

The State of Italian Boys

Understanding and Transforming Gender Norms in the Lives of Italian Boys

A Report for the Global Boyhood Initiative



Acknowledgments

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For more information about the Global Boyhood Initiative, please visit:

www.boyhoodinitiative.org

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Introduction

The **Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI)** – founded by Equipundo (formerly Promundo-US) and the Kering Foundation in partnership with Plan International – aims to support boys aged 4 to 13, the adults in their lives, and the institutions in which they live to promote healthier concepts of boyhood.

An overwhelming body of research finds that boys encounter a set of gender norms that compromise their humanity and well-being, and contribute to perpetuating gender inequality. It's necessary to start work early to promote changes by engaging young boys when they are being exposed to and internalizing messages about what it means to be a boy or a man. We also must change how the institutions most central to boyhood – such as educational systems, families and sports – understand what it means to be a boy.

The Global Boyhood Initiative isn't just focused on individual-level change. The work has an eye for long-term systemic change, ensuring that we are impacting every level of the child's environment: the messages they're receiving at home, at school, and in the media. Rather than being an alternative to working with girls, GBI intends to foster a relational approach to gender equality, complementing promising initiatives targeting girls and encouraging the adoption of a gender-transformative lens to question power dynamics and harmful gender norms when working around boyhood.

As of 2023, GBI and its partners have conducted research and/or programmatic activities around boyhood in several countries, such as the US, the UK, France, Cambodia, Italy, and Mexico. To learn more about this work, visit www.boyhoodinitiative.org.

In Italy, the Kering Foundation and Equipundo partnered with Plan International, Bocconi University, and Ipsos on foundational research to understand the state of boyhood in the country, analyzing existing evidence as well as collecting primary data to explore the development of gender roles in childhood and develop action-focused recommendations to promote gender equality beginning at an early age.

Goals

This study aimed to analyze how gender roles influence boys between the ages of 4 and 13 in Italy, providing empirical evidence and making recommendations to have an impact on the programmatic development of initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality. The study's specific objectives included:

1. Analyze how social norms related to gender equality are transmitted in the family environment
2. Find out how social norms related to gender equality are transmitted in the educational environment
3. Analyze how learning egalitarian norms around gender influences the well-being and development of children
4. Learn the challenges and opportunities in learning about egalitarian social norms around gender through the involvement of families and formal and non-formal education
5. Analyze approaches, tools, and content suitable for gender-transformative education that are applicable to specific programs and advocacy demands and that can be applied to early socialization contexts

Developing Complex Understandings

This section documents the situation of Italian children based on a comprehensive secondary literature review. The dimensions analyzed include child well-being and three contexts that are central to the transmission of gender stereotypes during childhood: the educational context, family life, and social and digital life.

This literature review involved analyzing data for Italy and other countries to achieve a comprehensive and comparative understanding of each dimension. In addition, the review accounted for studies, reports, and other relevant academic research and research by international organizations. The results described here provide a solid analytical basis for the rest of the empirical methodology applied in the study (quantitative and qualitative), as well as a key approach to achieving the study's objectives.

The Importance of Taking Childhood Into Account

Global literature highlights that for systemic change to be sustainable, a life cycle approach – starting with early childhood – must be undertaken. Based on a review of secondary literature, we wanted to take a closer look at the situation of boys and girls in Italy, considering in particular the gender inequalities that may be hindering their full development. The role of gender is particularly important given that gender stereotypes determine the ways in which boys and girls are socially expected to behave starting from birth. Therefore, **studying gender stereotypes in Italy is fundamental, as Italy is one of the countries in Europe where traditional gender roles continue to be particularly marked** (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022).

For boys, harmful gender norms often reinforce stereotypes in which boys are expected to be brave, be aggressive, and avoid showing vulnerability – in other words, to fit in what Paul Kivel (1992) and others have called the “**Man Box**,” which refers to a set of beliefs (communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society) that place pressure on men – and boys – to act a certain way. These pressures tell men to be self-sufficient, act tough, be physically attractive in a certain way, stick to rigid gender roles, be heterosexual, demonstrate sexual prowess, and use aggression to resolve conflicts – behaviors that are associated with a wide range of negative health outcomes, negative attitudes toward gender equality, and harmful behaviors such as bullying and harassment (Heilman et al., 2017).

In this regard, **it is not a matter of abolishing all stereotypes related to the more traditional view of “masculinity,” but rather of rethinking them and reinterpreting rigid ideas of “being a man” or “being a boy.”** Values such as stoicism, leadership, and the capacity for sacrifice need to be maintained but also transported beyond the social and public sphere and into the family and the home, areas that are usually feminized (Connell, 2005).

When thinking about the ways in which boys' attitudes and behaviors around gender equality are shaped, it is important to consider the multidimensionality of boys' lives, taking into account how various individual characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, and disability) can intersect and interact. It is also essential to go beyond individual-level factors and consider the ways in which other levels and structures – such as the family, the school, and the broader society (including in digital forms) – also influence their lives.

Key Facts About Children's Well-Being in Italy



Talking about well-being is a task that involves many scenarios and realities, as well-being is affected by multiple variables. While specific factors must be considered in each context to provide for children's well-being, some essential issues apply to all settings, such as that children need to be in a caring and responsive environment, be protected from common diseases and violence, and have access to opportunities for play and early learning.

Indeed, boys' well-being is profoundly affected by gender roles, which impact both their emotional and physical health, among other areas. As a vast body of literature shows, "For the young male, adopting these...norms becomes a traditional way to achieve social status" (Patton et al., 2018). Yet at the same time, evidence shows that younger boys, adolescent boys, and men who adhere to these norms are at greater risk of poor health (including sexual health), violence, substance abuse, school failure, and premature death (Tyler & Williams, 2014). In the case of health, for instance, gender norms that oblige men to be independent, strong, and invulnerable may prevent or delay their going to medical facilities, whereas from a young age, women receive information on the importance of care, especially sexual and reproductive health care (Tyler & Williams, 2014).

A Comparison With the Other OECD/EU Countries

For more than 20 years, the Innocenti Report Cards have provided an overview of children's well-being across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/European Union (OECD/EU) high-income countries, providing comparative statistics on children's well-being along several dimensions. This includes looking at children's own actions and relationships; at the networks and resources of their caregivers; at the public policies put in place in the country; and at the general national context. Focusing on the direct outcomes of children's well-being, the Innocenti Report Cards provide statistics on three dimensions: mental well-being, physical health, and skills.

According to the 2020 Innocenti Report Card, **children in Italy enjoy a relatively high level of mental well-being (proxied by levels of life satisfaction and suicide rates), with Italy ranking ninth of 38 OECD/EU countries.** However, the fourth edition of the Regional Index of Child Maltreatment in Italy (CESVI, 2022) analyzed how the COVID pandemic affected Italian children’s mental health and found an increase between 2020 and 2022 in requests for psychological help for children under 18 and in suicide attempts, especially during the second wave of the pandemic; self-harm and suicide attempts increased by 30 percent since October 2020. Similarly, a United Nations report found that 44 percent of the Spanish and Italian families surveyed reported mental health problems in their children (i.e., loneliness, nervousness, agitation, irritability, and difficulty concentrating) (United Nations, 2020).

When looking at physical health (proxied by rates of children who are overweight or obese) as a variable for analyzing emotional well-being, the situation is increasingly worrying, with Italy ranking 31st of 38 OECD/EU countries. Notwithstanding their low performance in terms of physical health, though, Italian children enjoy relatively high satisfaction with their own bodies – indeed, 40 percent of Italian children reported being “too fat” (27 percent) or “too thin” (13 percent), versus an average of 45 percent across the 38 countries. In this regard, only Iceland, Malta, and Canada scored better than Italy. Unsurprisingly, when looking at gender differences, body image seems to be much more closely linked to life satisfaction for girls than for boys; in Italy, body image explains almost 8 percent of the differences in life satisfaction of girls and slightly more than 4 percent of the differences for boys (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] Innocenti, 2020).

Additionally, both academic and social skills are elements that support children’s well-being (where academic skills are proxied by proficiency in reading and mathematics, and social skills by feeling able to make friends easily). According to the 2020 Innocenti Report Card, Italy ranked 19th of 38 OECD/EU countries, a slight improvement from previous years.

Lastly, using the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) data set, D’Agostino et al. (2018) show how **children in Italy are the most deprived in terms of economic well-being (measured by the equivalized household disposable income) compared to other Mediterranean countries** (i.e., Spain, Portugal, and Greece). This holds especially in southern Italy and in female-headed single-parent families. Moreover, they show that in Mediterranean countries (except for Spain), girls tend to suffer more deprivation than boys in most of the capabilities under analysis, including being financially secure and being/feeling financially safe. The authors suggest that it is particularly alarming that child deprivation is higher in Italy than in countries with similar welfare systems, as this not only represents a problem in itself but also because issues of deprivation can lead to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Education for Gender Equality in Italy

Gender-Transformative Education

Boys and girls must have access to gender-transformative education, which recognizes that all actors involved in education can be drivers of positive individual and social change and greater gender equality. This education must also include broader life skills and integrate the technological and digital revolution, avoiding the intensification of existing inequalities in this field. In this regard, studies show that engaging men and boys in gender equality education initiatives also brings them positive changes (Equimundo & CGIAR Research on Aquatic Agricultural Systems, 2016). Conversely, if education incorporates harmful stereotypes, it can be a tool to maintain the status quo and reinforce existing power relations, discrimination, and inequalities.

Discussions on education acquire special importance in contexts, such as Italy, that are permeated by the so-called “illusion of fake equality” (Nanou et al., 2021; Tsouroufli et al., 2021). That is, these contexts are often erroneously perceived as protected, gender-equal environments that are free from stereotypes, where girls and boys share the same opportunities and where girls even tend to outperform boys. Indeed, even though Italian girls tend to have better grades than boys at school, lower dropout rates (10.4 percent versus 15.6 percent), and higher university attainment (with 83 percent of girls aged 20 to 24 having a high school diploma or college degree versus 74 percent of their male peers), the educational system still tends to perpetuate harmful gender norms in many ways (Müller & Bang-Manniche, 2021).¹

¹ Also drawn from 2022 data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics [Istat], n.d.

Boys' and Girls' Presence in Italian Education



Available data shows that gender differences are present in the very composition of the Italian education system (Biemmi, 2015). Data from Italy's Ministry for Education, University, and Research (2019) show that girls are more likely to choose general high schools than boys (60.5 percent versus 39.5 percent), particularly classic high schools (70.1 percent versus 29.9 percent) and linguistic high schools (78.3 percent versus 21.7 percent); the gender gap vanishes when looking at scientific high schools (48.9 percent girls versus 51.1 percent boys). Boys are more likely than girls to choose technical high schools (70.0 percent versus 30.0 percent), especially technological high schools (83.1 percent

versus 16.9 percent); they are also more likely to enroll in professional high schools (57.2 percent versus 42.8 percent). During these years, girls and boys also have different aspirations for a future in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). According to the OECD (2017), at age 15, a significantly lower percentage of girls (4.7 percent) than boys (18 percent) report that they aspire to have a career in engineering or computing.

Gender segregation becomes even more evident in the transition to university, even if girls' university attainment continues to be higher than boys'. In 2020, 85.0 percent of recent computer science and information and communications technology graduates and 73.9 percent of engineering graduates were men, while 93.7 percent of graduates in education, 84.2 percent in linguistics, and 81.8 percent in psychology were women (Openpolis, 2021). This has consequences in terms of occupational segregation and the gender wage gap, as the better-paid and more stable professions (which are more often found in STEM) derive from educational paths in which female students are less represented.

At the same time, strong gender norms in the educational realm often produce negative repercussions for boys' cognitive development as well. Their "backwardness" in the Italian language is an example. By the end of lower-secondary school, 38.0 percent of boys have not reached proficiency in Italian, which is rarely analyzed and corrected because this skill is somehow considered irrelevant to their future professional paths (De Marchi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, within this context several initiatives have started to tackle both educators, teachers and teenagers to promote a change of attitude in relation to dominant male models. Among these, the EU-financed projects, such as Mind the gap: step up for gender equality^a, CarMia (Caring Masculinities in Action) and EcaRom (Early Care and the Role of Men),^b all focusing on empowering educators and other adults in contact with children to address gender stereotypes in education, as well as on challenging dominant male models.

