how bias affects mental health:

Bias pattern	Mental health outcome
Boys repeatedly told to “man up”	Emotional inhibition, shame around sadness
Girls only praised for neatness and helpfulness	Perfectionism, emotional over-responsibility
Roma boys punished more harshly for anger	Reinforced marginalization, learned distrust
Migrant girls encouraged to stay quiet	Isolation, underdeveloped communication skills
Neurodivergent children expected to “fit in”	Exhaustion from masking, anxiety

These effects accumulate over time and often go unnoticed—until a child is in deep distress.

SPOTTING BIAS IN EVERYDAY SCHOOL PRACTICE

Implicit bias is rarely obvious. It often hides in patterns across the school day. Here are some common signs and their potential effects:

Area	Subtle bias example	Mental health impact
Feedback	Boys repeatedly told to “man up”	Reinforces rigid emotional roles
Participation	Calling on boys more in science/math lessons	Undermines girls’ confidence in STEM
Discipline	Harsher tone with active boys; less tolerance for neurodivergence	Increases shame, deters help-seeking
Group Work	Girls take notes, boys present	Limits leadership experience for girls
Emotional Support	Girls comforted, boys told to “move on”	Boys may feel unsafe expressing sadness
Silence ≠ Safety	Quiet students assumed to be “fine”	Hidden distress in migrant or disabled pupils

 **Bias is not just about what we do—but what we assume, allow, or overlook.**



DEEP REFLECTION: STAFF IDENTITY & EMOTIONAL MAPPING

To move from awareness to action, we start with reflective practice. This section offers structured tools to help staff surface hidden assumptions and explore how their own socialization influences their behaviour.

Activity 1: Identity Reflection Map

Use this prompt for individual journaling or group discussion:

- What were the “acceptable” emotions for boys and girls in your childhood?
- When did you first feel pressure to behave in a gendered way?
- Which pupils do you find easiest or hardest to connect with—and why?
- Do you interpret loudness, stillness, anger, or tears differently based on gender?

Encourage honesty without judgment. This is not about shame—it’s about insight.

BIAS SCENARIOS FOR TEAM AWARENESS

Use these as discussion starters in staff meetings or workshops. Present without commentary and ask:

 “What assumptions show up here?”

Scenario 1:

A boy regularly stands up during class and speaks out of turn. A girl in the same class avoids eye contact, speaks softly, and never volunteers.

- Who gets more attention?
- Whose behaviour is labelled as a “problem”?

Scenario 2:

A Roma pupil becomes angry when asked to explain their behaviour. A white peer cries when criticized.

- Who is seen as aggressive, and who as vulnerable?



Scenario 3:

A migrant girl never speaks during group work but always completes tasks independently.

- Is her silence viewed as competence—or as disengagement?

💡 Ohrabrite zaposlene da prepisu narativ koristeći radoznalost, a ne pretpostavke.

ACTIONABLE SHIFTS FOR EVERYDAY PRACTICE

These are not “big reforms.” They are daily micro-adjustments that accumulate into lasting culture change.

💡 Practice 1: Reframe behaviour

Pause and ask:

“What unmet need might this behaviour signal?”

- Instead of: “He’s attention-seeking”
- Try: “He might not feel seen or safe.”

📅 Practice 2: Pattern journal

At the end of each week, write down:

- Who participated most today?
- Who received positive attention?
- Who seemed withdrawn—and why might that be?

Use this data to adjust seating, grouping, and engagement practices.

🧩 Practice 3: Emotional vocabulary for all

Model and normalize a wide range of emotions:

- “It’s okay to cry—everyone does sometimes.”
- “You can be scared and brave at the same time.”
- “Asking for help is a strong thing to do.”

🔄 Practice 4: Rotate visibility

Switch roles weekly:

- Presenters become note-takers
- Quiet pupils try leading (with scaffolding)
- Pupils reflect after: What surprised you about this role?





PEER COACHING PODS

Set up peer partnerships among staff to support each other in spotting and addressing bias. Structure it like this:

- **Observe** each other once per month
- Use a shared **observation sheet** (see below)
- Focus on curiosity—not criticism
- Discuss patterns in participation, praise, or emotional responses

Sample Observation Sheet

Focus area	Reflection prompts
Participation	Who was most visible? Who was overlooked?
Emotional Response	Which emotions got acknowledged—and by whom?
Discipline	Was tone consistent across gender and ethnicity?
Praise	Was feedback specific, or based on stereotypes?

End each session with:

 *One thing I noticed. One thing I might try.*



SUMMARY: A CULTURE SHIFT STARTS WITH US

Creating a mentally healthy, gender-sensitive school begins not with a new policy, but with a new kind of presence. Staff who slow down, ask better questions, and question their own assumptions create the conditions for all children to thrive.

Remember:

- Bias is not personal failure—it is cultural conditioning.
- Awareness without action is not enough.
- Emotionally safe schools begin with emotionally aware adults.





STAFF TOOLKIT

Weekly reflection prompts

- What surprised me today?
- Who challenged my assumptions?
- Did I model emotional openness?
- Who might need extra connection next week?



Poster: Daily staff awareness check (Place in staff room)

DAILY CHECK-IN

- ✓ Did I expect different behaviour from girls vs. boys?
- ✓ Who did I affirm emotionally today—and who did I overlook?
- ✓ Did I notice quiet pupils as much as loud ones?
- ✓ Did I assign leadership fairly—or based on confidence?



Let's lead with awareness, not autopilot.



SPARK MANUAL WORKING PAPER:

CHAPTER 2

Seeing what's been invisible — Reflecting on bias in school settings

Key takeaways from Chapter 2

- Implicit bias is unconscious — but powerful.
- Gendered expectations affect how children are seen, disciplined, praised, and supported.
- Bias impacts emotional safety, help-seeking, and self-image.
- Awareness is the first step; consistent reflection and action must follow.
- Emotional neutrality isn't enough — we must actively create inclusion.

Personal reflection prompts (pick 2–3 or use with your team)

- Think of a time when you were surprised by a pupil's reaction or behaviour. What assumptions had you made beforehand?
- Which children in your school or class are “easy to teach” for you — and who feels more challenging? Why?
- Have you ever expected different emotional behaviours based on gender? (e.g. anger from boys, tears from girls)
- How were emotions gendered in your own childhood?

Write a few short thoughts or key words:



Mini-audit: My own bias triggers

Put a checkmark where you feel a possible unconscious pattern:

Situation	I pause to reflect	I react on autopilot	I've never thought about this
When a loud boy disrupts group work	☐	☐	☐
When a girl speaks up assertively	☐	☐	☐
When a neurodivergent child avoids eye contact	☐	☐	☐
When a child cries during math	☐	☐	☐
When a boy asks for help with emotions	☐	☐	☐
When a migrant pupil stays silent	☐	☐	☐

Weekly observation tracker (use for 3–5 days)

Note down patterns – not to judge, but to build awareness.

Area	What I noticed	What it might mean	What I'll try next
Who got the most attention today?			
Whose emotions were acknowledged or ignored?			
Who was labelled "difficult" or "quiet"?			
Who led group work? Who stayed in background?			

🎯 Small shifts, big change

Choose one small action for the next week:

This week I will intentionally:

- ☐ Rotate leadership in group work
- ☐ Pause before interpreting behaviour
- ☐ Use inclusive emotional language
- ☐ Reflect on who I connect with most easily
- ☐ Other: -----

📌 Check back next week: What did you notice? What changed?

💡 Team exercise (optional)

Use at your next staff meeting:

- Print 3 real-life school scenarios (from SPARK examples or anonymised local ones).
- Ask: "What expectations are shaping our reaction?"
- Discuss: "What would a gender-sensitive, inclusive response look like instead?"

💡 ***Consider forming informal peer pairs to continue the discussion throughout the semester.***



CHAPTER 3: BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

WHY THIS CHAPTER MATTERS?

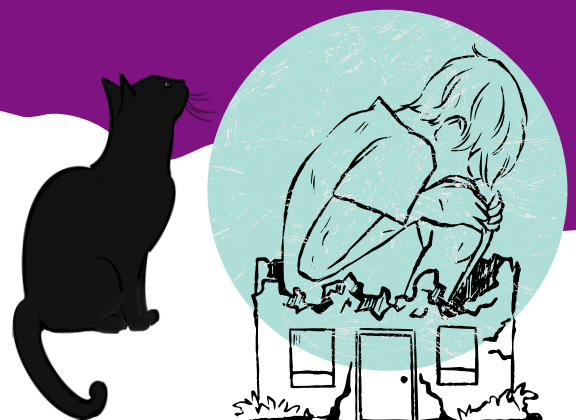
A child's mental health does not exist in a vacuum — it is shaped, protected, or compromised by the emotional climate of the school. Safe and inclusive school environments are not just about discipline policies or anti-bullying posters. They are about **how pupils feel in hallways, group work, bathrooms, and every informal moment in between.**

Too often, safety is defined only in terms of physical danger or academic risk. But what about the boy who is punished every time he moves his body? Or the girl who never dares raise her hand again after being teased for “knowing too much”? What about the quiet child who sees no one like them reflected in the books, wall displays, or group leaders?

Safety is emotional. Inclusion is daily. And both are deeply **gendered.**

This chapter explores *the layers of environmental safety* — visual, social, spatial, procedural, and relational — through a gender lens. It also offers original tools and practices that go beyond generic “inclusive school” tips, specifically addressing **gender expression, intersectionality, and peer surveillance, which are often left out of mainstream school safety conversations.**

 **Goal:** To equip all staff — teaching and non-teaching — with insight and tools to ensure that every child, regardless of gender identity or emotional expression, feels seen, safe, and supported throughout the school day.



THEORY: SAFETY, VISIBILITY & BELONGING

Research shows that children who feel safe and emotionally supported in school are more likely to engage, learn, and regulate stress (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). But “safety” isn’t just about rules and surveillance – it’s about emotional permission, visibility, and freedom from ridicule.

 Key theoretical points:

- **Safety is relational, not just procedural** (Hughes & Tucker, 2018)
- **Micro-exclusions**, like eye-rolling or seat shuffling, accumulate into macro-impact
- **Children perform gender** based on peer and adult expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987)
- **Safety is unequally distributed:** neurodivergent children, Roma pupils, migrant children, LGBTQ+ youth, and those with non-normative gender expressions often experience reduced safety.

 Reflection prompt for staff meetings:

“When you were in primary school, where did you feel safest – and why? Where did you feel unsafe – and why?”

