



RADICAL: At Egalia every detail has been carefully planned to make sure the children don't fall into gender stereotypes.

PHOTO/AP

Gender-free kindy: No boys or girls allowed . . .

Sweden

AT THE "Egalia" preschool, staff avoid using words like "him" or "her" and address the 33 kids as "friends" rather than girls and boys.

From the colour and placement of toys to the choice of books, every detail has been planned to make sure the children don't fall into gender stereotypes.

"Society expects girls to be girly, nice and pretty and boys to be manly, rough and outgoing," said Jenny Johnsson, a 31-year-old teacher. "Egalia gives them a fantastic opportunity to be whoever they want to be."

The taxpayer-funded preschool which opened last year in the liberal Södermalm district of Stockholm for kids aged 1 to 6 is among the most radical examples of Sweden's efforts to engineer equality between the sexes.

Breaking down gender roles is a core mission in the preschool curriculum, underpinned by the theory that even in highly egalitarian-minded Sweden, society gives boys an unfair edge.

To even things out, many preschools have hired "gender pedagogues" to help staff identify language and behaviour that risk reinforcing stereotypes.

Some parents worry things have gone too far. An obsession with obliterating gender roles, they say, could make the children confused and ill-prepared to face the world outside kindergarten.

"Different gender roles aren't problematic as long as they are equally valued," said Tanja Bergkvist, a 37-year-old leading voice against what she calls "gender madness" in Sweden.

Those bent on shattering gender roles "say there's a hierarchy where everything that boys do is given higher value, but I wonder who decides that it has higher value," she said.

At Egalia — the title connotes "equality" — boys and girls play together with a toy kitchen.

Lego bricks and other building blocks are placed next to the kitchen, to make sure the children draw no mental barriers between cooking and construction.

Director Lotta Rajalin notes that Egalia places a special emphasis on fostering an environment tolerant of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. From a bookcase, she pulls out a story about two male giraffes who are sad to be childless — until they come across an abandoned crocodile egg.

Nearly all the children's books deal

with homosexual couples, single parents or adopted children. There are no *Snow White*, *Cinderella* or other classic fairy tales seen as cementing stereotypes. Rajalin, 52, said the staff also tried to help the children discover new ideas when they played.

"A concrete example could be when they're playing 'house' and the role of the mum already is taken and they start to squabble," she said. "Then we suggest two mums or three mums and so on."

Egalia's methods are controversial; some say they amount to mind control.

Rajalin said the staff have received threats from racists apparently upset about the preschool's use of black dolls. But she said that there was a long waiting list for admission.

Jukka Korpi, 44, said he and his wife chose Egalia "to give our children all the possibilities based on who they are and not on their gender."

Egalia is unusual even for Sweden. Staff try to shed masculine and feminine references from their speech, including the pronouns him or her — "han" or "hon" in Swedish. Instead, they've have adopted the genderless "hen," a word that doesn't exist in Swedish but is used in some feminist and gay circles.

— AP