^a Project coordinated by Aidos (Italian Association of Women for Development) <https://aidos.it/en/project/mind-the-gap-step-up-for-gender-equality/>

^b In both projects the Istituto degli Innocenti is the Italian partner and/or coordinator. For further information see: <https://www.istitutodegliinnocenti.it/en/projects/caring-masculinities-in-action-carimia> and <https://ecarom.eu/>

Factors That Reinforce Gender Inequality in Schools

The gender segregation in schools presented in the previous section is not specific to Italy. The stereotype is widespread that boys often have greater intellectual ability than girls, as is the idea that girls are better suited for the humanities and artistic subjects, while boys perform better in STEM subjects (EIGE, 2019). **Such stereotypes – sustained by both family and the educational system – can discourage girls and young women from pursuing certain careers and, in the long term, contribute to the gender pay gap.**

But despite these stereotypes, girls tend to have higher educational attainment, better school performance, and lower rates of early dropout than boys. Evidence suggests that girls are often better equipped with a set of social and behavioral skills (such as self-discipline and diligence) that are internalized from the very early stages of life and that help them better perform in schools (DiPrete & Jennings, 2012; Bian et al., 2017). Within this framework, Borgna and Struffolino (2017) examined the push and pull factors behind gender differences in early dropout rates in Italy, where the difference between male and female dropout rates is more than 5 percentage points (Eurostat, n.d.). Among the push factors are that boys' lower educational achievement increases their probability of dropping out and also that **boys seem to be more vulnerable in the face of academic failure, whereas girls show greater resilience around poor scholastic performance.** Additionally, the authors note, the risk of early dropout is higher for children whose parents do not have an upper-secondary degree. **As for the pull factors, higher dropout rates for boys also can be partially explained by their better job opportunities in both the formal and informal labor markets** (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2022) also highlights these risks for boys worldwide, with boys falling further and further behind in education. In 130 countries, boys are more likely to repeat grades than girls, and in 73 countries, boys are more likely to miss out on higher education.

Gender Stereotypes in School

Bian et al. (2017) attempted to measure gender stereotypes in school by conducting an experiment with 96 children aged 5 to 7 in the United States. Their work shows how identification with gender stereotypes starts from an early age. In one of the tasks, children were told a short story about a "really, really smart" person (without any gender given). The same children were later asked to guess the gender of the character. At 5, children associated brilliance with their own gender – boys identified the smart person in the story as a man, and girls identified them as a woman. However, at 6 and 7, girls less frequently associated brilliance with their own gender. This study suggests that the stereotype associating manhood with brilliance may start to kick in after one year of school, about age 6. The authors performed a similar experiment about girls' attributes, looking at the association between womanhood and "being nice," which followed a similar trajectory.

A first step toward breaking gender stereotypes in the education system: the content of textbooks.

A key element for boys and girls to choose academic trajectories outside their socially assigned gender is the presence of thought-provoking examples in the textbooks they read from an early age, which can show children deviations from the norm. In this regard, an important policy measure introduced in Italy was the European project POLITE (Pari Opportunità nei Libri di Testo, or Equal Opportunities in School Textbooks), promoted in 1999 by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Department for Equal Opportunities, in collaboration with the Italian Publishers Association. POLITE's main objective was rethinking school textbooks to ensure they represented men and women without stereotypes and sexist discrimination. Its main results included the development and dissemination of a *Code of Self-Regulation for Editors (Codice di Autoregolamentazione degli Editori)* and two handbooks that provide guidelines for publishing future textbooks free of gender stereotypes.

Ten years after the POLITE program, Biemmi (2010) conducted a review of the textbooks adopted in Italian primary schools between 1998 and 2002 to evaluate the achievement of the project's goals. Later, Corsini and Scierra (2016) analyzed a new sample of textbooks from 2008 to 2010 and from 2014 on to test the hypothesis of a significant decrease in the use of sexist stereotyping compared to the 1998 to 2002 textbooks. Corsini and Scierra (2016) reached conclusions similar to Biemmi's (2010) – if not worse. **Fifteen years after the POLITE project, the number of male characters in textbooks was almost double that of female characters, and male figures still tended to be portrayed outdoors and in stories set in the past or adventures more than female ones.** Gender asymmetries in the presentation of textbook characters also emerged during the focus group discussions that Tsouroufli et al. (2021) recently conducted with teachers in three Italian schools.

Based on these findings, the POLITE project's goal is far from being achieved. Nonetheless, in recent years, other programs have pursued the same vision. Among these is "Obiettivo parità!" a project by Rizzoli Education and Centro Studi Erickson di Trento to promote a culture of gender equality by countering stereotypes and inequalities in education. In October 2020, a legislative proposal against sexist depictions in textbooks was presented to Parliament, proposing the establishment of a national observatory on diversity and inclusion at the Ministry of Education; it had not been approved as of this writing.

How Family Life Influences the Learning of Gender Stereotypes in Italy

While traditional and rigid conceptions of masculinity and femininity are increasingly socially contested across countries, more than half of boys and girls in Italy still grow and develop in a traditional, single-earner household (National Labor Inspectorate, 2020). This model typically entails a male, paternal figure as the main breadwinner and a female, maternal figure as the primary provider of childcare. According to the latest available data, when it comes to working parents in Italy, nearly 77 percent of resignations and consensual contract resolutions in 2020 concerned mothers (National Labor Inspectorate, 2020). This gender gap in employment for Italian parents illustrates a noteworthy jump in mother-led resignations. While such a surge has been anecdotally linked to women's disproportionate uptake of childcare responsibilities during the pandemic (e.g., Privitera, 2020), it depicts an underlying issue with reconciliation policies and the resilience of outdated gender roles.

Through what they observe directly in their family's day-to-day life and through their parents' messages to them, children are both directly and indirectly influenced by their parents' conceptions of stereotypes (see, for example, Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002; Leaper & Friedman, 2007; Carlana & Corno, 2021). In the same vein, fathers' involvement in care work and modeling of gender-equitable behaviors within the family affect girls – not just in their imagination and thinking but also in their future partner relationships (Levtov et al., 2015). In Italy, where the gender employment gap is one of the highest in the EU-27² and where the economy is characterized by blatant gender segregation (EIGE, 2021), intergenerational transmission of values, parental expectations, and the modeling of gendered roles risk that gender gaps perpetuate onto future generations. In fact, **most of the existing research on how family circles influence Italian boys and girls sheds light on how family circles impact children's eventual career choices, relationships with money, and preferred academic domains** (Mirisola et al., 2017).

Carlana and Corno (2021) provide causal evidence in support of the claim that Italian boys aged 11 to 14 conform to the gender-stereotypical choice (i.e., math) when they believe their fathers would suggest this choice. Chise et al. (2019) present similar findings. In addition to documenting parents' sizable influence on their children choosing to study STEM subjects at the university level, Chise et al. (2019) also show that fathers' influence over their sons continues well into the university years. Similarly, using administrative and survey data on Italian graduates, Aina and Nicoletti (2018) found that the children of fathers employed in liberal professions follow a similar path,³ that is, having a liberal professional father has a statistically significant effect on starting a liberal profession.

The relationship between career development and economic independence also helps explain existing gender inequalities. While the gender gap in money has narrowed by just half a percentage point since 2013,⁴ the coming generations will have access to comparatively more money, thus risking widening inequalities. In turn, this greater access to money has increasingly become an important part of what constitutes relationships between parents and children (Ruspini, 2012). In this way, and due to the significance of intergenerational values transmission in perpetuating gender stereotypes, parents play an important role in transmitting unbiased financial habits to their boys and girls (Rinaldi & Todesco, 2012).

Promisingly, however, additional evidence suggests that traditional gender norms are not transmitted to boys and girls uncorrupted. In fact, macro-level factors – such as the increasing flexibility of the Italian labor market and greater desire among some women to participate in paid employment – are slowly contributing to the decline of the pure male-breadwinner model (see Magaraggia, 2012; Bosoni & Baker, 2015). In Italy, as in other industrialized nations, changes at the macro level are contributing to evolutions at the micro level, in the form of renegotiations within the family unit and alterations in the traditional definitions of “fatherhood” and “motherhood.”⁵

2 Authors' construction employing 2021 data from Eurostat's "Population: Structural Indicators" database (Eurostat, n.d.).

3 According to Aina and Nicoletti (2013), liberal professionals are defined as “self-employed workers providing public services which require them to hold a specific university degree, to obtain a professional license by passing an exam and to complete a compulsory period of practice, which has to be undertaken before the licensing exam” (p. 108).

4 Authors' construction employing 2021 data from Eurostat's "Population: Structural Indicators" database (Eurostat, n.d.).

5 See, for example, Bosoni & Baker (2015) for a comparative discussion on the UK and Italy.

Traditional views on the family and parenting roles are nevertheless resilient. Although traditional gender roles in the household are increasingly challenged and dismantled, 27.9 percent of Italians in a national survey say it is the father’s responsibility to provide for the family’s financial needs, and 21.5 percent believe men are less suited to carry out housework (from 2021 data from Istat, n.d.). Similarly, a 2021 survey shows that 15 percent of respondents still consider men to be the main breadwinners.⁶

The COVID-19 crisis represents a key example of the intergenerational transmission of values (see, for example, Tintori et al., 2021). In Italy, evidence suggests the pandemic exacerbated gender gaps in employment and care despite both parents being at home (Cerbara, 2022; Del Boca et al., 2020). Promisingly, however, Brini et al. (2021) found no significant increase in the pure male-breadwinner model as of late 2020. They also found a significant increase in the female-breadwinner model during the second quarter of 2020, and thus, did not detect any forms of “re-traditionalizing” gender roles within couples during the pandemic. This points to an increasingly resilient dual-earner model, which is key to shaping how boys and girls learn appropriate models of “fatherhood” and “motherhood.” Alon et al. (2020), for example, suggest that as in the post-World War II period, the COVID-19 recovery period is a window of opportunity to shift gender norms for the youngest generations. Looking at the large influx of women into the US labor force during the war, the authors suggest⁷ that boys who grew up with a working mother following this influx were more likely to marry working women who stayed employed in the years after marriage. The example provided by parents, they argue, shaped the preferences of boys and girls in the succeeding generation, serving as a catalyst for social change.

Social and Digital Life in Italian Childhood

The Digitalization of Childhood in Italy and Digital Gender Gaps

In Italy, the digitalization of social life is apparent in that the majority of boys and girls access the internet daily through their mobile phones (Smahel et al., 2020). According to the latest EU Kids Online report, when asked about daily internet activities, 74 percent of Italian boys and girls said they regularly use the internet to communicate with friends and family, and 54 percent regularly access social networks (Smahel et al., 2020). In comparative terms, the proportion of Italian boys and girls who are interacting online every day is 13 percentage points higher than the European average. Anecdotally, this age group has also experienced a steady decline in daily face-to-face social interactions throughout the past decade.⁸

⁶ From data analyzed by Plan International and Bocconi University.

⁷ Following Fernández et al., 2004.

⁸ Authors’ observations using 2021 data from Istat (n.d.).

While research shows that boys and girls have similar rates of internet access and use, their online activities vary (see McQuillan & O’Neill, 2009; Smahel et al., 2020),⁹ The biggest difference between boys and girls is in online gaming; while 41 percent of boys play online games daily, just 16 percent of girls do (Smahel et al., 2020). **Although gaming could seem like an inconsequential activity at face value, experts hint that it could be the path to developing some digital skills, with the potential to widen gender gaps in the future.**

Other areas in which gender gaps are apparent include mediation and reverse mediation – that is, parents’ involvement in their children’s internet use (Smahel et al., 2020). Boys and girls receive a similar quantity of advice (mediation), with 75 percent of girls and 73 percent of boys saying their parents talk to them about their online activities (Smahel et al., 2020). Differences exist, however, in reverse mediation: 32 percent of boys versus 38 percent of girls help their parents navigate the internet. This difference is consistent with other research suggesting that in Italy, parents hold divergent expectations for their sons and daughters, with girls more often expected to attend to other family members’ needs (see Section 5.1 for a detailed discussion).