THE FIVE LAYERS OF A SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Creating a safe school environment requires more than just enforcing rules – it requires intentional action at different layers of the child’s everyday experience. This section breaks down five distinct but interconnected layers that shape a pupil’s sense of safety, belonging, and freedom to express emotions without fear of judgment.

Each layer includes:

- A short explanation
- A gender-sensitive example
- A ready-to-use activity or practice



Layer	What it involves	Gender-sensitive lens	 Practical action
1. Visual	What children see: walls, books, posters, uniforms	Who is represented? Are girls shown as scientists? Do boys appear nurturing? Are non-binary identities acknowledged?	Poster audit walk: In small teams, pupils and staff review school displays and reading materials using a visual inclusion checklist. What messages are being sent? What's missing? Create a "Missing Stories" wall together.
2. Spatial	Who uses which spaces, and how? How is movement managed?	Boys often dominate playgrounds; girls stay at the edges. Pupils with disabilities or neurodivergence may avoid crowded or noisy areas.	Inclusive mapping: Give pupils a blank school map. Ask them: "Where do you feel most safe? Least safe? Where do you feel free to be yourself?" Collect anonymous answers and display a "Feelings Map." Use results to make adjustments.
3. Social	Who is popular, who is isolated, who gets teased?	Humour is often used to enforce gender norms ("You throw like a girl"). Girls may face quiet exclusion; boys face performative toughness.	Lunch table mix-up: Once a week, use colour cards or themes to mix lunch seating. Encourage new interactions. Debrief with "What surprised you?" or "What did you learn about someone?"
4. Procedural	Rules, routines, discipline, reward systems	Do discipline patterns reflect bias? Are boys punished for emotions and girls ignored when assertive?	Policy pause: Staff review a recent behavioural incident. Ask: "Would we respond the same if this pupil had a different gender?" Include this step in regular discipline review.
5. Relational	The tone and habits of adult-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions	Do all children feel comfortable approaching adults? Do we treat crying boys and angry girls with the same patience?	Trust web: Ask pupils privately: "Which adult would you go to if you were upset?" Use results to identify pupils with no safe adult. Set intentional connection goals with these children.



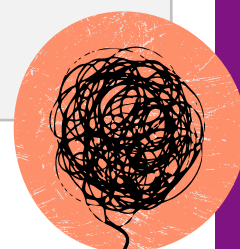
Reflection for team use:

“Which of these layers is most developed in our school? Which needs more attention – and why?”

Purpose: Help school staff (teachers and non-teaching) observe, reflect on, and adapt the visual environment to support gender-sensitive mental health for all pupils.

Observation focus	Prompts	Notes / Action steps
Wall displays	Do classroom or hallway posters feature a diversity of genders, races, abilities, and emotional expressions?	
Gender representation	Are both boys and girls shown in leadership, helping, STEM, and creative roles? What about non-binary inclusion?	
Language use	Are the signs and labels gender-inclusive? E.g. "Firefighter" vs. "Fireman", "Everyone is welcome" vs. "Boys and girls"	
Emotion visibility	Are a wide range of emotions (e.g. sadness, anger, fear, joy) represented visually—across all genders?	
Inclusive role models	Are pupils exposed to non-stereotypical examples (e.g. male carers, female scientists, diverse family types)?	
Student work displayed	Are all pupils' work represented equally? Do you unintentionally favour certain groups?	
Hidden messages	What assumptions might a visitor make about gender, emotion, and identity based on the space alone?	

 *Tip: Repeat this audit once per term as a staff team activity.*



Toolkit File: Mapping Emotional Safety Template

Purpose: Help schools identify where pupils feel emotionally safe or unsafe throughout their school environment.

 This can be used with teachers, staff, or pupils themselves (ages 8+).

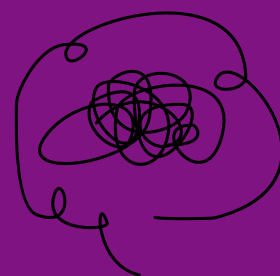
Step 1: Prepare a large map of your school

Include: classrooms, hallways, gym, toilets, lunch areas, library, playground, nurse's office, etc.

Step 2: Use coloured stickers or markers

-  Blue = I feel safe here.
-  Yellow = It depends.
-  Red = I don't feel safe here.

Step 3: Add reflection notes



After the map is filled out (anonymously or in groups), use this table to analyse patterns:

Location	Safety level (Blue/Yellow/Red)	Possible reasons (What happens here?)	Suggested actions
Toilet area	 Red	Teasing, no adult supervision	Install mirror signage, assign safe adult rotation
Hallway near Grade 5	 Yellow	Loud transitions, pushing	Create hallway transition agreements
Principal's office	 Blue	Private, calm, trusted adult present	Keep consistent staff presence
Playground corner	 Red	Hidden from sight, arguments often occur	Increase visibility, rotate supervision

 *Tip: Use this tool once a semester, then re-map to track improvement.*

GENDERED SURVEILLANCE: HOW PUPILS REGULATE EACH OTHER

In schools, much of the gender regulation that affects children's mental health happens not through formal rules – but through each other. Pupils act as **watchers, judges, and enforcers** of gender norms: monitoring who wears what, who speaks how, who sits with whom. This **peer surveillance** is often subtle, continuous, and rarely visible to adults – yet it can be as impactful as bullying or exclusion.

Staff often address **overt behaviours** like name-calling or fighting, but overlook the **daily micro-corrections** pupils impose on one another. These may include sarcastic looks, jokes, whispers, or exaggerated performances of masculinity or femininity. For children who do not conform to rigid gender norms – including non-binary youth, neurodivergent pupils, and Roma and migrant children – this environment can become emotionally unsafe, even when no rules are being broken.

Research insight

- By the age of 6–8, children already police each other's gendered behaviour, especially in play and emotional expression (Martin & Ruble, 2004).
- Performative masculinity – where boys must suppress empathy or softness to “prove” themselves – is linked to emotional suppression, increased aggression, and later mental health issues (Kimmel, 2008; Mahalik et al., 2003).
- Girls often face quiet surveillance: being shamed for “trying too hard,” acting “bossy,” or not conforming to body ideals, leading to reduced self-confidence and self-censorship (Renold, 2005).
- Pupils from Roma and migrant backgrounds are often stereotyped as “too loud,” “inappropriate,” or “not fitting in” – and are disproportionately disciplined for behaviours that are accepted in dominant peer groups (Keddie, 2012).

Activity 1: The invisible rules audit (all staff)

This staff-only activity helps unearth how peer surveillance operates across the school – and how staff may (unintentionally) reinforce it.



Step 1: Staff room brainstorm

Ask teams to anonymously write:

- 💬 *"What do you think the unwritten rules are for pupils around gender?"*
- 💬 *"Where and when do these rules get enforced – and by whom?"*

Step 2: Visual mapping

Create a large board titled:

💬 *"Unwritten rules of gender in our school"*

Columns:

- The rule ("Boys don't cry," "Girls are quiet," "Boys get dirty," "Girls don't speak first")
- Enforcers (Peers? Teachers? Coaches? Posters?)
- Consequences (Laughter? Isolation? Teasing? Praise?)

🧠 Reflect:

Which rules do we accidentally enforce (e.g. separating boys and girls for activities, commenting on outfits, laughing at gendered jokes)?

🔧 Activity 3: What's so funny? (grades 4–9 or staff meeting)

💬 *Purpose: To challenge humour as a tool of gendered regulation.*

1. Gather anonymous jokes, memes, or common phrases heard in school.
2. In small groups, explore:
 - Who is the target of the joke?
 - What message is being reinforced?
 - Could this joke limit someone's behaviour or self-expression?

🧑🏫 Create a "Comedy code" – 3 rules for humour that respects identity and emotion.

💡 Optional: Invite students to make short skits or TikTok-style videos showing harmful jokes and inclusive rewrites.

Activity 4: Peer lens walk (non-teaching staff)

This short reflection is ideal for lunch monitors, cleaners, security staff, and bus drivers — people who see unfiltered peer dynamics daily.

Ask:

- Where do you observe the most peer policing (looks, comments, mimicking)?
- Are there certain pupils who are always corrected, mocked, or avoided?
- Are there spaces where children seem more free to be themselves?

 *Follow-up: Use these observations to inform layout changes (e.g. lunchroom seating), supervision roles, or new rituals of welcome and belonging.*

Activity 5: Rehearsal for reality (Drama-based | Grades 5–9).

Create a “social theatre” space where pupils explore:

- Being the rule-breaker
- Being the enforcer
- Being the bystander

Ask pupils to role-play a moment when someone:

- Wears something “different”
- Expresses a “wrong” emotion
- Refuses to follow gendered expectations

 Let them try different endings:

- What happens if someone speaks up?
- What if an adult intervenes?

 Encourage meta-reflection:

- Who decides what’s normal? What does it cost to conform?



Reflection prompts for all staff

- “What gender expectations do I notice among pupils — but rarely question?”
- “Have I ever laughed along or ignored a gendered joke because it felt small?”
- “What would happen if I modelled emotion in a non-gendered way — e.g., a male teacher crying, a female headteacher being assertive?”

Toolkit file: “Spot the rule” observation sheet

Create a printable observation tool for any staff member to jot down notes during breaks, transitions, or group work.

Date	Location	What rule seemed enforced?	How? (Words, looks, laughter?)	What could we try next time?
3/3/2025	Lunchroom	“Girls sit quietly”	Boys teased loud girls	Mix seating, invite co-play
5/3/2025	Gym	“Boys must win”	Teasing slower boys	Reframe success as effort

Use this data to launch team discussions or monthly peer climate reviews.

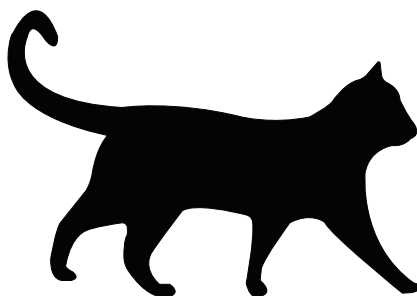
HIDDEN CURRICULUM: WHAT SCHOOLS TEACH WITHOUT WORDS

Every school teaches two curriculums: the official one — written in lesson plans and textbooks — and the hidden curriculum: the unspoken messages children absorb from everyday interactions, routines, space, and power. While the official curriculum may promote inclusion and emotional wellbeing, the hidden curriculum often reinforces the opposite — subtly teaching who matters, who leads, who is emotional, who is disruptive, and who belongs.