Remaining Risks/Challenges in the Digitalization of Childhood and Adolescence

Given the fast-paced nature of the digital revolution, policymakers must ensure inequalities do not widen and social exclusion does not grow. But despite the democratized, (un)gendered view on digitalization and the “digital revolution” for the youngest generations, socioeconomic inequalities affect both girls and boys of minority backgrounds. **The concept of the “digital native” misses the importance of intersecting inequalities, masking the different risks and opportunities that a digital social life presents for different groups of boys and girls. While it is true that digital transformations bring about novel avenues for children’s inclusion in the social, economic, and political realms, such opportunities come with some caveats.** The digital world is not necessarily “purely negative” or “purely positive” for boys’ and girls’ development; “the same activity can have positive consequences for one child and negative consequences for another” (Smahel et al., 2020).

⁹ Also from data analyzed by Plan International and Bocconi University.

When considering a wide range of forms of violence collectively, negative online experiences have affected Italian boys and girls equally. Overall, 10 percent of boys and 11 percent of girls in Italy said they had a negative experience in the previous year (Smahel et al., 2020). Differences do occur among age groups, with 15- to 16-year-olds being affected the most. Such experiences can be both internal and interpersonal. Internally, safety might be challenged when children internalize the messages they encounter online. When asked by about harmful content online for the EU Kids Online report, boys and girls in Italy most frequently encountered hate messages and gory or violent images; they encountered messages about harming and hurting oneself, committing suicide, and taking drugs less frequently (Smahel et al., 2020). While Italian youth reported encountering harmful messages less frequently than youth surveyed in other European countries for the EU Kids Online report, other research in Italy suggests the pressures to achieve a certain body image affect children’s well-being and have some differences for boys versus girls.

One of the main ways safety is jeopardized in the virtual world is through cyberbullying. This phenomenon is similar to offline bullying, although the continuous evolution of networks and technologies has meant the forms of cyberbullying and the degree to which it has manifested are evolving as well. In Italy, those who suffer from offline bullying are also at a greater risk of experiencing defamation, abuse, and exclusion online (Ministry of Health, 2021). While gender differences for victims are not significant, age matters – cyberbullying tends to particularly affect children aged 9 to 11 and 15 to 16 (Smahel et al., 2020; Ministry of Health, 2021; also see Genta et al., 2012) The fact that gender differences are small (just 1 percentage point, according to Smahel et al., 2020) helps show it is not just boys who suffer from this phenomenon, as is popularly believed (Ministry of Health, 2021). **In fact, the Italian government considers bullying and cyberbullying a public health concern due to their effects on boys’ and girls’ mental health and well-being.**

Relevant Public Policy Initiatives in Italy

In Italy, and in Europe more generally, the pressure for digital transformation in all realms of life comes not only from unprecedented technological advancements but also from policymakers. For instance, the EU introduced the “Digital Decade” in 2021, including the goal for technology to “unite, not divide, people.” At the same time, the Italian government has allocated 27 percent of its Recovery and Resilience budget to the country’s digital transition (Benecchi et al., 2021, p. 5; also see the Italian government’s Recovery and Resilience Plan, [Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza](#)).

Methodology

Qualitative Data

Focus groups are popular and widely used in qualitative research, and over the last decade, the literature has expanded on how to collect data from children and youth through this participatory strategy (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). Children have proven to be competent informants and have their own views. However, working with them requires considering their specific needs and abilities, and it has important implications in terms of research questions and design.

Within the framework of the Global Boyhood Initiative, we carried out eight focus groups involving 50 children (37 boys and 13 girls) aged 5 to 11. Discussions and activities aimed to explore three main areas: identification, or how children perceive and describe themselves, as well as what their models are; the way they experience certain feelings and how their expression is managed; and finally, how gender norms influence behaviors and the way one reacts to certain situations. Two of the focus groups targeted a mixed group of boys and girls, while others targeted only boys, to observe whether and how gender heterogeneity affected how children approached gender-related stereotypes.

Figure 1: Children doing the “What Do Boys and Girls Look Like?” activity



Source: Project material

Recruitment involved sports associations and summer camps (focus groups took place during the summer). Research activities took place during the children's designated activity hours in a dedicated space, as the setting needed to be calm, free of distractions, and easy for families to reach. Indeed, in choosing the location, we strove to maintain a balance between familiarity and the equally necessary ownership of the space within the research relationship. Furthermore, to help children feel welcome and reduce their anxiety about participating, researchers asked for their assent¹⁰ to ensure they accepted the researchers' presence and to establish trust.

After a pilot with a mixed-gender group of children in a city soccer club, focus groups continued in different settings and with different age groups, with the outline adjusted based on this initial experience. In selecting the different settings for focus groups, we tried to provide a good representation of the territory, with associations and groups from neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic profiles.

Figure 2: Cards used in the focus groups to explore how children handle their emotions



Note: The labels under the figures are, from left to right: "to be scared," "to love someone," "to be sad," "to be angry," and "to be happy."

Source: Project material

We carried out the thematic and content analysis of focus groups by identifying analytic units and recurrences of key themes during the discussions. Ethnography was also a very important part of the work; a researcher was in charge of acting as notetaker and, specifically, taking ethnographic field notes. Indeed, it was important to catch the particularities of attitudes and interactions, as well as social practices, among the participants rather than the analyst's perspectives. We also discussed and analyzed group interactions and processes, as well as how participants' opinions might have changed during and through the discussion. Also, the research team varied and perfected different triangulations to conduct focus groups, always maintaining a high degree of self-reflexivity. Lastly, conducting the focus groups in different realities gave the research group the opportunity to interview researchers and educators during the focus groups. Discussion topics revolved around how strong the presence of gender stereotypes is among the children they usually work with and how they handle gender stereotypes and norms during their activities.

¹⁰ For more about the difference between consent and assent for children, see Cocks (2006).

Quantitative Data

To get a sense of parents' views on children and childhood in Italy, we surveyed 500 parents (of children aged 4 to 13) living in Italy who constituted a nationally representative sample for a variety of socioeconomic characteristics. We conducted the survey online between July 19 and 27, 2022, via the Ipsos Online Access Panels. We ensured the representativeness of the sample by applying the quota method to the gender and age of parents and children, the occupation of the parent surveyed, and the region.

Each parent was asked to answer questions about one of their children aged 4 to 13. Before beginning the questionnaire, the following message was displayed to parents of multiple children: "You said you have '#' children. The questions we are about to ask you are specifically about your [son/daughter] aged [age]." For all the questions asked, a conditional display was set up to adapt the text of the questions and items to the child's gender (e.g., "Is your son happy?" versus "Is your daughter happy?").

A total of 125 fathers of boys, 125 mothers of boys, 125 fathers of girls, and 125 mothers of girls were surveyed (i.e., 250 fathers and 250 mothers, or 250 parents of boys and 250 parents of girls). This method was chosen to provide a sufficient base of results for comparison across these four categories. Each category was weighted to its actual weight in the global sample during the data processing phase so the overall results are well representative of the population of parents of children aged 4 to 13.

Evidence on the State of Italian Boys

In this section, we present the analysis of the data and insights gathered through the quantitative and qualitative research, following the thematic areas identified:

- Family life
- Education
- Social and digital life
- Well-being

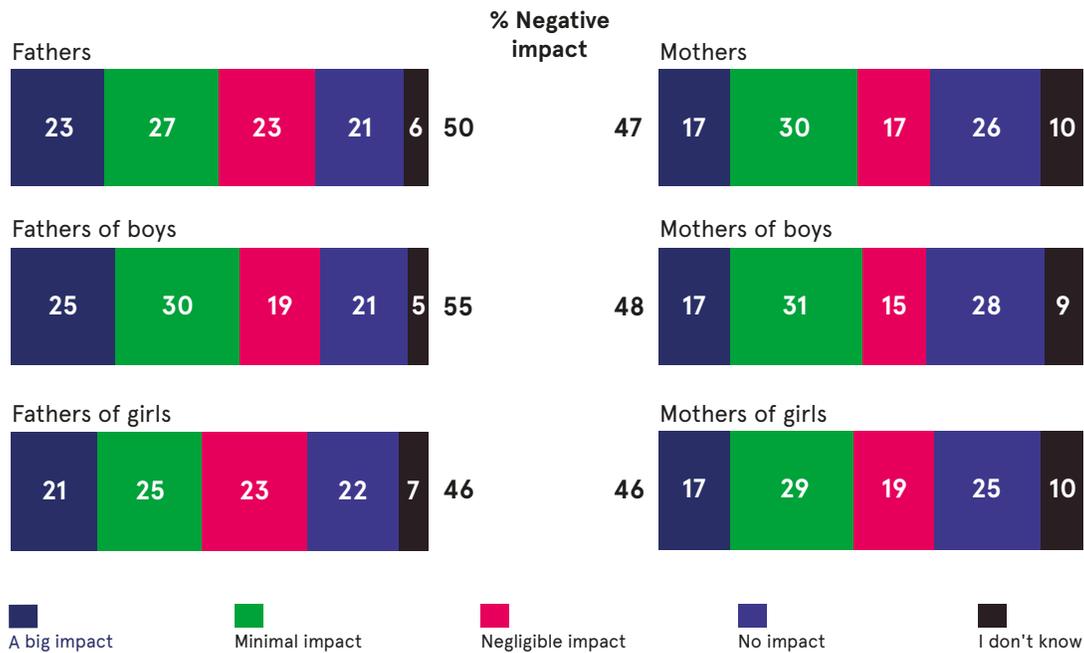
Family Life

Value Transmission and Role Models

Family is the first socializing agent for children. At the same time, the first years of a child's life are key to the development of his or her future; it is in childhood that boys and girls learn about society and emotions and also acquire the social and language skills that are the basis for future development, well-being, and healthy relationships. In these first years, children also learn about social and gender norms, which influence how children understand emotions, play, and generally develop their personalities and worldviews. Prior research suggests that both as role models and through encouraging divergent forms of behavior for sons and daughters, parents directly and indirectly influence children's views on gender stereotypes (see Section 3.4 for a full discussion). While the intergenerational transmission of values is bidirectional, it is particularly important to stress the role of adults.

According to EIGE's (2022) Gender Equality Index, Italy's equality prospects have been improving throughout the past decade. However, unaddressed gender stereotypes and intergenerational values transmission could help perpetuate gender gaps for future generations. The survey carried out for this project finds that only half of parents are aware of how stereotypes can influence boys' and girls' views on both genders, and differences between mothers and fathers are not substantial. Of the fathers of children aged 4 to 13 surveyed in our study, 50 percent believe negative representations of stereotypes have a negative effect on their children, while 47 percent of mothers believe the same.

Figure 3: The negative impact of traditional representations of men and women on children, according to fathers versus mothers



Differences between fathers and mothers do emerge when considering their child’s gender, which is consistent with traditional, stereotypical views held by parents. Our results reflect some of the stereotypical pressures in the “Man Box” that tell boys (and later, men) to be self-sufficient, act tough, and use aggression to resolve conflicts. For example, when asked which three of a list of values they would like to pass on to their children, **mothers of girls** tended to prioritize honesty and courage, whereas mothers of boys prioritized responsibility and independence. **Mothers of girls** also showed a preference for empathy, gratitude, and tolerance, while **mothers of boys** prioritized emotional stability. We also observed some positive advances related to gender equality and norms: Compared to **mothers of boys**, **mothers of girls** more often prioritized a competitive spirit, which is a characteristic typically associated more with boys. Similarly, compared to mothers of girls, **mothers of boys** gave greater importance to caring for others, a characteristic typically associated more with girls.

However, stereotypical differences are clear when looking at the differences between **fathers of girls** and **fathers of boys**. This is consistent with prior research, especially on career choices, which shows that children’s stereotypes in this regard are primarily shaped by their fathers versus their mothers (Mirisola et al., 2017). While their concerns also encompassed other realms of their children’s lives, **fathers of boys** were more likely than **fathers of girls** to name respect for others, courage, and autonomy as values they would like to pass on. By comparison, **fathers of girls** were more likely to choose values such as responsibility and kindness. At the same time, **fathers of girls** prioritized caring for others, gratitude, and resourcefulness, while **fathers of boys** prioritized being emotionally stable, being comfortable with one’s feelings, being sporty, and having a competitive spirit.