The hidden curriculum is not necessarily intentional. It exists in who gets praised first, who is always told to “calm down,” whose behaviour is labeled “mature,” and whose is “problematic.” It can be found in:

- Who is asked to clean up
- Who is always line leader
- Whose stories are displayed
- Whose language is “corrected”

Because it operates silently and socially, the hidden curriculum is one of the most powerful reinforcers of gendered mental health outcomes — shaping children’s emotional literacy, sense of belonging, and permission to be themselves.



Goal

To help teaching and non-teaching staff become more aware of the hidden curriculum and its impact on gender, mental health, and belonging – and to support practical strategies to shift it toward inclusivity and care.

Key theoretical links

- Jackson (1968) first coined the term "hidden curriculum" to describe how norms, values, and beliefs are conveyed through schooling – often without explicit teaching.
- Connell (2002) warns that gendered school cultures reinforce hegemonic masculinity and emotional restriction through everyday routine and language.
- Hooks (2000) reminds us that classrooms are sites of resistance and possibility – if we interrogate power, not just content.
- The hidden curriculum directly shapes gendered help-seeking behaviours, emotional suppression, and self-worth (Gilligan, 1982; Way, 1997).

Activity 1: "The silent messages map" (all Staff)

 *Purpose: Reveal what is taught without words in school routines and spaces.*

Step 1:

Choose a routine or space (e.g. lining up, group work, bathroom breaks, breaktime, feedback).

Step 2:

In staff teams or small mixed groups, answer:

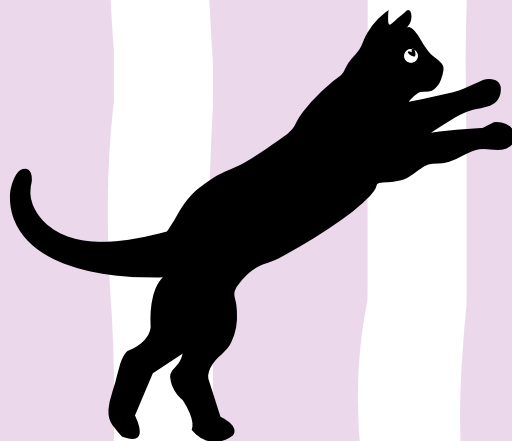
- Who usually leads or is chosen?
- Who is expected to help?
- Who is often corrected?
- Who gets second chances?
- Whose behaviour is praised?

Step 3: Discuss:

- What emotional lessons are being taught?
- How might these messages affect children differently based on gender, background, or emotional style?

 *Reflection:*

"What did I learn in school – without being taught – about gender and behaviour?"



Activity 3: “Invisible jobs log” (Grades 4–9 or staff use)

Track over one week:

- Who is asked to carry things?
- Who is expected to mediate peer conflict?
- Who is reminded to be quiet?
- Who is excused for loudness?
- Who is asked to help others?

 Tally the roles and reflect: Are these “jobs” gendered? Is emotional labour unevenly distributed?

 Follow-up: Re-assign classroom and hallway jobs to deliberately break patterns. Rotate power.

Activity 4: “Corrected or connected?” (Teaching staff)

Keep a private notebook for 3 days. For each behavioural correction, jot down:

- Pupil's gender
- Emotion shown (anger, sadness, silliness)
- Staff response (punishment, redirection, empathy)

After 3 days, review:

Are boys more often corrected for emotion?

Are girls more often told to “be nice” or “calm down”?

Are assertive or sensitive children treated differently based on gender?

 Tip: Pair this with a staff reflection circle to discuss biases and share strategies for emotionally attuned discipline.



Activity 5: “Unlearning the curriculum” workshop (Staff + pupils together)

Co-design a short workshop where pupils and staff swap roles:

- Pupils create “lesson plans” on what they think adults teach them without words.
- Staff share the values they hope to model.

 Present the lessons through skits or drawings.

Discuss:

- Where do the gaps lie?
- What lessons do we want to keep, and which should we unlearn?

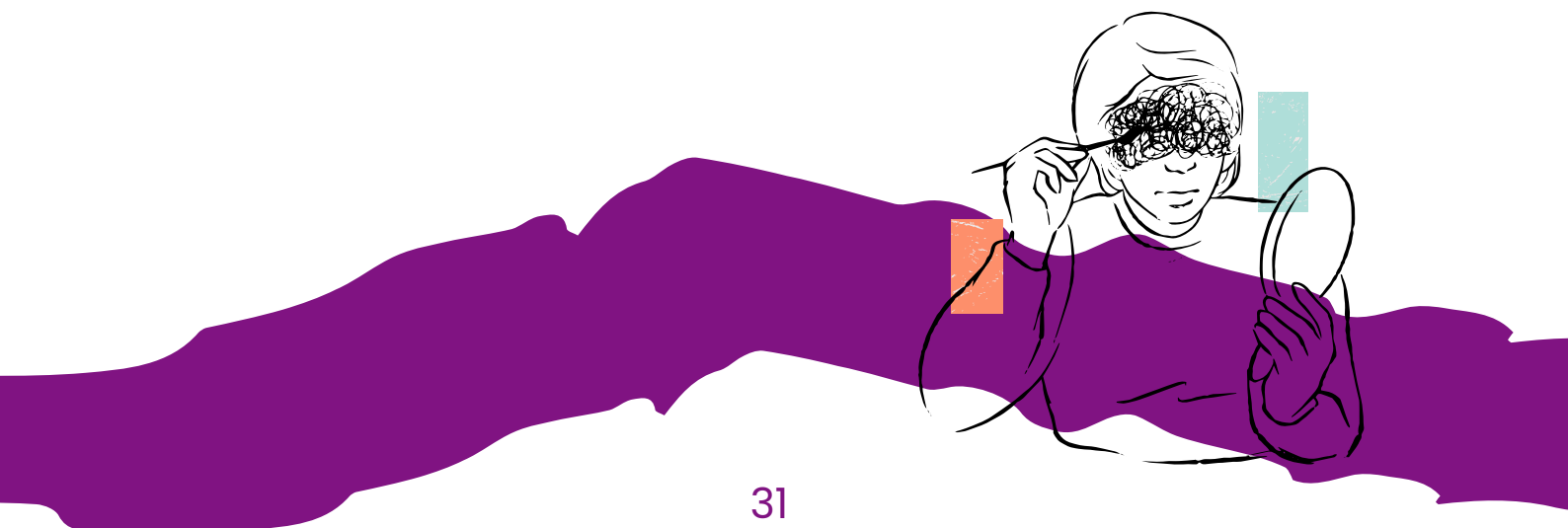
 Shared reflection prompts for staff journals or team sessions

- “When have I taught something without meaning to?”
- “How might I model emotions in more gender-inclusive ways?”
- “What do my daily routines say about who belongs – and who doesn’t?”

TOOLKIT FILE: HIDDEN CURRICULUM MINI-AUDIT

Purpose:

To help staff and pupils recognise the unspoken lessons being taught through daily school life, and to co-create changes that promote emotional inclusion and gender equity



♦ **Part A: Staff mini-audit – “What are we teaching without saying it?”**

Routine or moment	What is being taught (Without words)?	Who benefits?	Who might be excluded?	What could we change?
Morning line-up	Quiet = good; stillness = maturity	Calm, compliant pupils	Neurodivergent or active children	Add flexible entry, movement starters
Asking for help	Needing help = weakness	Pupils who are more independent	Pupils who struggle, especially boys	Normalize help-seeking with posters and staff modelling
Who gets praised	Being quiet = being good	Soft-spoken girls	Assertive girls, boys showing emotion	Balance praise – celebrate courage, kindness, curiosity
Group work	Leadership = loud or fast thinkers	Extroverted pupils (often boys)	Reflective, multilingual, or shy pupils	Rotate roles: listener, timekeeper, encourager
Clean-up time	Girls are better at tidying	Girls	Boys, energetic pupils	Randomize or rotate tasks with playful draw
Emotional behaviour	Sad = weak; anger = misbehaviour	Boys suppress emotion	Girls may internalize anger	Use “emotion check-ins,” de-gender emotional response

 Reflection questions:

- **When you were in school, what unspoken rules did you learn?**
- **How do your actions today reflect or challenge those rules?**
- **Where in your daily routines could small shifts create big change?**



♦ **Part B: Pupil worksheet – “What is school telling us (Without saying it)?”**

(Recommended for Grades 4–9; adapt with drawing or storytelling for younger children)

Instructions for pupils:

Sometimes, school teaches us lessons that no one says out loud – through routines, rules, or who gets chosen. Let’s explore what those messages are.



Section 1: What we notice

Complete each sentence with your own words:

1. At our school, the kids who are always chosen to lead are usually...
2. The people who clean up the most are usually...
3. When someone cries, the usual reaction is...
4. When someone gets angry, they are often told to...
5. When someone helps others, they are usually...
6. When someone is loud or playful, they are often seen as...
7. In our classroom, it’s hardest to be yourself when...



Section 2: Emotion map

Draw or list where in school you feel:



You can be yourself



You feel unsure about how to act



You feel like you need to hide part of yourself



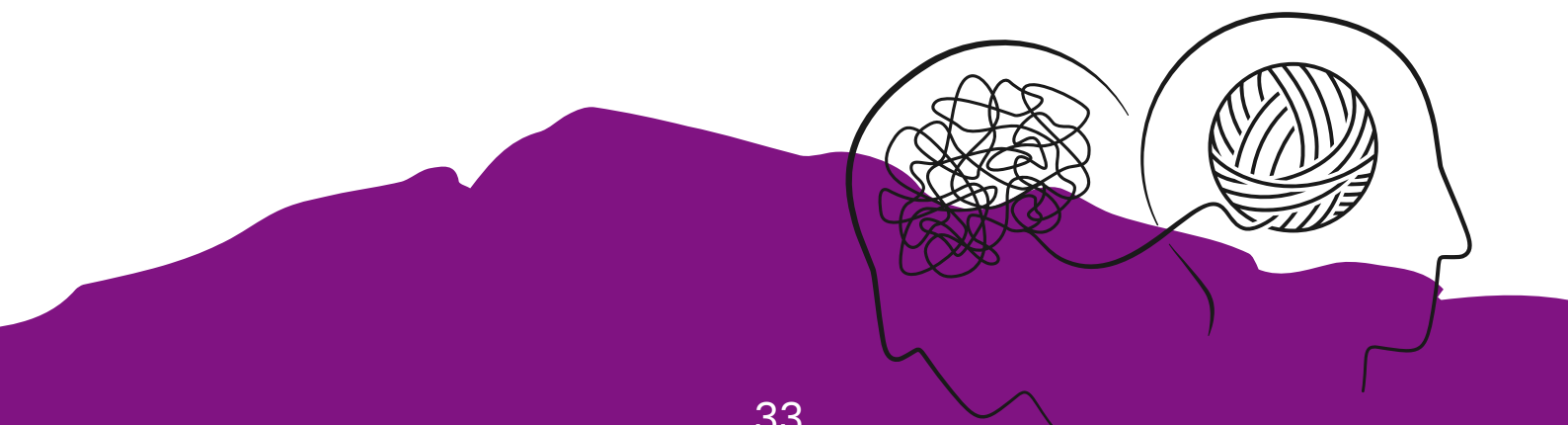
Section 3: Rewriting the message

Imagine we could rewrite the hidden rules. What would they say?

- “At our school, it’s okay to cry if...”
- “Being a leader means...”
- “We take turns helping by...”
- “Fair means...”



Optional: Pupils work in small groups to design a poster titled:
“The unwritten rules we choose together”



💡 **Staff + pupil dialogue activity:**

Facilitate a **circle discussion** with a mixed group of staff and pupils using the prompt:

“What is one unspoken rule in our school that you think should change – and how could we change it together?”

Use this to co-create:

- A **charter of fair emotional rules**
- An **inclusion agreement**
- Or a **“rewrite” display** of old vs. new hidden curriculum messages

PEER DYNAMICS AND BELONGING

Children spend most of their school day in the company of peers – walking to class, sharing snacks, whispering jokes, choosing group members. In these everyday moments, a powerful message is formed:

“Do I belong here? Am I accepted as I am?”

Belonging is not just a “nice to have.” It’s a core psychological need and **a protective factor** for mental health. When children feel emotionally excluded – through gossip, exclusion from games, or peer teasing – their stress levels rise and their emotional expression narrows.

Crucially, **peer culture is one of the strongest enforcers of gender norms**. Boys may mock each other for showing care. Girls may be pushed into people-pleasing roles. Non-conforming pupils may get frozen out altogether. Unless we actively address this peer regulation, we leave some children emotionally unsafe – even in classrooms full of well-meaning adults.

🎯 **Goal:** To help school staff identify, understand, and shift peer dynamics that limit emotional expression, enforce gender norms, or exclude pupils from belonging.

Theoretical foundations

- **Belonging theory** (Baumeister & Leary, 1995): The human need to form and maintain meaningful social bonds is universal – and begins early. Children who feel rejected or marginalised are more likely to show signs of anxiety, aggression, or emotional withdrawal.
- **Peer culture theory** (Corsaro, 2005): Children create their own “mini-cultures” within schools – with norms, values, in-jokes, and rules. Adults often miss the **hidden social rules** pupils use to police each other.
- **Gender schema theory** (Bem, 1981): From early age, children internalize ideas of “*how boys and girls should act*” and use these schemas to judge both themselves and others. **These judgments are constantly reinforced in peer interactions.**
- **Intersectionality in peer belonging:** Pupils are not just navigating gender – they also face peer exclusion or microaggressions based on race, class, ability, language, or religion. A gender-sensitive peer culture must also address these multiple layers.

ACTIVITIES & TOOLS

1. Social constellation mapping – For teaching and non-teaching staff (Grades 1–9)

Create a safe space for mapping peer belonging. Use sticky notes or anonymous cards where pupils write:

- 💬 "Who are 2 people you feel safe with?"
- 💬 "Who makes you feel like you don't belong?"
- 💬 "Where do you feel most left out – and why?"

Cluster responses on a chart (anonymised) to identify patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

→ Use the map to guide informal check-ins, group reshuffling, or playground interventions.

2. Unwritten rules: Peer pressure decoder – For teaching and non-teaching staff (Grades 4–9).

Ask pupils:

- 💬 "What do you have to do to fit in here?"
- 💬 "What do you have to hide?"



Create two columns on a flip chart:

“To fit in I must...” / “To avoid being teased I must not...”

Example responses:

- *“Act tough if I’m a boy”*
- *“Not answer too many questions”*
- *“Wear cool shoes”*
- *“Not cry in public”*

Discuss:

- *Who made these rules?*
- *Who do they exclude?*
- *What would a better set of rules be?*

💡 *Tip: This activity can also be repeated with teachers during a staff meeting – reflecting on what silent norms shape their classroom culture.*

3. Peer role switch scenarios - For teaching and non-teaching staff (Grades 3–9).

Give pupils role cards describing common peer situations, such as:

- A boy is teased for complimenting another boy’s clothes.
- A girl is left out for being “too loud.”
- A child is mocked for not speaking the local language.

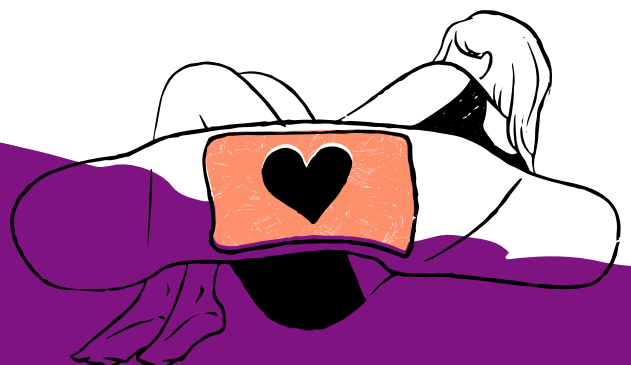
Ask pairs or small groups to act out:

- The usual version.
- A flipped version where the peer group responds supportively.

🎯 Purpose: Pupils learn how peer group reactions shape safety – and how small shifts can open space for others to belong.

4. “Kindness is courage” peer challenge - Whole school activity (Grades 1–9)

Run a week-long challenge where pupils collect points (individually or in groups) for actions that support peer belonging. Display them on a classroom “courage wall.”





Examples of actions:

- “I invited someone new to play.”
- “I stood up for someone being teased.”
- “I asked someone how they’re feeling.”

Encourage children to **write short notes or drawings** showing when someone made them feel like they belong. Share selected examples at assembly or in class.

📌 Adaptable: Great for school-wide campaigns or anti-bullying week.

🔧 5. “Belonging jar” for non teaching staff

Daily micro-interactions:

Cafeteria staff, janitors, bus drivers, and admin staff are crucial in shaping emotional tone. Create a “Belonging Jar” in the staff room with cards that suggest simple things non-teaching staff can say or do:

- “Thanks for helping out today – I saw that.”
- “You look like you’re thinking deeply – I admire that.”
- “Everyone belongs here – and you’re part of the reason why.”

💬 *Use this as a rotating peer motivator, building awareness that everyone shapes peer culture – not just teachers.*

Reflection for staff teams:

- “Whose peer dynamics are we not noticing?”
- “Do we only step in when there’s conflict – or do we actively build belonging?”

🧠 Suggestion: At your next meeting, ask staff to anonymously name 1 child who always seems surrounded – and 1 who always seems on the edge. Reflect together on strategies to shift that.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM CHAPTER 3

- Safety is not only physical – it is visual, spatial, emotional, social, and relational.
- Children’s mental health is shaped by what they see, where they go, who they’re with, and how they’re treated.
- School environments often reinforce gender norms through peer dynamics, adult assumptions, and implicit space management.
- Inclusion is not a one-time training – it is a daily, intentional practice across staff teams and classroom routines.
- The most vulnerable students – Roma pupils, migrant children, neurodivergent students, gender-nonconforming youth – often remain unseen in standard safety planning.



PERSONAL REFLECTION PROMPTS



Use individually or with your team. Choose 2–3 questions to reflect on each week.

- Think back to a specific space in your school – a hallway, lunchroom, or playground. Who feels most at ease there? Who tends to withdraw?
- Whose safety is actively considered in your daily planning? Whose safety is assumed?
- What messages about gender and emotions are currently displayed on your school walls or shared in classroom dialogue?
- When did you last intervene in a peer-to-peer interaction that reflected harmful gender norms? What stopped you – or what helped you act?
- Which pupils in your care may have no “go-to” adult at school? What could change that?

 Write a few notes, keywords, or short sentences:

MINI-MUDIT: OUR ENVIRONMENTAL INCLUSION MINDSET

Mark where you or your team currently stand. This tool supports honest reflection – not judgment.

Situation	I intentionally address this	I tend to overlook this	I've never thought about this
Who dominates shared spaces (e.g., corridors, playgrounds)	☐	☐	☐
Who appears in posters, displays, and curriculum examples	☐	☐	☐
Emotional safety in gender-segregated areas (e.g., toilets, locker rooms)	☐	☐	☐
Who is consistently called on in discussions or group work	☐	☐	☐
Who leads and who follows in peer interactions	☐	☐	☐
What assumptions are made about behaviour, based on gender or culture	☐	☐	☐



WEEKLY ENVIRONMENTAL OBSERVATION TRACKER

Track patterns in your school over 3–5 days. Invite your team or peers to reflect together.

Area	What I noticed	What it might mean	What I'll try next
Which pupils felt "at home" where?			
Who is rarely seen in leadership?			
Where did conflict or tension arise?			
Who supported whom during breaks?			
Who spent time alone — and where?			



SMALL SHIFTS, BIG CHANGE: THIS WEEK I WILL...

Choose one small shift to implement with care and intention.

- ☐ Ask one quiet child where they feel safest — and why
- ☐ Change a wall display to reflect more inclusive identities
- ☐ Invite pupils to redesign part of a shared space
- ☐ Reframe an emotional reaction with empathy, not assumption
- ☐ Revisit a school rule with a gender lens
- ☐ Other: _____

🌱 Revisit this next week. What changed — and what didn't yet?





TEAM EXERCISE (OPTIONAL) – ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES

Track patterns in your school over 3–5 days. Invite your team or peers to reflect together.

Purpose: To develop collective insight into how school environments tell stories — about who belongs, who leads, and who's safe to express emotion.

Activity:

- Invite staff to walk through the school silently for 15 minutes, noting what messages are communicated through displays, space usage, and peer interactions.
- Come back and journal individually: "What did I see that felt inclusive? What did I see that raised questions?"
- In teams, discuss:

💬 *What are the dominant narratives in our environment?*

💬 *Who is missing from those narratives?*

💬 *What immediate, low-effort change can we make tomorrow?*

📌 "Our walls, our spaces, our habits — they speak even when we don't."