Figure 4: Qualities and values that parents would like to pass on to their children, according to fathers and mothers

<i>In %</i>	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>
Honesty	33	33	32	31	29	33
Self-confidence	29	29	29	42	39	45
Respect for others	28	24	32	25	25	24
A sense of responsibility	20	24	17	30	32	28
Courage	19	17	21	20	17	23
Creativity	17	16	17	11	10	11
Curiosity	16	15	17	18	19	17
Autonomy	16	13	18	21	23	18
Kindness	15	18	11	15	15	16
Empathy	11	10	11	12	11	14
The fact of being strong	10	9	10	10	7	12
The advocacy of others	9	10	9	3	3	3
Gratitude / thankfulness	9	8	11	9	7	11
Being emotionally stable	9	10	8	8	11	5
Resourcefulness	8	7	10	8	8	8
Caring for others	8	4	13	7	11	3
Tolerance	7	7	7	7	6	8
The fact of being sporty	7	9	6	4	5	2
Being comfortable with one's feelings	7	10	4	8	9	8
The competitive spirit	5	8	2	3	1	6
The fact of being successful	4	5	2	4	6	2

The qualities that mothers and fathers wish to convey to their children correlate strongly with the worries they have for their sons and daughters. Overall, **mothers of girls** were more worried about bullying in school than **mothers of boys** were, while mothers of boys worried significantly more about their sons “frequenting bad company.” Bullying – and cyberbullying – are considerable issues in Italy, to the extent that the Italian government considers them a public health concern. However, gender differences are not significant in terms of who suffers such aggression, suggesting that mothers’ divergent views on their sons’ and daughters’ interpersonal safety could be affected by bias. Similarly, another prevalent worry held disproportionately by both the **mothers and fathers of daughters** relates to physical appearance and the potential for developing an eating disorder. Notably, though, while this worry was primarily associated with daughters in our survey, research in Italy suggests that pressures to achieve a certain body image affect both boys and girls. While a strong adherence to traditional gender values in the family plays a role, children are also affected by the influence of the media and social media. In this regard, prior research by Marengo et al. (2018) confirms that increased use of highly visual social media (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) creates more opportunities for both boys and girls to compare themselves with others, increasing their dissatisfaction with themselves.

When it comes to boys, while **mothers** are comparatively worried about their sons not having friends or being isolated, **fathers** tend to be concerned about their sons not asking for help when needed, feeling bad about themselves, being completely dependent on the gaze of others and not expressing their true personality, and not showing their emotions when frustrated. At the same time, **mothers of girls** are comparatively more worried about their daughters placing too much emphasis on their physical appearance, while **mothers of boys** are comparatively more worried about their sons not having friends/being isolated and having a learning disorder. Encouragingly, **mothers of boys** are concerned about emotions and forms of emotional expression that are not stereotypically associated with boys (or men) and lie outside the “Man Box.”

Because children develop their views on social and gender norms during the first years of life, role models play a crucial role in such development. While the family is the main place where children learn by example, the parents surveyed in our study correctly recognized that other important figures may influence children’s relationships with stereotypes, such as those they encounter in school or the media (see the following sections for further discussion). However, **both fathers and mothers** displayed bias in their ideas of who influences their children most. For example, both **fathers and mothers of boys** ranked their sons’ role models as the father, then athletes, and then the mother. **Fathers of girls** suggested the most influential figures are the mother, then the father, and then athletes, while mothers held a slightly more stereotypical view; that is, **mothers of girls** suggested the most influential figures for daughters include the mother, then friends, and then the father (unlike mothers of boys, not including athletes as relevant).

Forms of Representations and Future Projections

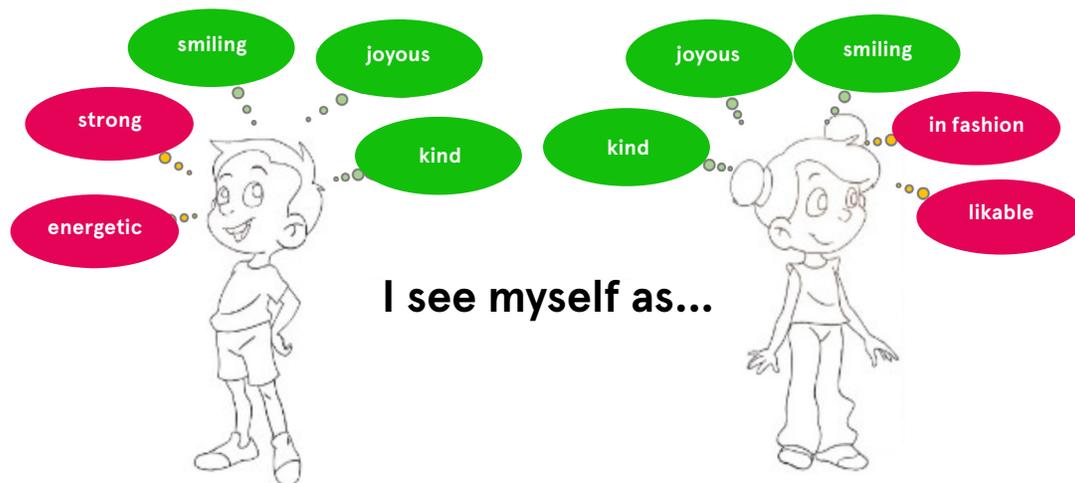
The picture emerging from the quantitative research was enriched by the qualitative work carried out with children aged 6 to 10. As underlined in the methodology section, while organizing focus groups with children, we encountered different educational realities and spaces, networking not only with schools but also with scout groups, summer camps, sports associations, and community centers. The road undertaken to meet 50 children of different ages proved unexpectedly bumpy and interesting, and it gave us the opportunity to reflect on the doubts of many parents we encountered, which revolved mainly around the centrality of boys in a project about gender equality. Indeed, the easy acceptance of gender-equality education when it centered on empowering girls – understood as an appropriation of assertiveness and strength-related qualities – paralleled a certain rigidity toward gender equality being dealt with from a masculinity perspective.

This affirms how some reluctance is related to the valorization of masculinity and femininity as categories, with “masculinity” encompassing qualities such as assertiveness, strength, and competitiveness and “femininity” evoking sensitivity, benevolence, and caring. Male role incongruity appeared to be much more disruptive to parents’ degree of collaboration, suggesting that more work should be done to valorize characteristics stereotypically attributed to femininity – that is to say, the very content of the socially constructed category of “femininity.”

Concerning roles, the focus groups sought to investigate children’s perception of gender norms and expectations, as well as their degree of interiorization, mainly through an input-led discussion about “What Do Boys and Girls Look Like?” and a role-play activity named “Can I?” The first activity – “What Do Boys and Girls Look Like?” – focused on the relationship between identity and role, having children choose a limited number of adjectives (among many available) to describe themselves and people of the opposite gender.¹¹ We carried out the activity particularly with children aged 6 to 8, as it was a good conversation starter for their age, while older children’s higher level of reflexivity made this activity less effective in catching a more honest glimpse of their self-image.

¹¹ To learn more about this, please refer to: [Diversi sì, ma tutti uguali. Sensibilizzazione ed educazione alle pari opportunità nelle scuole primarie di Forino, Mercogliano e Monteforte Irp. 2019](#) (Different yes, but all the same. Awareness raising and education to equal opportunities in the elementary school of Forino, Mercogliano and Monteforte Irp.)

Figure 5: What are the prevailing adjectives that boys and girls use to describe themselves?



Adjectives prevailing for both genders are in green, while diverging adjectives are in magenta.

Source: ARCO

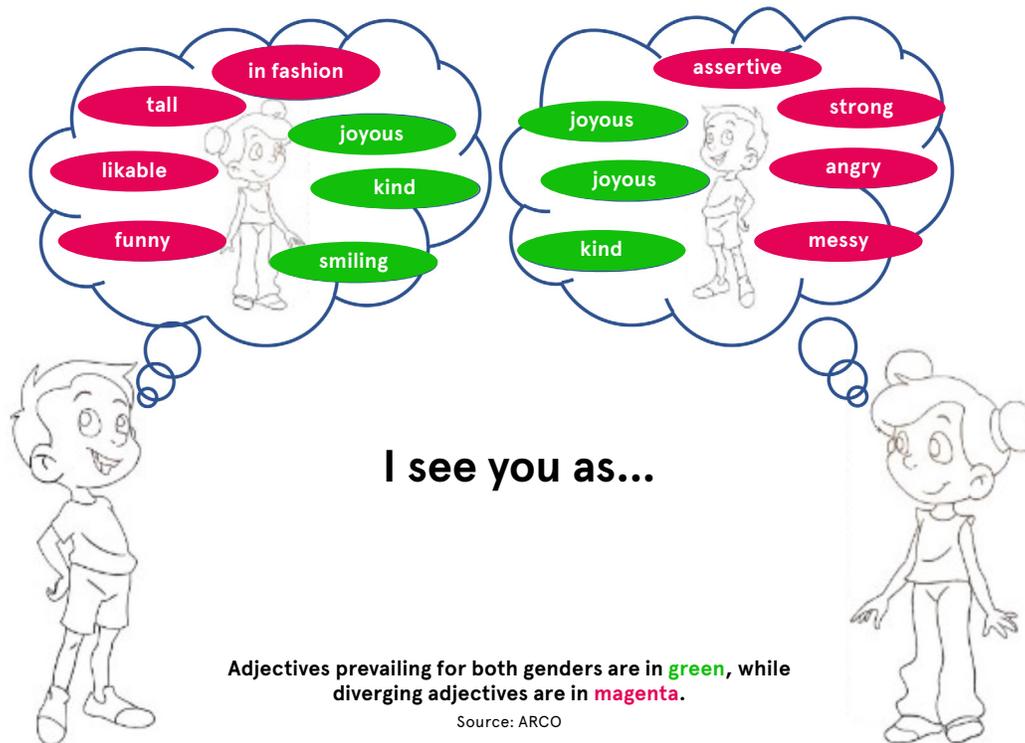
Source: Authors' elaboration on project material

Many recurring adjectives were common to girls and boys, such as "kind," "smiling," and "joyous." Unexpectedly given the content of many conversations, when asked to do this matching activity on their own, no children in the focus groups – boys or girls – chose "strength" as a quality for girls. As in the parents' survey, children expressed more emotion-related qualities for girls versus more descriptive adjectives for boys.

No children in the focus groups – boys or girls – chose "strength" as a quality for girls.

Neither girls nor boys used bounded categories to identify the opposite gender, with all children using a much wider range of the available adjectives to describe the opposite gender compared to the clear preference for certain characteristics to describe themselves. Nevertheless, the "us" versus "them" dynamic was much more evident during the discussion, and in all discussions, girls' descriptions of boys made many references to the idea that boys tend to be aggressive even when they are friends.

Figure 6: What are the prevailing adjectives boys and girls use to describe the opposite gender?



Source: Authors' elaboration on project material

According to girls in the focus groups, boys don't respect rules and end up in punishment more often; as one 8-year-old girl noted, "They don't understand how much they are annoying and how other people feel. Maybe it is because they feel less pain." In the mixed-gender group, this issue of rules and punishment was the subject of many debates along gender lines; in these arguments, the adults most often called upon were parents and teachers. Boys teamed up to claim they often are punished without a good reason, while adults tend to "forgive" girls more easily. Interestingly, even at a very early age, the awareness that gender shouldn't affect your opportunities parallels an underlying antipathy toward advantages attributed to one's gender in relationships with adults.

The focus groups' "Can I?" activity investigated gender norms, testing children's preferred behavior in challenging situations. The game involved telling topical stories and asking children to put themselves in the protagonists' shoes and make choices on how to deal with the situation. The activity's main objective was to investigate the presence of gender norms in different environments, trying to understand how these interfere with children's ability to express themselves and also the role played by adults. Although most children appeared to feel free to act as they deemed right (rather than worrying about expectations), we were particularly interested in better understanding the motivations behind the choices made by the minority of children. For example, only one of these stories introduced explicit discrimination: a girl being told by a teacher that being an electrician was a job for men only. Most of the children in the focus

group opposed the teacher's statement, but while paying attention to smoothing the interaction between children holding different opinions, we probed the motivations of the six children who agreed with the teacher and discovered that their reasoning relied mainly on their parents' opinions. This suggests that attention should be paid to how explicit references to gender-stereotyped social norms normalize discrimination.

However, the overall picture from this discussion proved to be much more complex. Indeed, when children were prompted directly with situations referring to jobs that women and men can do, they generally answered positively and confidently that "men and women can do anything." However, this confidence became less and less universal when stories involved their public role; then, it was evident that children were influenced by gender stereotypes and unconscious bias. Children addressed stories involving family and friends with assertiveness and tranquility, but picturing themselves in "incongruous roles" in front of other people (e.g., a school dance show) triggered concern and discomfort. Gender is a property of a group of people rather than of individuals, and the focus group discussions affirmed that boys are aware of the attributes of hegemonic masculinity and the expectations it implies from a very early age. At the same time, they experience an increasing familiarity and comfort with different kinds of masculinities – so-called "marginalized masculinities" (Connell, 2005) – a situation that leads to a continuous negotiation of their own identity and spaces along the lines of the "I" and "us" dynamic.

The final conversation in the activities addressed how children envisioned themselves in the future, and they generally struggled to foresee their future selves. After a general chat about possible jobs, several ideas started to pop up. However, in mixed-gender focus groups, girls had more difficulty than boys in envisioning themselves and, very often, made this difficulty explicit by repeatedly emphasizing that they did not know what they could or would become. Interestingly, younger children displayed more unconscious bias than older ones did, suggesting that work around gender equality with families and in educational settings is required from an early level to embed and sustain gender equality.

Education

Internalizing Expectations

Despite the increasing presence of egalitarian attitudes related to sexism in our societies, children are socialized from a very early age on the expectations for men and boys versus women and girls. Developmental studies carried out from an ecological perspective confirm that children internalize these norms and values not only from family but also from school and interactions with peers, in particular, using them to construct their expectations of others and judge them. During focus groups, we examined the degree to which children had internalized gender bias, finding that participants actively negotiated what they thought was right for themselves – in terms of the freedom to choose what they liked and disliked – and traditional gender expectations, especially concerning masculine attributes. Furthermore, boys seemed more aware of expectations surrounding masculinity, and the male gender role appeared to be more rigid and less malleable. In this regard, developmental and environmental studies have shown how types of environments affect children’s acquisition of traditional gender roles, which should be considered when designing early intervention programs to promote equity in schools and families.

“Males are stronger with muscles, females with brains. Females talk more. I like to be with both. Males are naughtier; females run away. Males are tougher; females are delicate.” —7-year-old boy in focus group

This study’s activities investigating gender-related expectations and compliance with them were conducted only with children, but it has been interesting to look at what emerged within the context of previous research involving interviews with educators. Indeed, alongside a perceptible normative pressure on boys to not behave in a feminine way, our focus groups uncovered a sort of acceptance of boys’ supposedly “natural” inclination toward violence. Many girls, but also some boys, said boys tend to have more physical confrontations and fights, something educators also underlined in prior studies. As one 7-year-old boy noted, “Males are stronger with muscles, females with brains. Females talk more. I like to be with both. Males are naughtier; females run away. Males are tougher; females are delicate.” What it is striking is that from a very early age, girls take this attitude for granted as a “boy thing”: “This is how they behave; this is how things work,” one 7-year-old girl said. On the other side, several boys did not easily accept this narrative, refusing to see the recurrence of physical confrontation or the violent resolution of conflict as something that must necessarily belong to the male world.

Additionally, our interview with a female soccer coach revealed a series of interesting insights from her experience with mixed-gender teams. From her account, parents’ attitudes and opportunities emerged as a key differentiator between boys merely consciously accepting gender equity and their internalizing behaviors and norms.

If parents having different expectations for girls and boys (as emerged from survey analysis) deeply affects children's attitudes, then the opportunities given to children (which depend on parents' willingness and the family's socioeconomic context) also play an important role in children acquiring behaviors and skills that break the cycle of gender stereotypes.

For example, if a mixed-gender soccer team normalizes girls playing soccer, girls' possibility of playing is an achievement on its own. Very often, not enough effort is put into giving girls the opportunity to shine in that sport. As the soccer coach said, "Even though they play the same sport, after a few years, boys outclass girls because they use much more free time to play soccer. They are encouraged and nurtured into succeeding, while girls play soccer almost exclusively when they come here." The same applies to playing video games. When asked if girls played video games, for example, children in the focus groups often immediately said that girls always play but are perceived as being "less good because they are less used to playing." But when researchers asked the children to elaborate, this contradiction ended up puzzling them. The same mechanisms apply to boys and care, with a few educators underlining that attempting to bring boys closer to caring activities sometimes reinforces their estrangement because it creates a sense that boys are doing something extraordinary in providing care.

Parental Transmission of Values and Expectations

Approximately 82 percent of **fathers** and 78 percent of **mothers** identified the transmission of values at home as relevant to their sons' and daughters' development of gender stereotypes; 77 percent of **fathers and mothers** said the school is an important avenue of transmitting values on gender as well (Figure 7). In fact, both the family and educational settings matter under the ecological model framing this study, meaning it is difficult to separate the two settings when it comes to the development of social rules and expectations among Italian children aged 4 to 13.

In educational settings, both teachers and peers matter. When asked about their relative influence, **mothers and fathers** did not display differences in the belief that teachers play an important role in transmitting gender stereotypes. Indeed, while the teacher is a crucial role model, the feminization of teaching staff in Italy leads to a lack of male role models for young boys in schools. This, in turn, may have undesirable consequences for children's aspirations and future career choices, perhaps contributing to the differentiated presence of boys and girls across formative trajectories. In countries like Italy, stereotypes sustained both by family and by the role models that children encounter in the educational system can help segregate women and men into different areas of the economy over the long term and, thus, widen the gender pay gap.

Fathers and mothers held clear differences in opinion on peers' influence related to gender. In fact, **mothers** attributed less responsibility to friends and to parents (4 percentage points less than fathers for both categories). These differences in opinion become especially apparent when looking at parents of girls; while 78 percent of fathers of girls believe friends are crucial influences related to gender, 69 percent of mothers of girls say the same.

Figure 7: The role of different people in raising gendered children, by gender of parent and child

In % - "Yes"	Fathers	Mothers	Parents of kids	Fathers of boys	Mothers of boys	Parents of daughters	Fathers of girls	Mothers of girls
Parents	82	78	76	79	73	84	84	83
School teachers	77	77	76	76	76	77	78	77
The environment in general	76	75	75	74	76	75	77	74
Friends	77	73	77	77	78	74	78	69
The people who take care of him/her after school (<i>nannies, babysitters, educators from extracurricular services...</i>)	75	62	71	76	66	66	74	58
Advertising	51	54	50	49	50	55	53	57
Video games	53	62	50	49	50	37	39	36
The catechist	57	57	52	56	49	50	56	44
TV Programs/Movies	57	57	57	56	58	57	58	56
Social networks (<i>Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter</i>)	56	46	60	57	63	55	49	61
The people who supervise his/her extracurricular activities (<i>sports/arts/scout-teaching/homework</i>)	74	68	68	71	66	73	77	70

Although this survey dealt with children aged 4 to 13 (who are far from choosing their academic specializations), some of its findings hint at the academic gender differences that prior research has shown affect girls' and boys' choice to begin a career in the liberal arts or STEM disciplines, respectively. While stereotypes – such as that men have greater intellectual abilities – are learned in academic environments, they are also shared in the home. In our survey, this issue is apparent not only in parents' descriptions of men and women but also in the fact that parents were comparatively more worried about their sons vis-à-vis their daughters having a learning disability. In fact, when asked about their concerns for their children, both **mothers and fathers** tended to associate such worry more with sons (9 percent of fathers of boys and 13 percent of mothers of boys). This pattern is replicated when looking at mothers of boys and mothers of girls separately, although it is less pronounced when looking at fathers of girls versus fathers of boys.

This segregation in the educational system is perpetuated in the labor market. In fact, according to EIGE's index, Italy has the lowest score in the EU-27 for gender equality at work (EIGE, 2022). At the same time, it ranks just below average for financial equality between genders. Prior research suggests that such patterns in finances can emerge

from an early age. Focusing on a sample of northwestern Italian families, Ruspini (2012) suggests that while parents provide boys with more money than girls and see boys as better able to manage finances, girls are perceived to be savers and are thus more likely socialized to be “disciplined” with money. Pressures for men to become providers and girls to be austere are internalized and carried out into adulthood. Reciprocally, additional evidence suggests that boys assign greater importance than girls do to receiving money from their parents and they interpret it as a trait of good parenting (Rinaldi & Todesco, 2012). Similarly, boys have greater self-confidence in money management.

Some of these biases were apparent in our survey, given that a larger share of **fathers of boys** and **mothers of boys** said they regularly give money to their sons vis-à-vis fathers and mothers of girls. (Figure 8). This pattern was replicated for parents giving money to their sons or daughters on special occasions. Interestingly, girls tend to get more money from their parents after “earning it” (e.g., because of good grades or proper behavior). In this regard, **mothers** tend to reward behavior more often than **fathers**, with 32 percent of mothers versus 23 percent of fathers affirming they give money to their children when they have earned it. When fathers do so, it is more likely that they are **fathers of girls** (27 percent versus 19 percent of fathers of boys). **Mothers**, however, still reward boys more often, with 35 percent of mothers of boys affirming they give money to their son when he has earned it compared to 29 percent of mothers of daughters. Therefore, overall, **boys are more likely to receive money from their parents** across all occasions.

Figure 8: Monetary allowances to sons and daughters, according to fathers versus mothers

<i>In %</i>	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>
Yes, regularly (e.g. every week, every month...)	31	33	28	18	20	17
Yes, on special occasions such as his birthday or Christmas	40	42	37	32	33	31
Yes, when he thinks he deserves it (after good results, because he behaved well...)	23	19	27	32	35	29
No, never	18	17	18	28	26	30

Social and Digital Life

Are There “Boy Toys” and “Girl Toys”?

Boys discover early on that they are different from girls in a variety of ways. Children’s daily lives are marked by many differences across binary lines of gender, including everything from their clothes to their activities. Previous studies have demonstrated that boys’ and girls’ knowledge and comprehension of gender norms, including norm violations, increases with age (Blakemore, 2003). Furthermore, boys’ negative assessment of gender norm violation exceeds that of girls as age increases. Indeed, gender-differentiated treatment is something that characterizes a child’s growth not only within the family but also through interactions at school and with friends. Gender-appropriateness is reinforced through toys and hobbies.

In one of the focus group activities, children were prompted to talk about their favorite free time activities, hobbies, and games. The preferred activities included playing soccer or other sports, playing video games, playing at the park with friends, and staying with their family, as well as watching TV. All participants agreed that it is extremely unfair to think in terms of “male versus female” activities and games. However, their elaborations and accounts showed how the world works differently. As an example, video games were an important favorite activity and were perceived as common for boys and girls. However, when talking thoroughly about the kinds of games they liked, boys were more likely to choose those related to war because they felt these games belong to a more masculine – and, therefore, more appropriate to them – military culture.

“You can do it, but I don’t do it because I don’t care [to].”

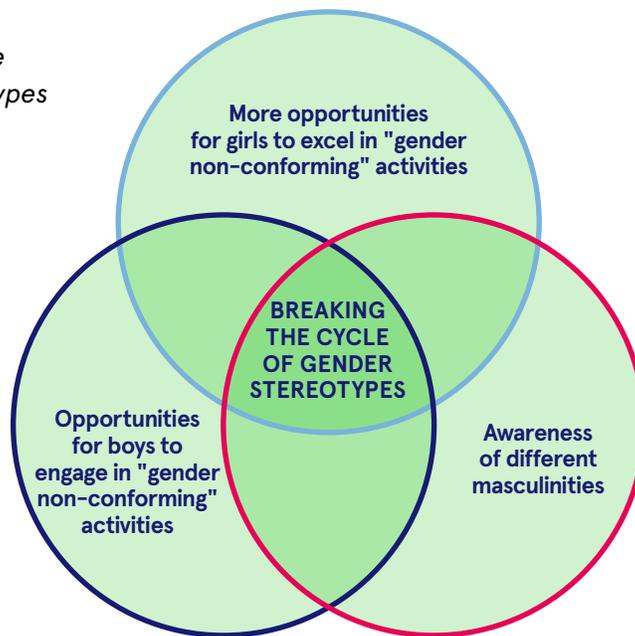
—8-year-old boy in focus group

Working with children of different age groups, we saw that as they are exposed to more socialization models throughout childhood, children’s awareness of gender norms and stereotypes gets more complicated and children increasingly try to negotiate their own identities in relation to gender expectations. There was a certain degree of reluctance toward “girl games” but also an awareness that “‘girls’ games’ do not exist.” An interesting dynamic is emerging that is indicative of a historical moment in gender equality discourse and against gender stereotypes. An attitude that is becoming more widespread even compared to a decade ago is, as one 8-year-old boy said in a focus group, “You can do it, but I don’t do it because I don’t care [to].”