CHAPTER 4: EMOTIONAL LITERACY AS A FOUNDATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Helping children name, navigate, and express their inner worlds



WHY THIS CHAPTER MATTERS

Emotional literacy is not just a “soft skill.” It is a core foundation for lifelong mental health. When children can recognize, name, and safely express their emotions, they are better able to manage stress, build relationships, and seek help when needed. Yet schools often prioritize academic or behavioral goals over emotional development — especially in ways that unconsciously reinforce gender norms.

Too often, emotional expression is either rewarded or shut down based on how “appropriate,” “calm,” or “quiet” it appears — not based on whether it’s honest or healthy. Boys may be discouraged from crying, while girls may be expected to be agreeable at all times. Neurodivergent children might be punished for “outbursts” instead of being supported in their regulation needs.

This chapter provides staff with tools to embed emotional literacy into the fabric of school life — in lessons, interactions, breaks, and even discipline — through a gender-sensitive lens.



CHAPTER GOAL

To equip school staff with strategies for teaching emotional vocabulary, modeling healthy expression, and creating inclusive emotional cultures that support all pupils — especially those marginalized by gender, neurodivergence, or cultural background.



THEORETICAL GROUNDING: WHAT IS EMOTIONAL LITERACY?

Emotional literacy is more than just “knowing your feelings.” It includes:

- Recognizing emotions in oneself and others
- Naming emotions accurately
- Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions
- Expressing emotions safely and respectfully
- Responding empathetically to others

According to Goleman (1995) and Denham (2006), emotional literacy is a stronger predictor of life success than IQ. It is also a key buffer against anxiety, isolation, and interpersonal conflict.

Yet, emotional learning is deeply gendered.

Key theoretical insights:

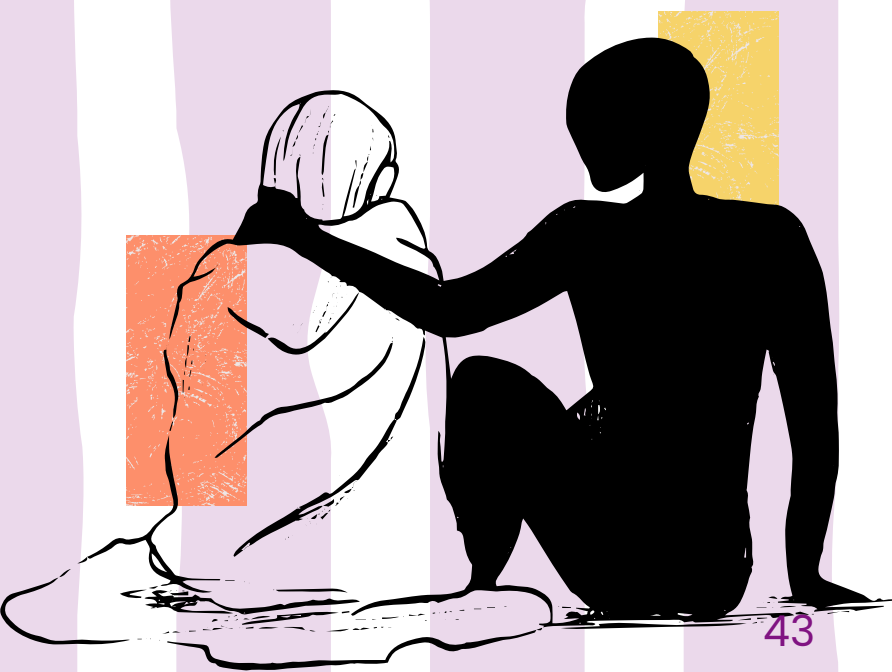
- Boys are often socialized to suppress vulnerable emotions (fear, sadness) and permitted to show anger.
- Girls may be expected to suppress anger and prioritize the feelings of others.
- Children with disabilities or trauma histories may not have the same access to emotional vocabulary or co-regulation.
- Cultural norms influence which emotions are seen as acceptable or respectful.

Research spotlight:

A 2022 study in Slovenia (EMPATH project) found that by age 10, 73% of pupils agreed that “boys shouldn’t cry,” while 62% of girls said they “don’t want to seem too angry.” This emotional policing reinforces gendered distress patterns.

Staff reflection:

“What emotions were ‘safe’ to express when you were a child? Which were discouraged? How might this shape your classroom responses today?”



THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

Emotional literacy doesn't develop through one-off lessons or isolated interventions. It is built – and eroded – in everyday school interactions. To support the mental health of all pupils, especially those who face gender-based exclusion or emotional silencing, we must treat emotional development as foundational, not optional.

Below are **five key pillars** of emotional literacy. These are not meant to be a checklist, but interconnected practices that must be embedded into school culture – in lessons, playgrounds, lunchrooms, and even conflict resolution.

1. Vocabulary

What it involves:

Teaching and regularly using a wide range of emotion words. This includes not just basic emotions like happy or sad, but complex ones like frustration, disappointment, jealousy, or relief.

Gender-sensitive lens:

Gender roles often restrict emotional vocabulary. Boys are frequently discouraged from naming “vulnerable” emotions (e.g. sadness, anxiety), while girls may struggle to identify assertive or “unpleasant” emotions (e.g. anger, jealousy).

 *Practical actions & questions*

Build a classroom or hallway “emotion wall” that includes:

- Emotion cards with faces and multilingual labels
- A mirror station: “What emotion do you see today?”
- Daily check-in: Pupils pick an emotion card as they arrive

💬 Ask: “Which emotions are easy for you to name? Which feel confusing?”

💬 Observe: Are certain emotions linked to certain gender expressions in your class?



2. Modeling

What it involves:

Staff openly model emotional language and emotional regulation in real time. This teaches pupils that emotions are manageable, not shameful.

Gender-sensitive lens:

Are male staff comfortable showing vulnerability or care? Are female staff supported when expressing firm boundaries or frustration without being seen as “emotional”? Pupils learn as much from what adults model as from what they teach.

 *Practical actions & questions*

 Use “I statements” regularly:

- “I felt anxious when I couldn’t find the form, but I took a deep breath and asked for help.”
- “I feel proud of how we handled that loud moment — we didn’t panic.”

 Practice normalizing emotional slips: “I was short with you earlier. I was overwhelmed — that’s not okay, and I’m sorry.”

 **Staff role-modelling is especially powerful for challenging rigid gender norms.**

3. Validation

What it involves:

Acknowledging and accepting children’s emotional experiences — even when they are inconvenient, disruptive, or uncomfortable. Validation isn’t indulgence; it’s the foundation of trust.

Gender-sensitive lens:

In many schools, some emotions are quickly redirected instead of understood. Boys who cry may be told to “toughen up.” Girls who get angry may be silenced. Children from migrant or Roma backgrounds may be misunderstood as “too emotional” or “too quiet” depending on dominant cultural frames.



Practical actions & questions

 Replace quick-fix phrases like “You’re fine” or “Don’t be silly” with:

- “That sounded really frustrating.”
- “It makes sense that you felt that way.”

 Use “name + normalize” strategies:

- “That’s called disappointment. It’s hard – but everyone feels it sometimes.”
- “Being angry doesn’t make you bad. It tells us something needs to change.”

 **Ask: Who gets comforted in your classroom – and who gets corrected?**

4. Co-regulation

What it involves:

Supporting pupils as they move through strong emotions – by staying present, offering tools, and resisting shame-based responses. This is particularly important for neurodivergent, traumatized, or socially excluded pupils.

Gender-sensitive lens:

Gendered and racialized expectations often mean that certain children are labelled “too much” and removed from class instead of supported. Co-regulation counters this by offering connection before correction.

Practical actions & questions

 Set up a dedicated Emotional regulation corner (not a punishment zone):

- Soft seating, sensory objects (fidgets, textures), breathing cards, calm jars
- Emotions chart: “What am I feeling now?” + “What might help me feel safe?”
- Regroup form: “What helped me calm down? What do I need next?”

 Use real-time scripting: “I can sit with you. You’re safe. Let’s breathe together.”

 **Make sure access to this space is not gendered: all children should be allowed – and encouraged – to use it without stigma.**

5. Peer empathy

What it involves:

Encouraging pupils to recognize others' emotions, respond with care, and reject peer mockery or exclusion. This includes challenging gender policing ("boys don't cry") and supporting emotional allyship.

Gender-sensitive lens:

Girls are often expected to provide emotional labor (comfort others), while boys may be discouraged from showing concern. Non-binary children may be excluded altogether from these dynamics. Peer empathy should not be gendered – it should be expected from all.

Practical actions & questions

Embed empathy-building practices:

- Morning mood check-ins: "How are you feeling today?"
- Buddy reflections: "What helped my classmate today?"
- Empathy jars: Pupils anonymously write kind observations about peers.

Practice sentence starters:

- "I noticed you seemed... Can I help?"
- "You looked proud today – what happened?"
- "It's okay to be upset. Want to talk or sit quietly with me?"

 Pay attention to peer policing: Are certain emotions ridiculed? Who is allowed to comfort, and who is silenced? Address these patterns openly and directly in class discussions.

 **Staff reminder: Emotional literacy is not a "girl thing," a "soft skill," or an "extra." It's a protective factor against anxiety, bullying, violence, and disconnection – and it must be taught explicitly, modeled consistently, and practiced daily.**



ACTIVITIES FOR EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Age-differentiated, inclusive & gender-sensitive practices

These classroom activities are not one-off worksheets — they are springboards for emotional dialogue, inclusion, and critical thinking. Each one is designed to:

- Deepen emotional vocabulary and expression
- Challenge gendered norms around feelings
- Foster emotional safety across all pupil identities (including migrant, Roma, neurodivergent, and LGBTQ+ pupils)
- Be easy to adapt to different levels of language proficiency and social-emotional development



Grades 1–3: Feelings detectives

A foundational activity for building awareness of emotional cues in self and others.



Materials: Emotion flashcards (with faces and labels), child-safe mirrors, crayons or colored pencils, paper



Set-up:

Tell pupils they are becoming “Feelings Detectives” for the day. Their job is to spot clues that tell us what someone might be feeling — using body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions.



Steps:

- Show an emotion card (e.g. proud, shy, confused).
- Pupils look in a mirror and try to show that emotion on their own face.
- Then, they draw a picture of themselves feeling that emotion.
- Ask:
 - 💬 “When do you feel like this?”
 - 💬 “Where in your body do you feel it?”
 - 💬 “What helps you when you feel this way?”