Indeed, when asked to explain their choices of hobbies and games, boys appeared to rely on an intuitive understanding of boys’ preferences and were rather vague in their rationale. During a focus group, two boys (ages 7 and 9) argued that although everyone can do everything, there are undeniably more masculine activities, such as soccer, and others more feminine, such as volleyball or gossiping. On another occasion, boys were joking about the games they played as children; two girls teasingly “accused” them of playing with dolls. Even in this case, one of the boys “defended” himself not

by bringing up gender difference but instead by relying on a “personal preference” argument: “A game is for fun. I don’t play Barbies because it doesn’t amuse me. But if it amused me, I would have no problem doing it.”

Figure 9:
Breaking the cycle
of gender stereotypes

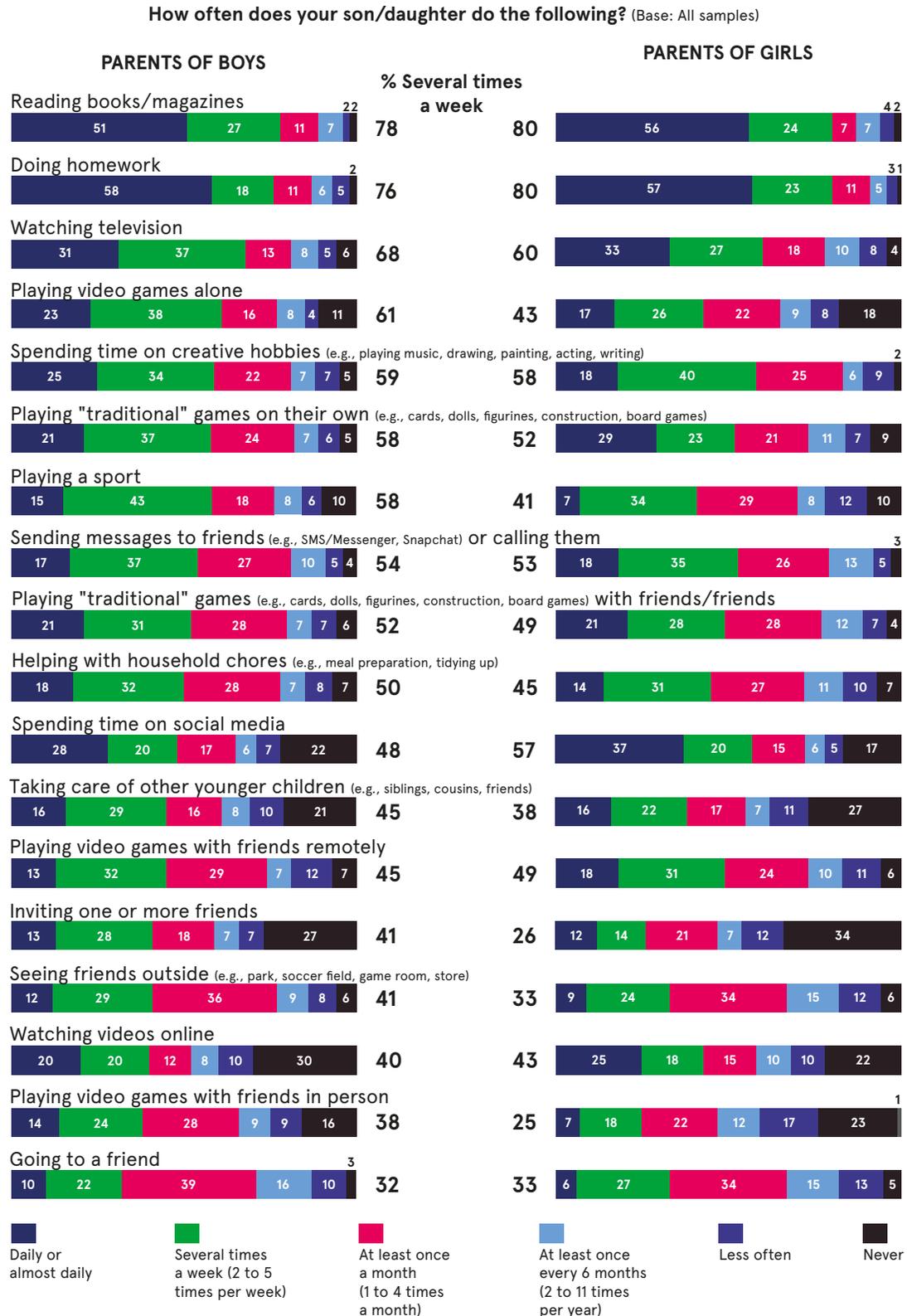


Overall, discussions and observations during the focus groups indicate that for many children, many activities have entered their cognitive landscape but are far from normalized. Simply put, girls generally oppose gender stereotypes for themselves and claim their right to do what they’d like; however, for many boys, others participating in activities violating gender norms has been normalized, but this is matched by boys’ reassurance that their own preferences correspond to the accepted gender norm. Next to a dynamic in which children brought up personal preferences as the explanation for all those cases where their choices correspond to stereotypes, focus group participants also referred to explicit cases of negative reactions to gender norm violations. In particular, they often mentioned cases of their friends being teased for their choices, including girls playing soccer and boys taking dance classes (even when it was a less stereotypically “female” type of dance, such as hip hop). This shows the importance of creating practical opportunities to engage in activities outside stereotyped gender boxes, as well as of creating spaces for experimenting and putting into practice the emotional tools passed on through gender equity education.

To delve deeper into the issue of stereotypical toys and activities, we also asked parents about activities that children regularly practice (Figure 10). Survey results suggest that parents more often associated boys with traditionally "masculine" activities, such as watching TV (68 percent of parents of boys compared to 60 percent of parents of girls), playing video games alone (61 percent of parents of boys compared to 43 percent of parents of girls), and playing sports (58 percent of parents of boys compared to 41 percent of parents of girls). Our findings are consistent with those of the EU Kids Online survey (Smahel et al., 2020). Although there is scant information on the issue, a growing body of literature suggests that such activities might be linked to developing certain abilities in the future and, in turn, contribute to segregation in the labor market.

For example, some digital skills that boys learn playing video games might play a role in their choice of STEM subjects.

Figure 10: The different activities practiced by girls and boys, according to parents



Girls were more likely to be seen using social media several times a week in comparison to boys. This is an activity that parents also tended to associate with increasing the likelihood of their children developing insecurities in relation to their bodies. Interestingly, however, 50 percent of parents of boys suggested their sons help with household chores several times a week compared to 45 percent of parents of girls, and 45 percent of parents of boys suggested their sons oftentimes took care of other younger children (such as siblings) compared to 38 percent of parents of girls, which represent activities that are traditionally seen as feminine.

Children's social and digital lives are increasingly interlinked. The democratization of digital life has given children more opportunities than ever – but has also given rise to new forms of violence and inequality. In this way, through our survey, we sought to understand the risks and opportunities of digital life in Italy. Evidence from our survey with parents suggests that girls carry out more of their social lives online than boys do. In fact, while parents associated boys more with inviting friends home (15 percentage points more than girls) and seeing friends outside the home (8 percentage points more than girls), girls were more frequently associated with playing video games with their friends online (4 percentage points more than boys). Similarly, when it comes to time online (such as playing video games), **boys** tend to navigate it while in the physical company of their friends (13 percentage points more than girls).

Well-Being

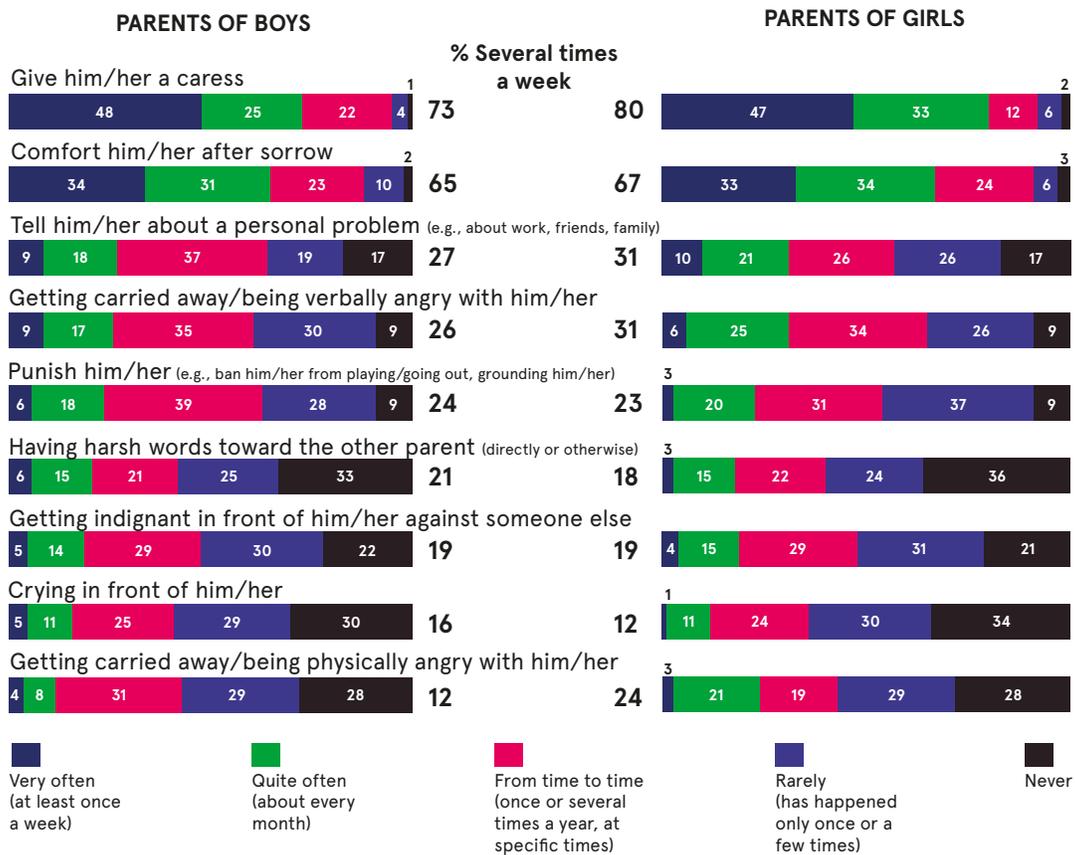
Expressing Emotions

Children's well-being is affected by gender roles and pressures to fit into stereotypical views of what boys and girls should be. Research on children's mental health in Italy suggests that while Italian boys and girls enjoy comparatively good mental health relative to children in other OECD countries (UNICEF Innocenti, 2021), the pandemic might have significantly affected children's well-being (CESVI, 2022). In this way, our survey with parents sought to delve into the mandates and pressures that Italian boys and girls regularly face in relation to physical health, academics, social life, and emotions.

The way parents explained how they relate to their sons versus daughters displayed blatant gender differences (Figure 11). In fact, while a greater proportion of parents were more likely to say they often lovingly touch their daughters compared to their sons (80 percent versus 73 percent), they also admitted to getting comparatively angrier with daughters. While 31 percent of parents of girls said they oftentimes act "verbally angry" with their daughters, this was true for 26 percent of parents of boys. Similarly, while 24 percent of parents of girls said they oftentimes act "physically angry" with their daughters, this was true for merely 12 percent of parents of boys. Such differences are consistent with prior research suggesting that in Italy, parents hold divergent expectations for their sons and daughters, with girls more often expected to be attentive to the needs of others.

Figure 11: The space that parents leave for emotions in boys' and girls' daily lives

And how often do you do the following things with your son/daughter? (Base: All samples)



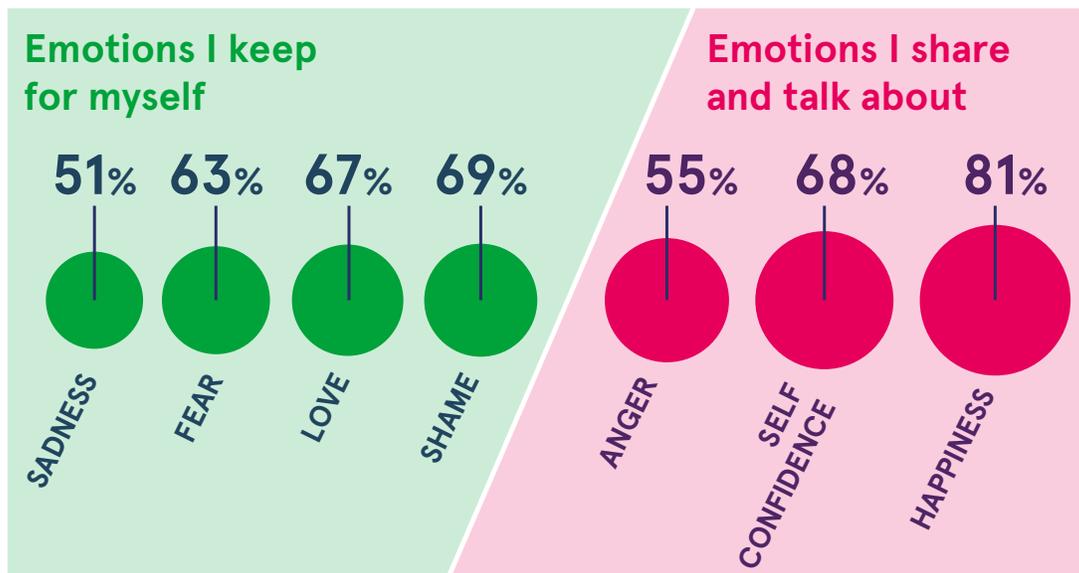
More than actively discouraging displays of emotion, parents and adults were mostly not encouraging the boys to express their feelings.

Gendered patterns also emerge when looking separately at mothers' and fathers' answers. **Mothers** said more often than fathers that they often lovingly touch their children (82 percent versus 71 percent). While no blatant differences exist in this regard between mothers of boys and mothers of girls, a larger proportion of **fathers of girls** than fathers of boys said they lovingly touch their child (80 percent versus 62 percent). **Mothers** were also more likely than fathers to say they share their personal problems with their children (32 percent versus 26 percent), with this being more common for **mothers of girls** than mothers of boys. Similarly, a greater proportion of mothers admitted to often acting verbally angry toward their children, and importantly, this occurred more frequently for **mothers of girls** than mothers of boys. That is, while 40 percent of **mothers of girls** admitted to often getting carried away or being verbally angry with their daughters, this was true for merely 24 percent of mothers of boys. A greater proportion of **fathers**, on the other hand, admitted to frequently acting

physically angry (21 percent of fathers compared to 15 percent of mothers), with this attitude being more common amongst **fathers of girls** as well. In fact, while 27 percent of fathers of girls admitted to acting physically angry toward their daughters, this was true for 15 percent of fathers of boys.

During the focus groups, it was clear how expectations concerning gender-appropriate emotional behavior strongly affected boys. In their account, more than actively discouraging displays of emotion, parents and adults were mostly not encouraging the boys to express their feelings – something usually mentioned in contrast to how girls were treated. When discussing emotions, it is worth noting that boys tended to talk about how much more attention they paid to others’ feelings rather than deepening their own. To explore how children dealt with their feelings – as well as how comfortable they were sharing certain emotions with others and seeking support (both adults and peers) – we played a game in the focus groups that involved distributing cards representing many different emotions; then, we asked the children to assign cards to different baskets according to how easy the emotions were to communicate. As one might expect, boys said positive emotions were the easiest to communicate and show, while fear, embarrassment, and love were the ones boys were reluctant to share.

Figure 12: Which emotions do I mostly keep to myself and which do I feel comfortable sharing? Prevailing emotions discussed in the focus groups (boys results)



On several occasions, children perceived the game itself to be challenging, with boys joking about “feeling bad” after we explained what they were expected to do. Other boys, especially those older than 8, did not hide their difficulties and embarrassment in doing an activity about emotions when cards were read out loud. Sensitivity, however, did not prevent their participation. Indeed, many of the children do laboratories about emotions at school, sometimes both in preschool and elementary school. Of note: The word for “love” was received with embarrassment, especially by boys; therefore we tried to substitute it with the word for “affection” (the amore-affetto nuanced meanings have no exact equivalent in the English language) to defuse the immediate connection to romantic love.

The most discussed emotions were love, shame, sadness, and anger. In the mixed-gender groups, there was a striking difference in boys' and girls' choices on communicating emotions. While girls kept hardly anything to themselves except some of the cards related to shame (fear, embarrassment, insecurity), boys put most of the cards in the "I keep it to myself" jar, especially all those related to shame and affection. Even in the discussion, boys and girls were outspoken about their different perceptions of love; for girls, it was among the positive emotions that are good to demonstrate, while for boys, it was not.

Boys tend to be sad "angry-style," while "girls like more to be alone or sharing with friends." —10-year-old boy in focus group

As the catalyzing feeling behind stereotypes, shame played a key role in the focus group discussions. Therefore, the aspect of "showing off in front of others" emerges as central to the choice to shun what is feared to be a "girly" emotion. The same applies to how boys talked about comforting friends or adults, either saying that they do not console anyone because it makes them uncomfortable or emphasizing how they are more comfortable consoling with words and not with gestures like hugs – often specifying how girls hug more. An 8-year-old boy pointed out how he usually teases a friend a bit to console him; then, the friend is no longer sad but angry, and in the end, "it is better to be angry than sad."

Anger was not one of the first emotions to come up in the focus groups, but it was always discussed by boys, both on its own and in connection with sadness. Indeed, many boys in the focus groups reported crying is an activity to be done in solitude and is most often assumed to be crying in anger. However, regardless of whether they scream into a pillow or lash out at things, the boys talked about anger especially as a demonstration of sadness. In the words of a 10-year-old boy, boys tend to be sad "angry-style," while "girls like more to be alone or sharing with friends." By contrast, all children talked at length about calming strategies when they are consciously and outspokenly angry, from eating to playing to companionship.

But to whom do children turn when they need comfort? Friends and the mother were the pivots around which conversations around emotions revolved, especially with the younger children. Generally, many boys and girls identified their mother as the parent with whom it is easier to have an affectionate relationship. Some of the children emphasized the differences between mom and dad concerning anger, with the mother described as having circumscribed bursts of anger and fathers sometimes described as more difficult to relate to. Concerning love, some girls liked to show during the discussion that they were knowledgeable about the dynamics of love and affection among adults, while some of the boys were outspoken about how much they like to be cuddled by their parents, while at the same time being embarrassed to say they love their parents.

Internalizing gender norms, including avoiding showing emotions, is something boys learn in childhood and can lead to a number of psychological consequences. For this reason, the valorization – or, rather, the normalization – of caring, human interdependence, and empathy through the development of pedagogical material is an essential step in promoting forms of masculinity different from hegemonic ones.

Children’s Relationships with Their Bodies

While insecurities about their appearance are equally relevant for boys and girls, worrying about physical traits tends to be more stereotypically associated with young girls. At the same time, girls tend to spend slightly more time on social media, which Marengo et al. (2018) suggest increases the likelihood of physical dissatisfaction. In this regard, our survey with parents displayed clear differences between parents’ perceptions of what their sons and daughters worry about (Figure 13). In fact, overall, a larger proportion of parents of girls suggested their daughters worry excessively about their bodies and that they compare their appearance to that of others.

Gender differences also emerged between mothers and fathers when asked separately about their children's relationship with their physical appearance. In this regard, a greater proportion of **fathers** than mothers believed that their children pay attention to their bodies (72 percent versus 55 percent), this being particularly true for **fathers** of girls. Similarly, a larger proportion of fathers than mothers believe their children compare their bodies to those of others (45 percent versus 37 percent) and that their children change their eating habits and/or their involvement in physical activity to meet beauty standards (38 percent versus 22 percent). Lastly, **fathers** were more likely than mothers to say their child is ashamed of his or her appearance (26 percent versus 14 percent). In this regard, while **fathers of boys** were more likely than fathers of girls to believe their child is ashamed of their appearance, **mothers of girls** were more likely to assert the same vis-à-vis mothers of boys.

Figure 13: Children’s relationship with their physical appearance, according to fathers versus mothers

<i>In % - "Yes"</i>	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>of boys</i>	<i>of girls</i>
...pays attention to one's physical appearance	72	66	78	55	47	64
...compares her appearance a lot with that of her friends/friends	45	45	46	37	28	46
...changes their eating habits and/or physical activity to meet certain beauty standards	38	43	33	22	21	22
...is ashamed of his appearance	26	35	18	14	9	19

Conclusions

In the past decade, a significant reflection on men and masculinities has begun in Italy. This is thanks to a growing body of critical studies on men and masculinities in the country, both in academic research and in research projects – and especially in the field of gender-sensitive education. Nevertheless, the important and innovative projects carried out in some school settings in recent years have depended on the willingness and interest of individual schools or teachers rather than being the outcome of a coordinated and integrated plan.

Particularly because calls for a return to traditional gender roles have recently gained traction among politicians and in policies, studies on gender stereotypes and discrimination in Italy are fundamental to having a realistic picture of the country. This research has revealed some interesting aspects of parents' and children's perceptions of gender stereotypes and conceptions of masculinity, particularly:

- **Parents are role models, and their attitudes deeply affect their children's attitudes toward gender stereotypes.** It is worth underscoring how explicit references to gender-stereotyped social norms directly affect the normalization of discrimination.
- **Parents and adults appear to *not encourage* boys to express their feelings rather than explicitly *discouraging* this, while girls are more actively encouraged to express both their positive and negative emotions.** Moreover, when discussing emotions, boys prefer to talk about how much they pay attention to others' feelings rather than explore their own.
- **Younger children display more unconscious bias than older ones do,** suggesting that work around gender equality with families and in educational settings is required from very early ages to embed and sustain gender equality.
- **In general, boys and girls use a wide variety of adjectives to describe the opposite gender but show a clear preference for associating certain characteristics with themselves.** A meaningful example is that "strength" was never referred to as a feminine feature. Furthermore, as in the parents' survey, children named more emotion-related qualities for girls versus more descriptive adjectives for boys.
- **From the focus groups, it emerges that Italian boys are increasingly aware of – and comfortable with – "new forms" of masculinity, showing how the debate on gender equality issues is now so widespread that it is also internalized in primary school-age children.** However, at the same time, boys are very aware of expectations surrounding masculinity but are also reluctant to publicly display "less masculine" attitudes. This involves constant negotiation with themselves and their environment. Indeed, today, public discourse for gender equality and against gender stereotypes is becoming more widespread, and while boys in the focus groups openly rejected there being "feminine" or "masculine" attitudes and activities, their elaborations and stories provided testimonies showing how the world works differently than their beliefs.

- **Although many “incongruous” roles and activities have entered children’s cognitive landscape, they are far from normalized, and it is much easier for girls to engage in “boys’ activities” than the reverse.** Indeed, when they were asked to explain their choices of hobbies and games, boys appeared to rely on an intuitive understanding of boys’ preferences and they were rather vague in their rationale.
- **Girls generally express their feelings more easily than boys do.** Boys in the focus groups were more embarrassed to express their emotions in front of other people and often understood anger as an expression of sadness.
- **Opportunities to engage in nonstereotyped activities are a key differentiator** between merely accepting gender equity and internalizing behaviors and norms that break the cycle of gender stereotypes.

How can we Transform Problematic Gender Norms?