Extension discussion:

- “Which emotions are easy to spot in others? Which ones hide?”
- “What do we do when we see someone else feeling scared/sad/happy?”
- “Are some feelings ‘for boys’ or ‘for girls’? Or can everyone feel everything?”



Staff tip: Gently interrupt gendered narratives if they arise:
Actually, everyone gets nervous sometimes—even teachers! Feelings don't belong to boys or girls. They belong to people.”

Grades 4–6: The emotion sort challenge

Designed to broaden emotional vocabulary and challenge early gendered beliefs about expression.

Materials:

Printed list of 30–40 emotion words (ranging from basic to complex), scissors, sorting mats or categories, glue sticks or magnets for group boards.

Instructions:

1. In small groups, pupils sort the words into 3 categories:

- Easy to feel
- Hard to show
- Often hidden

2. Invite them to move, dispute, or debate placements. There are no right answers – only reflection.

3. Then ask:

 “Are some of these emotions seen as stronger or weaker?”

 “Which ones are people proud to show?”

 “Do you think boys, girls, and non-binary kids are expected to feel or hide different ones?”

Reflection chart:

Create a table together titled:

| Emotion | Who shows this? | Who hides it? | Why might that be? |

Class discussion:

Use these prompts:

- “Who taught you which feelings were ‘okay’ to have?”
- “What happens when someone breaks those rules at school?”
- “What can we do to make it safer for everyone to feel whatever they feel?”

Why this matters:

This age group is especially vulnerable to peer-policing of emotions. Offering permission to name, question, and reframe emotional expectations is a powerful act of prevention.

Grades 7–9: Emotion playlist project

Explores complex emotions and public vs. private expression through music and media.

Materials:

Internet access, headphones, lyrics printouts (if needed), access to Spotify/YouTube or teacher-curated samples

Activity brief:

Ask each student to pick 5 songs (or instrumental pieces, poems, or movie scenes if music is inaccessible) that reflect five distinct emotions – e.g. anger, joy, grief, anxiety, hope, pride, heartbreak, relief.

Group work:

1. In small groups, students present 1–2 choices and explain:

- “Which emotion is this expressing?”
- “What does the music make you feel?”
- “Is this an emotion you show in school? Why or why not?”

2. As a group, discuss:

... “Which emotions were easiest to find music for?”

... “Which were hardest – and why?”

... “Are some emotions more accepted for boys/girls/non-binary pupils in songs? In real life?”

Class playlist creation:

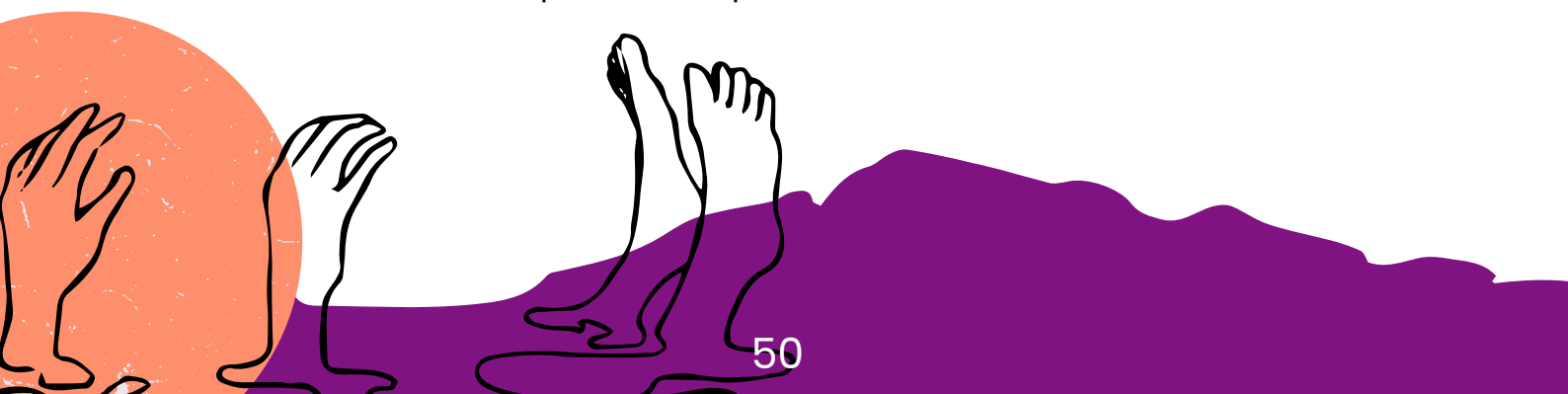
Each group contributes one song to create a shared “Emotion Playlist.” It can be played at quiet times, used for journaling sessions, or discussed further.

Deepening the reflection:

- “If emotions had genders, what would they be – and should they?”
- “How does media affect what we think we’re allowed to feel?”
- “Have you ever hidden a feeling to avoid being judged? What helped you express it safely?”

Optional add-on:

Let pupils write a short blog post or voice memo explaining one track choice and what it helped them process.





INCLUSION NOTES FOR ALL ACTIVITIES:

- Offer multilingual emotion vocabulary (especially for migrant pupils or those using AAC systems).
- Normalize code-switching and cultural emotional styles – not every culture expresses anger or sadness the same way.
- Invite pupils who don't feel safe sharing emotions publicly to use anonymous journals, drawing, or story characters.
- Ensure boys and gender non-conforming pupils are explicitly welcomed into emotional spaces – don't assume girls will lead all emotional conversations.



BUILDING EMOTIONALLY LITERATE CLASSROOMS

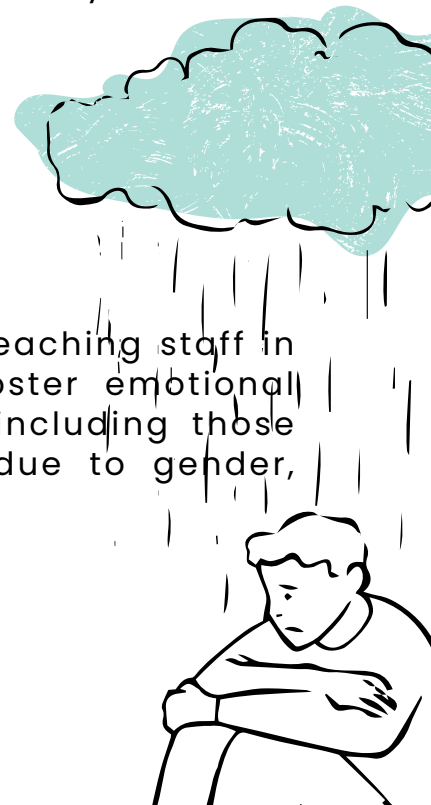
From isolated activities to a whole-class ethos.

Introducing pupils to emotional vocabulary in one lesson is not enough. Emotional literacy must become part of a living, breathing classroom culture – not a separate subject or one-off project. The most impactful learning happens not during designated SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) hours, but in the daily rituals, hallway conversations, conflict moments, and teacher responses that form the *emotional climate* of the school.

To truly support mental health and wellbeing – especially in a gender-sensitive and inclusive way – emotional literacy must be embedded across:

- Language and communication norms
- Daily routines and transitions
- Peer interactions and group structures
- Subject matter and content
- Responses to conflict, silence, or distress

This section supports teachers, assistants, and non-teaching staff in turning everyday interactions into moments that foster emotional intelligence, safety, and belonging for all pupils – including those whose emotions are often overlooked or misread due to gender, cultural background, neurodiversity, or behavior.



1. Language: Emotionally-inclusive talk

Why words matter more than we think

Language is the most immediate tool educators have to validate or dismiss a child's inner experience. And while we may not always have time to stop and debrief, the tone, phrasing, and assumptions in our everyday talk shape pupils' emotional safety in profound ways.

Children quickly learn the "emotional rules" of the classroom: which emotions are welcome, which are met with discomfort or discipline, and which are quietly ignored. These rules are often **gendered**:

- Boys may be discouraged from expressing sadness or vulnerability.
- Girls may be praised for being agreeable and soft, but not assertive or angry.
- Non-binary pupils may feel invisible or unsure which "rules" apply to them.
- Migrant children may experience emotional cues differently due to language and culture, leading to misinterpretation.

 **What's said** — and what's left unsaid — teaches children whether their feelings are valid, ridiculous, threatening, or "too much."

Emotionally-inclusive alternatives: A quick guide

 Instead of...	 Try saying...	 Why it matters
"You're okay."	"That looked tough — want to tell me about it?"	Acknowledges emotional reality without dismissal
"Stop crying."	"It's okay to cry — we all do."	Models compassion and removes shame
"Don't be angry."	"I see you're angry. Want to take a moment or talk about it?"	Offers emotional regulation, not suppression
"Boys don't do that."	"Everyone feels all kinds of emotions. You're not alone."	Disrupts restrictive gender norms
"Be a good girl."	"You have the right to speak up when something's unfair."	Encourages agency and fairness
"Calm down."	"You're feeling a lot right now. Let's breathe together."	Supports co-regulation and connection
"You're just being dramatic."	"You're having a strong reaction. Let's make sense of it together."	Validates intense emotion while guiding reflection

Theory link: Why language shapes emotional safety

Multiple studies across developmental psychology and trauma-informed education show that emotional invalidation – even when subtle – is strongly linked to:

- Emotional suppression and shame
- Poorer emotional regulation skills
- Increased behavioral problems
- Decreased help-seeking and trust in adults
- Internalized beliefs like “My feelings don’t matter”

This is especially dangerous for:

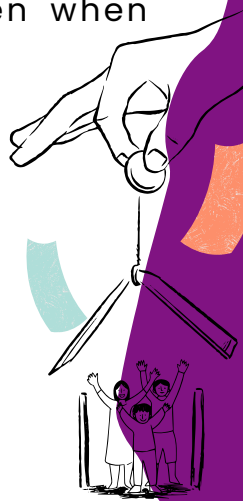
- **Boys** who are taught that crying or asking for help is weak
- **Girls** who learn to suppress anger or avoid confrontation
- **Roma or migrant children** whose emotional communication may differ from school norms
- **Neurodivergent pupils** who are misunderstood or labeled as inappropriate.

 **Emotional flexibility** – the ability to recognize, tolerate, express, and manage a wide range of feelings – is one of the strongest predictors of long-term mental health. Language is our first and most powerful tool to build.

Practical actions for staff

These small shifts in communication can have major impacts on classroom climate:

Practice	How to apply	Example
Mirror language	Repeat and reflect the emotion you hear	“You’re upset because your drawing was erased – that makes sense.”
Normalize emotions	Show that emotions are shared, not isolating	“Lots of people feel nervous before presenting. I still do sometimes.”
Use inclusive pronouns	Avoid assuming gendered emotional norms	“Anyone can feel scared, no matter who they are.”
Validate without fixing	Don’t rush to “solve” discomfort	“It makes sense that you’re frustrated. I’m here with you in it.”



 Classroom tip:

- Create a visible **“emotion language wall”** that includes:
- Emotion words in multiple languages
- Illustrations of diverse people expressing feelings
- Quotes or affirmations that normalize emotional expression (e.g. “Tears are brave,” “We can feel big things and still be safe”)

 SPARK MANUAL WORKING PAPER:
CHAPTER 4

Emotionally literate classrooms – Small practices, big impact

 Key takeaways from Chapter 4

- Emotional literacy is a core life skill – not a luxury.
- Schools play a pivotal role in shaping children’s relationship to their emotions.
- Gender norms influence which emotions are expressed, suppressed, or policed.
- Emotionally literate classrooms validate all emotions and model healthy expression.
- Embedding emotional learning into daily routines builds resilience and belonging.

 Personal reflection prompts (Choose 2–3 or use with your team)

- Which emotion were you discouraged from expressing as a child? How does that show up in your teaching or support work?
- Think of a moment when a pupil expressed a strong emotion. How did you respond? Would you change anything?
- Have you ever redirected or minimized a child’s feeling unintentionally?
- Which emotions are still “gendered” in your classroom or school culture? How can you interrupt this?
- What message does your school send about emotions – through policies, posters, or staff tone?

 Write a few key thoughts or phrases:

Mini self-audit: Emotional climate of my classroom

Put a  in the column that reflects your current practice.

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
I model emotional language and regulation in front of pupils	☐	☐	☐
I validate a wide range of emotions (including anger, grief, fear)	☐	☐	☐
I challenge emotional stereotypes linked to gender	☐	☐	☐
My classroom has a dedicated space/tool for emotional regulation	☐	☐	☐
I integrate emotional learning into non-SEL subjects (e.g. math, art)	☐	☐	☐

Weekly observation tracker (Use for 3–5 days)

What I noticed	What it might mean	What I'll try next
Who expressed emotions openly?		
Who suppressed or avoided emotion?		
Which emotions were received with care?		
Which emotions triggered discomfort?		
Who comforted others?		



Small shifts, big change

Choose one small action to implement next week:

This week I will intentionally:

- ☐ Use gender-inclusive emotional language
- ☐ Name and validate an “uncomfortable” emotion in class
- ☐ Model vulnerability during a routine moment
- ☐ Introduce a co-regulation strategy
- ☐ Create a mini emotion-check-in ritual
- ☐ Other: -----

 Next week, reflect: What changed? What surprised you?

Optional staff team activity.

Use at your next staff meeting:

- Present a common school scenario where a child expresses a strong emotion (e.g. a boy crying after losing a game).
- Ask: “What messages do we send — explicitly or implicitly — in these moments?”
- Brainstorm: “How can we shift the culture so that all children feel emotionally safe?”

 Consider rotating emotional observation partners among staff

CHAPTER 5: PEER DYNAMICS, BELONGING & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Understanding how group dynamics shape pupils' mental health and self-expression in gendered ways.



WHY THIS CHAPTER MATTERS

Belonging isn't just a feeling — **it's a mental health lifeline**. Children who feel emotionally safe and accepted by peers are more resilient, confident, and better equipped to navigate challenges. But pathways to belonging are **gendered, cultural, and unequal**.

Peer dynamics shape what's "allowed," who's included, and what gets punished. A boy crying may be ridiculed; a girl speaking out might be called bossy; a Roma child may never be invited into games. This chapter explores how gendered peer norms influence mental health — and how school staff can dismantle hidden hierarchies and build communities of **authentic belonging**.



"To change the mental health climate, we must change the social weather in our classrooms."



THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF BELONGING

Children constantly signal, enforce, and absorb social norms — many of which are **deeply gendered and racialized**. These shape mental wellbeing.

Social dynamic	Mental health impact
Popularity tied to appearance or athleticism	Pressure to conform, anxiety, eating disorders
Boys discouraged from close friendships	Emotional suppression, loneliness
Girls expected to soothe others	Emotional fatigue, people-pleasing
LGBTQ+, Roma, migrant pupils excluded	Isolation, identity erasure
Neurodivergent pupils misread by peers	Misunderstanding, exclusion

What is praised, punished, or ignored in your pupils' peer world?

STAFF TOOLS FOR INCLUSIVE PEER CULTURES

Even subtle teacher behaviors shape peer norms. Here's how to intervene:

Microgroup mixing.

Rotate groups often. Avoid ability-based or "behavior" sorting. Let pupils try new roles like "listener" or "supporter."

💬 Ask: "What surprised you about working with this person?"

Social mapping.

Chart which pupils are consistently alone, dominant, or ignored – at lunch, breaks, in discussions.

🎯 Use it to plan supportive seating, buddy shifts, or quiet check-ins.

Praise redirection

Celebrate empathy, inclusion, and courage – not just correctness.

💬 "You helped someone feel welcome today – that matters more than being right."

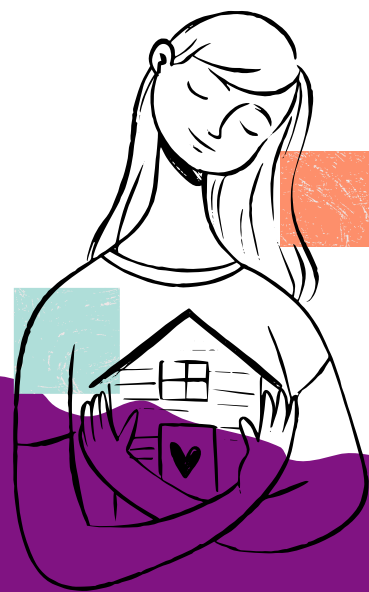
Normalize risk

Support children trying new roles: e.g., a shy pupil leading a game, a boy showing fear. Debrief gently.

Empathy spotlights

Daily 2-minute shoutouts: "I saw ____ help someone at lunch." "____ checked if their partner was okay."

Make kindness visible.



INTERRUPTING GENDERED MICROAGGRESSIONS



Microaggressions are small verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights—often unintentional—that reinforce stereotypes or exclusion. In schools, they are one of the most common, yet least addressed forms of gender-based harm. Their subtlety is what makes them powerful. They chip away at belonging, confidence, and self-expression—especially for pupils who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

In emotionally safe schools, these comments are not ignored. They are seen, named, and transformed into opportunities for growth. This section offers insight and tools for staff to confidently intervene and co-create a culture where microaggressions are the exception—not the norm.

Common gendered microaggressions in school life

Example phrase	Hidden message	Mental health effect
"Man up."	Emotions are weakness for boys.	Emotional suppression, shame, performance anxiety.
"Stop being a girl."	Femininity is inferior.	Internalized misogyny, body image issues, silence.
"That's not how boys/girls act."	There's one right way to 'be.'	Identity conflict, anxiety, masking.
"You don't look like a real boy/girl."	Appearance must match binary norms.	Gender dysphoria, low self-worth, isolation.
"That color/job/sport is for boys/girls."	Interests are gendered.	Self-censorship, peer ridicule, disengagement.

Research insight:

Repeated microaggressions, even when subtle, are associated with higher levels of psychological distress, particularly among marginalized groups.

Pupils exposed to gender-based microaggressions report **lower self-esteem, higher anxiety, and reduced academic motivation** (Nadal et al., 2011).

The 3C Strategy: A practice for interrupting microaggressions:

A calm, confident response to microaggressions helps create visible norms of inclusion. Here's how:

♦ *Catch it*

Notice and name it—do not let it slide.

- “That sounded like a stereotype.”
- “I heard that—let’s pause for a second.”

♦ *Challenge it*

Open a reflective space instead of shaming.

- “What do you think that phrase means?”
- “How might someone feel hearing that?”

♦ *Change it*

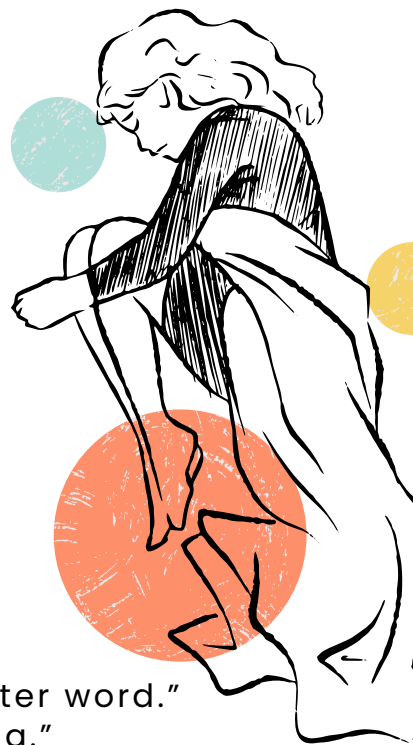
Redirect toward inclusive language and curiosity.

- “We don’t use that kind of label here. Let’s find a better word.”
- “We talk about people with respect—even when joking.”

 **Note:** Tone matters. The goal isn’t punishment but transformation. You’re modeling what respectful accountability looks like.

Staff tool: Monthly “Language clinics”

Short, informal, and powerful. These 15–20-minute peer sessions help staff build confidence in spotting and addressing patterns.



How to host:

Step 1: Collect

Invite staff to anonymously share common microaggressions they've heard from pupils, colleagues, or materials.

Step 2: Script

Pick 1–2 phrases and develop three sample responses (Catch–Challenge–Change). Write them on a poster or handout.

Step 3: Practice

Do a quick role-play or simply read aloud with tone variation. Let people try different ways to intervene based on comfort.

 *Goal: Normalize action. Interrupt silence. Support each other.*

 Classroom application: Pupil co-learning (Grades 5–9)

Activity: "Words that hurt / Words that heal"

Step 1: Setup

Introduce the idea of words that stick — even if meant as jokes. Ask:

- "Have you ever heard a phrase that made you feel small?"
- "What's something you wish people didn't say?"

Step 2: Two columns

Create a chart together:



Words that hurt	Words that heal
"Man up!"	"You're allowed to feel that."
"That's so gay."	"Everyone has the right to be themselves."

Step 3: Practice scripts

Ask pupils:

- "How would you respond if you heard one of these?"
- "What's a respectful way to speak up for someone?"