In conclusion, these are some specific **recommendations** concerning the central issues that emerged in the literature review, survey, and focus groups:

Policyholders and Public Policies

1. Investing in gender-transformative educational programs:

- **Gender equality needs to remain at the center of educational plans, budgets, and policies**, following the 2015 reform on the school system which establishes that educational institutions ought to implement in their three-year plans the principles of equal opportunities by promoting education on gender equality in order to inform and raise awareness among students, teachers, and parents (Art. 16). It is recommended that the guidelines established under each institution's Three-Year Plan of the Educational Offer (PTOF) delineate specific and standardized benchmarks to assess progress and areas for improvement during the implementation of a plan and before the drafting of the consecutive PTOF. These benchmarks should address issues of discrimination through teaching materials (e.g., visuals, textbooks), curricula that mainstreams gender equality and new forms of masculinity, and teacher training. However, it became apparent that recent projects within schools are overall dissociated from an organized, coordinated plan across the territory. Moreover, as depicted by the results of our focus group, social roles and stereotypical representations of girls and boys are still replicated through the school system. For this reason, policymakers should raise initiatives at the ministerial level to uniform what it is recommended in the PTOF; particularly, school textbooks should be changed in a way that they do not replicate gender stereotypes and outdated conceptions of masculinity and femininity. In this regard, it's necessary to highlight how the POLITE program, (Pari Opportunità nei Libri di Testo – Equal Opportunities in School Textbooks), implemented in 1999 by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, failed in promoting gender-stereotype-free schoolbooks, as proven by Biemmi (2010) and Corsini and Scherri (2016).
- **Policymakers are encouraged to evaluate to what extent all children have access to different forms of technological tools, and act accordingly to promote equal access to digital citizenship. In this regard, it should be a cooperation between policymakers and educational facilities in the mainstreaming of gender equality in technological use through the educational curriculum to ensure the equal development of boys' and girls' digital, information, and media literacy.** While Italian boys and girls access the internet to similar extents, the ways they employ technologies and develop their social skills still display gender disparities with the potential of widening gender gaps throughout the life course, such as the gender gap in STEM subjects.

To this end, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR for its Italian acronym) foresees the introduction of actions to reinforce the development of mathematical, scientific, technological, and digital skills with the aim of encouraging the participation of girls in STEM studies in the future. The PNRR promotes the collaboration of policymakers and educational facilities through the introduction of innovative teaching methodologies, information, awareness-raising and training actions, and the introduction of the "International Day of Women and girls in Science" celebrated by schools and educational centers. However, efforts to expose girls to technological skills mostly remain part of individual efforts by organizations and educational institutions such as the 'Girls Code it Better Project', by Officina Futuro Fondazione W-Group.

- **It is necessary to emphasize the importance of sharing best-practices, especially with other European partners, through the Global Education Network Europe (GENE).** While the Italian Ministry of Education is involved in the network, Italian policymakers should work towards the adoption of best-practices in relation to data collection (for example, a clear understanding of digital inequalities between boys and girls -country-wide and thus which would allow to also monitor regional differences-, data on funding, data on the initiatives carried out by schools. which would allow for the implementation of evidence-based public policies.

2. Protecting children from bullying and cyberbullying:

- **Digital literacy is also essential to protect children from cyber-bullying and other forms of digital violence, given children's social and digital lives are increasingly interlinked.** In this regard, it's necessary the continuation of programs to prevent cyberbullying as outlined in Law No. 71 of 29 May 2017, while encouraging advancements in terms of data collection and awareness-raising. While Law no. 71 of 19 May 2017 containing provisions to prevent and combat cyberbullying allows victims to file reports, progress still needs to be made in keeping track on the number and qualities of victims for monitoring purposes. According to our survey, Italian parents can benefit from accessible information on cyberbullying and other forms of violence between children, while also from training opportunities to support their sons and daughters in the responsible and safe use of new technologies. Evidenced-based recommendations can allow for the development of educational programs for families and educators that are appropriately tailored to the Italian context. As evidenced by our survey, the support of parents is also crucial in allowing children to express their worries and emotions and thus deconstruct traditional forms of masculinity that may perpetuate digital and social violence.
- **It is necessary to highlight the need for the creation of an ad hoc legislative framework to regulate these cases, given the high number of cases of gender-related bullying and violence even among young people, and the specificity of these crimes.** The D.D.L. Zan (named after its first signatory, deputy Alessandro Zan), was a proposal to toughen penalties against crimes and discrimination against homosexuals, transgender people, women and people with disabilities. The proposal was rejected by the Italian Senate in 2021, but the urgency for such laws remains.

3. Develop initiatives and campaigns to promote equality in children's environments:

- **In order to break the cycle of gender stereotypes it remains essential to target children's daily activities.** As highlighted by the results of our survey and focus group, children still engage in stereotypical activities and play with stereotypical toys. Adherence to traditional views of masculinity and femininity can be limiting in many domains, such as the development of technological skills, the development of social skills, and divergent forms of emotional expression. Policymakers are encouraged to work cooperatively with schools and educational centers to enact information-sharing and awareness-raising campaigns to foster gender-neutral activities and create opportunities for both boys and girls to interact together (e.g., both boys and girls playing soccer or with dolls). Similarly, information-sharing and awareness-raising campaigns can be an effective way to engage parents and families in the breaking of traditional gender stereotypes and thus foster bottom-up change.
- **Policymakers must work cooperatively with private companies to develop a code of ethics to avoid the imposition of gender roles in toy commercials and advertisements.** This initiative would emulate a campaign enacted by the Spanish government in 2022, with great transferability potential for the Italian context. In order to ensure the execution of such rules and the development of information-sharing and awareness-raising campaigns, it is essential to enhance the appointment of a specialized authority figure in charge of monitoring the situation of gender roles in commercials and advertisements. Ideally, such monitoring will expand beyond the issue of toys to also consider other products and services.

4. Educators: The Role of Educational Centers as Spaces for the Promotion of Gender Equality:

- **Developing, implementing, and rigorously evaluating, evidence-based teacher training on this topic.** Following the policy-related recommendations on gender mainstreaming on the PTOF of educational centers, teachers should adopt internal gender equality plans (GEPs) to be sustained throughout the implementation of successive PTOFs and thus that are not a mere add-on to changing educational frameworks. GEPs aim to implement actions and projects to reduce gender inequalities and to enhance diversity with regard, for example, to age, culture, physical ability, sexual orientation, multilingualism. These should be rigorously evaluated through the identification of an internal authority to be in charge of monitoring and the drafting of periodic accountability reports. Consequently, they should be equipped to identify some of the prevalent gender differences outlined in this report (e.g., textbooks, teachers as role models) and have measurable steps to address these. Their application to the school environment implies that teachers become active agents for the promotion of gender equality in schools.

- **In this regard, it's necessary that educators to be involved in teacher-to-teacher peer learning opportunities for the sharing of best practices.** As outlined by our survey, teachers are important role models for boys and girls. One of the ways to carry this out is through the development of annual or bi-annual workshops within schools, or through the development of local networks of teachers who can share experiences across institutions and provide each other support. These workshops could be led by the authority responsible for evaluating progress within schools who would be most appropriately informed of developments and critical areas for improvement.
- **It is important to leverage what already exists on the Italian panorama, with regard to the creation of ad hoc tools and material to equip school personnel in dealing with gender-related issues.** In this regard, we highlight the Toolkit created within the EU-funded Ecarom project carried forward in Italy by the Istituto degli Innocenti.^c The toolkit includes methods that will help childcare pedagogues and teacher to improve their knowledge and daily praxis on the topics of men in professional care and men's responsibility for caring activities, as well as working with children in a gender sensitive manner including a focus on caring masculinities.
- **It's important to advocate for children to be exposed to a diverse pool of teachers and authority figures, in terms of gender and ethnic backgrounds,** leveraging again on the essential role of teachers for boys and girls. To this end, schools are encouraged to include in their GEPs specific mechanisms to ensure that recruitment is gender-balanced. Moreover, policies and projects aimed at limiting the strong feminization of the workforce should be promoted. For example, in English-speaking countries, governments and organizations that promote the image of the master's profession have set up websites for men to inform themselves about the profession and specific training opportunities (Rapino, 2019). In Sweden, higher education institutions, universities and colleges have implemented initiatives to increase the proportion of men in courses aimed at training primary school teachers: mentoring projects, networking and mentoring male teachers during the apprenticeship (Eurydice, 2010). Initiatives like these would reduce the overrepresentation of women as teachers and educators, and thus to deconstruct traditional social roles of masculinity and femininity from the early years. Similarly, teacher training workshops need to be adapted to equally mainstream the experiences, priorities and concerns of both male and female teachers. Schools are expected to work in a coordinated fashion with respect to the PTOF in order to ensure gender equality in all aspects of the educational facility.
- **One of the main aspects of teacher training should be to raise awareness for teachers and the educational facility as a whole to generate opportunities for both boys and girls to engage in conjoint activities defying gender stereotypes and the traditional engagement with certain types of toys and sports that are considered 'for boys' or 'for girls'.** The main objective is to allow boys and girls to experience and practice the emotional tools shared through gender transformative education.

^c For more information visit their website at https://ecarom.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Ecarom_Toolbox.pdf

As a good practice regarding this issue, we can identify the [conversation cards developed by GBI](#), that “aim to open up conversations between kids and parents”. [Champion of Change Program, for Plan International](#), is another opportunity for children to participate in activities that break down established social roles. Champions of Change for Girls’ Rights and Gender Equality promotes gender equality and social norm change through youth engagement and peer-to-peer mobilization. The program, developed by Plan International, includes adaptable and adolescent-friendly activities that encourage girls and boys to build their knowledge, attitudes and skills, through separate but interrelated curricula. The journey of change for girls focuses on empowerment, self-esteem, and rights awareness. The boys’ journey focuses on unpacking dominant, harmful and restrictive masculinities, and how boys can support girls’ rights and gender justice for all. The program is currently active in 41 countries.

5. Academics: Building Knowledge on Gender-Transformative Education:

- **Academics should be engaging with research contributing evidence toward the construction of gender-transformative education programs**, such as collaborating in the construction of databases and indicators to evaluate progress both on a macro and micro level. Due to current developments in relation to gender equality and a dynamic and fast-changing environment, academics can be essential in the provision of evidence on current measures to feed public policies.
- **Encourage the development of critical studies and applied research on gender and masculinities, especially during childhood and adolescence.** Although attention to this area has grown in the last decade, Italian scientific production is still limited to a few reference authors, as the general focus remains on thematic strands about women’s empowerment. At the same time, most existing research in the Italian context merely considers data from the Northern regions and thus does not representatively depict the evolution of masculinities and stereotypical gender views. Therefore, new projects that collect data from all Italian regions are needed to shed light on national patterns and regional disparities.
- In addition to the generation of evidence, universities are spaces for the promotion of equality. **They should therefore advocate the promotion of non-research activities such as symposia, talks, and activities to bring about top-down change in perceptions of gender stereotypes.**

6. Media:

- **Media channels should be pluralistic in the representation of children in terms of gender roles.** Indeed, notwithstanding the progress obtained, media are still playing an active role in producing and perpetuating wrong gender stereotypes. For this, we echo what suggested by the Council of Europe Conference on “Media and the Image of Women”, which took place in Amsterdam in July 2013, which called for the adoption of good practices as “national and targeted media campaigns, specific legislation, prizes/ awards for non-stereotyped portrayal of women [...] training courses directed at mass media professionals” by Italian stakeholders.

- As children's digital life becomes increasingly digitalized, the role of the media plays an essential role in the construction and propagation of gender stereotypes, **media should outlets to work cooperatively to construct a code of ethics protecting minors**, modelled on the already established Code of Marketing Communication Self-Regulation developed by the Institute for Advertising Self-Regulation (IAP for its acronym in Italian) which already makes special reference to children but merely focuses on recommending the avoidance of violent messages. At the same time, the recommendations are mainly focused on advertisements for food and beverages, and thus leave a myriad of products unaddressed. The Code must incorporate gender equality issues, which should be addressed from an early age. It's necessary that the Code to expand these messages to other products, such as toys. As established in our recommendations to policymakers, this is a crucial step to break down traditional views of masculinity. While the 2013 MoU signed by the IAP and the Italian Minister of Labour and Social Policies institutes the avoidance of gender stereotypes in media outlets, a specific code is necessary for advertisement.
- **The media should also be used as a source of education, even if it needs to be regulated in terms of its display of gender stereotypes.** In this way, media outlets should engage in awareness-raising and information-sharing campaigns which engage with novel forms of masculinity and thus the breakdown of traditional gender stereotypes. These initiatives should especially target children and thus be entertaining from a young age. Awareness-raising and information-sharing campaigns would be ideally established with the cooperation of policymakers, such as the one previously recommended in relation to toys.

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