Optional extension:

Invite pupils to make posters, video reels, or short performances around "How We Speak in Our School."

 **Why it matters: Involving pupils builds empathy, shared responsibility, and peer accountability.**



STAFF MINI-REFLECTION: SPOT > REFLECT > RESPOND

Use this weekly tool to build your confidence in microintervention.

Situation	What was said?	What did I do?	What could I try next time?
E.g. during PE, a pupil says "You	Ignored it in the moment.	Next time, I'll say: "That phrase puts	

Repeat weekly. Progress is practice.



INCLUSIVE BELONGING BEYOND THE MAJORITY

Inclusion means more than adapting the mainstream. It means reshaping the default to affirm all identities.

Group	Common peer experience	Belonging strategy
Roma pupils	Seen as disruptive, outsiders	Include Roma history, invite Roma speakers, amplify success stories
Migrant pupils	Silenced or overlooked	Use multilingual signs, integrate home languages, buddy systems
LGBTQ+ pupils	Jokes, silence, fear	Include LGBTQ+ books, posters, positive representation
Neurodivergent pupils	Misread, excluded	Teach diverse communication styles, sensory support options

🧠 A pupil shouldn't have to assimilate to feel safe.



TOOLKIT: ACTIVITIES FOR PEER BELONGING



Grades 1–3: “Belonging blocks”



Pupils build a tower where each block = something that helps them feel welcome (e.g., “My name is used,” “No teasing,” “Sharing games”).



Display it and revisit during the year.



Grades 4–6: “Unwritten rules map”



Pupils draw their school and mark places where they feel free and where they feel pressure.



Discuss: “Who decides what’s normal here?”

Use to redesign spaces or peer practices.



Grades 7–9: “Normalize the brave”

Ask: “What takes bravery in our school?” Collect anonymous answers: e.g., “Crying,” “Wearing what you like,” “Calling out a slur.”

Create a “Wall of Courage” to affirm acts that challenge norms.



SPARK MANUAL WORKING PAPER: CHAPTER 5



What you’ve explored:

This chapter invited you to reflect on how everyday language – from jokes to job titles – affects the emotional safety and gender inclusion of pupils. You examined how subtle labels, classroom scripts, and microaggressions shape self-expression, silence, or shame. You also explored strategies for interrupting harm and building a new vocabulary of belonging.



Personal reflection prompts:

Take a few minutes to reflect honestly. Write short answers, keywords, or even draw if you prefer.

1.A phrase that stuck

- What is one phrase (from pupils, staff, or school culture) that you now recognize as gendered or harmful?

Why does it stick with you?

2.Label legacy

- Have you ever been labelled in school – as too emotional, too bossy, too quiet, too different?

How did it shape the way you showed up?

3.Power of words

- Think of a time you saw a pupil light up or shut down based on something said.

What was said? What was the effect?

4.Your classroom script

- What habitual phrases do you use when pupils cry, argue, or act out?

How might they be heard – especially through a gender-sensitive lens?

Microaudit: How gender-sensitive is my language?

Tick or reflect on each line. Use this as a gentle self-check – not for judgment, but for growth.

Statement	Yes	Sometimes	Not yet
I pause to reflect on the language I use when addressing emotional behavior.	☐	☐	☐
I actively avoid phrases like “boys don’t cry” or “be a good girl.”	☐	☐	☐
I step in when I hear gendered teasing or harmful “jokes.”	☐	☐	☐
I co-create inclusive scripts or phrases with pupils.	☐	☐	☐
I reflect on who gets labelled as “difficult,” “dramatic,” or “troublemaker.”	☐	☐	☐
I’ve tried one version of the 3C response (Catch-Challenge-Change).	☐	☐	☐

Weekly self-tracker: Shifting language patterns

Over the next week, use this tracker to notice — not judge — how gendered or inclusive your language choices feel.

Day	One phrase I used or heard	What I did	One phrase I could try instead
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			

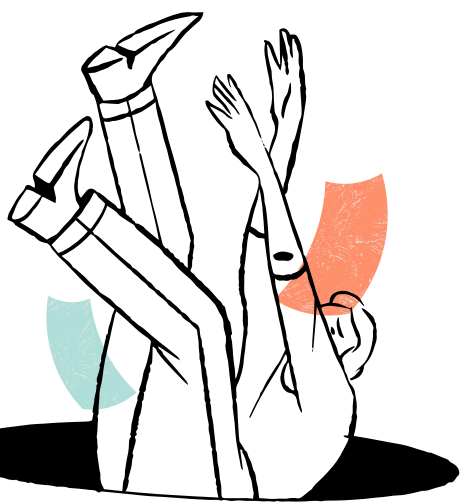
Small shifts, big change: Try one action this week

Choose one of the following (or create your own):

- Host a 10-minute “language circle” with your class.
- Change one habit phrase (e.g., “Calm down” → “Want help calming down?”).
- Invite pupils to co-create a “Words We Use to Care” poster.
- Interrupt a microaggression using the 3C model.
- Reflect in a team meeting on one schoolwide label you’d like to change.

✓ Write your chosen action here:

→ **This week, I will:** _____



CHAPTER 6: CAFÉ FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Strengthening the home-school link for mental health.

Children don't experience emotional health in silos — what happens at school is deeply connected to what's happening at home. But mental health conversations can feel intimidating for parents and staff alike. That's why we need **low-threshold, high-trust spaces** where families and schools can talk — honestly, respectfully, and without jargon.

A simple idea like a “**Café for parents and caregivers**” can break through silence, reduce shame, and build shared responsibility for children's emotional wellbeing.

What is a “Café for parents”?

Not a formal lecture. Not a therapy session. Not a PTA meeting. A Café for parents is a regular (monthly or seasonal) conversation circle in a casual format where:

- Everyone can speak or just listen — no pressure
- Emotions are not pathologized
- Gendered expectations are unpacked together
- There's tea, coffee, a warm room, and a safe tone

Sample Format: 60-Minute café

Time	Activity
0–10 min	Welcome & grounding — Coffee/tea, soft music, warm greeting from staff or school leader.
10–15 min	Prompt question: (e.g., “How did your child show emotions this week? How did you respond?”)
15–40 min	Open dialogue: Small group or circle, with facilitation support (e.g. school counselor, teacher).
40–55 min	Resource share: A short tip or handout (e.g. “5 ways to support emotional expression without shame”).
55–60 min	Closing round: One word or feeling from each participant. Invitation to next café.

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A simple idea like a **“Café for parents and caregivers”** can break through silence, reduce shame, and build shared responsibility for children's emotional wellbeing.

🎯 Goal: To help schools create welcoming, stigma-free spaces where caregivers feel seen, heard, and supported in understanding gender-sensitive emotional health.

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🔧 Sample Format: 60-Minute café

🧠 Topics for Thematic cafés (pick one per session)

- “Why won't my child talk to me?”
- “Boys, tears, and ‘toughening up’ — Let's unpack that.”
- “What do girls hear when we say ‘Be nice’?”
- “What if my child doesn't fit the box? Neurodivergence, gender, identity.”

“What to say when you don't know what to say — Emotional literacy for parents.”



CONCLUSION: BEYOND AWARENESS — REWRITING THE SCHOOL STORY



Creating a mentally healthy, gender-sensitive school is not about adding more content. It's about rewriting the rules of belonging.

Over the course of this **manual**, we've examined how **mental health is deeply social** — shaped by peer dynamics, staff expectations, classroom norms, emotional scripts, and invisible hierarchies. We've seen that **gender is not just an identity** — it's a set of permissions and punishments that children learn early and carry quietly.

We've seen how silence is not neutral. How certain children are asked to shrink, others to harden. How emotions are policed in ways that mimic gender lines. And how mental distress doesn't always show up as crisis — but often as invisibility, perfectionism, aggression, withdrawal, or relentless self-control.

What SPARK is really about

This manual was created as part of the **SPARK Project** — a cross-border initiative committed to igniting real change in how schools approach **mental health, gender sensitivity, and emotional literacy**.

But SPARK is not just a project. **It's a provocation:**

- What would it take for every child to feel safe being fully themselves?
- What if emotional safety was not the exception — but the rule?
- What if every staff member — not just school psychologists or “wellbeing leads” — had the tools to support real emotional change?



The SPARK Project is based on a simple but powerful belief:

 Children don't need to be "toughened up." They need to be taken seriously.

From awareness to agency

This manual has not offered fixed answers. It has offered tools to:

• Slow down interpretation and ask better questions.

- Name what often goes unnamed – especially in emotional moments.
- Rebuild everyday interactions in classrooms, corridors, and care plans.
- Share responsibility across staff teams, rather than isolating emotional support to specialists.
- Work with parents and caregivers as co-creators, not just as observers.

These shifts lie at the heart of SPARK's mission: **to build schools where mental health and gender inclusion are embedded in daily practice – not occasional campaigns.**

 What changes when we do this work?

We begin to notice:

- That a boy's rage is masking grief – and deserves compassion, not exclusion.
- That a high-achieving girl is burning out from being "good" all the time.
- That a neurodivergent child has never been allowed to lead – only to follow.
- That we've never once asked a Roma pupil how school actually feels for them.
- That we say "we want safe schools" but don't ask whose safety we prioritize.

 Your role in this shift

If you're reading this, you're already part of the shift. Not because you're perfect – but because you're willing to practice differently.

You don't have to fix everything at once. But you can:

- Make gendered microaggressions visible – and interrupt them.
- Shift discipline conversations from control to connection.
- Design classroom routines that don't reward conformity, but celebrate emotional range.
- Invite parents and pupils to be meaningfully involved – not managed.





WHAT COMES NEXT

This work lives in every small moment:

- In how you respond when a child cries unexpectedly.
- In who you believe first.
- In whether you assume defiance or distress.
- In who gets to be seen as complex.

A gender-sensitive, emotionally safe school is not a model. It's a mindset. And like all mindsets, it must be practiced — again and again — until it becomes culture.

Let that culture begin with you.

 **Because when children feel safe to feel, they don't just cope — they grow.**

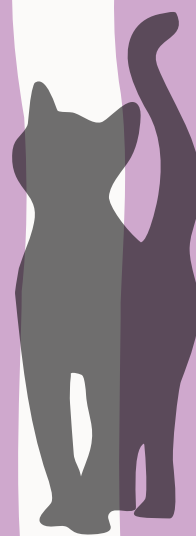
 **Because when we change how we respond, we change what is possible.**

 **Because SPARK is not just about schools — it's about futures.**





SPARK



THANK YOU!



SPARK

