Some key facts

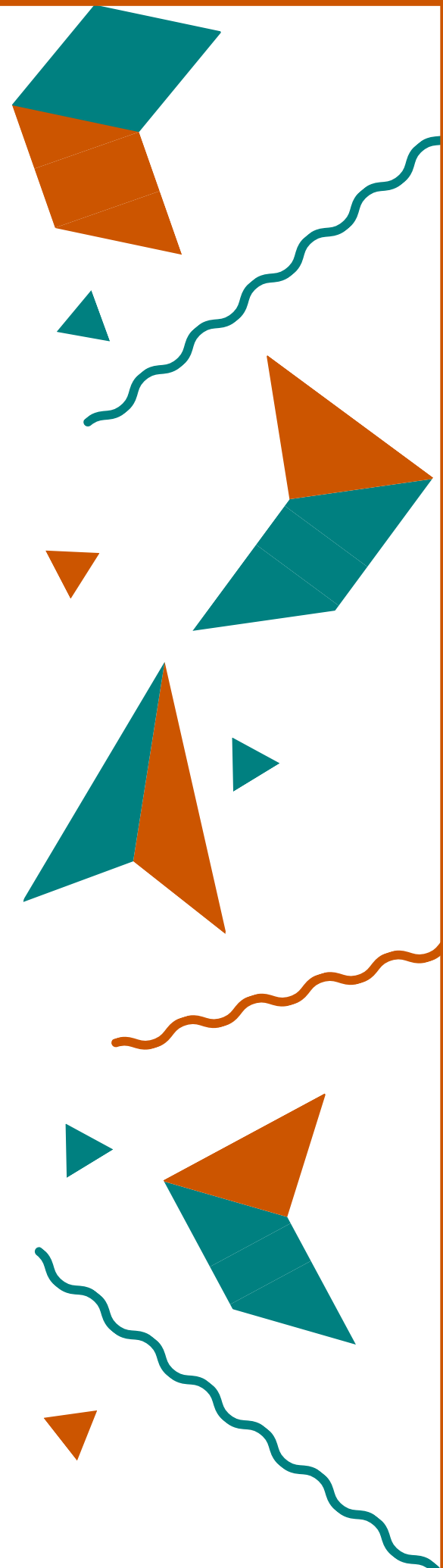**What is unconscious gender bias?**

A. Picture this:

A father and his son are involved in a horrific car crash and the man died at the scene. When the child arrived at the hospital and was rushed into the operating theatre, the surgeon pulled away and said: "I can't operate on this boy, he's my son".

How can this be?

B. Now, picture a nurse. Who do you see?

Some key facts

The answer to section A is that the surgeon was the boy's mother. People often unconsciously assume that the surgeon is a man.

For section B, most people imagine the nurse as a woman. These are both examples of our unconscious bias showing itself.

Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.
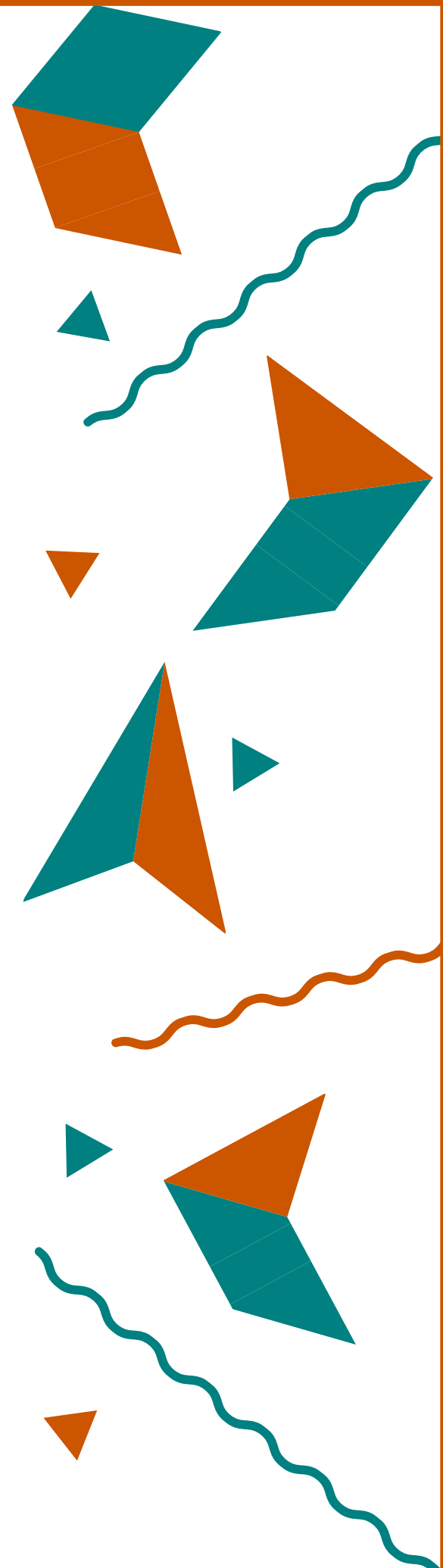(Office of Diversity and Outreach, University of California).
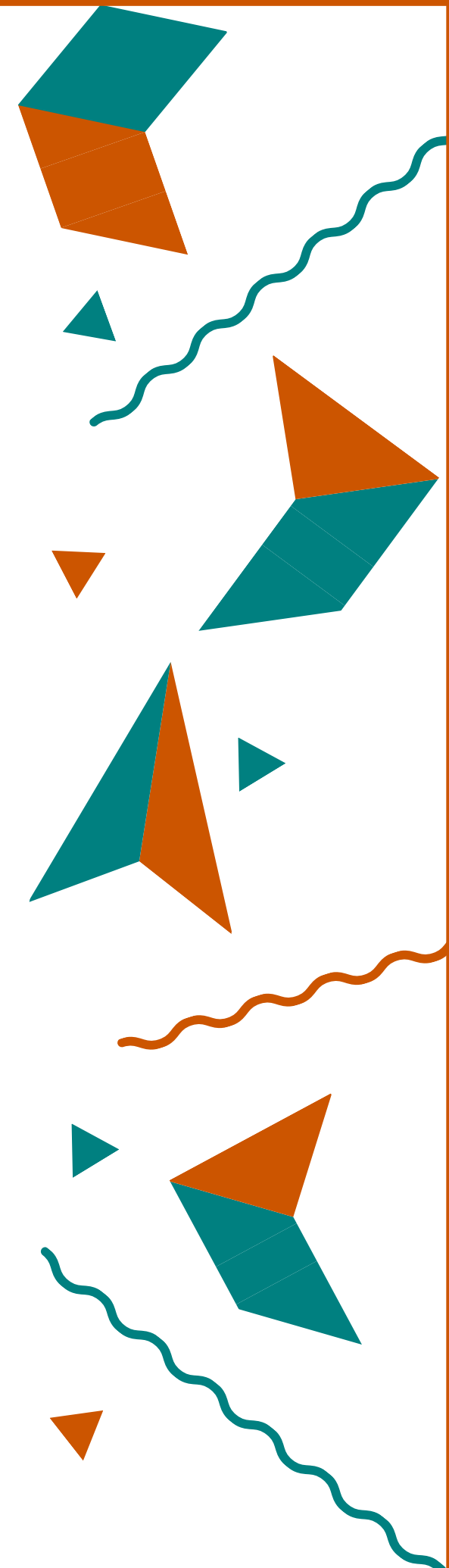
Some key facts

Why is it important to consider unconscious gender bias in the context of raising children?

The Fawcett Society's 2020 report 'Unlimited potential' has highlighted the key reasons to challenge gender stereotypes and the main limitations caused by them.

1. **Limitations to girls' education and career opportunities.** By the age of 6 girls are avoiding STEM (Science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects, resulting in a lower take up of these subjects in later life. This is not only limiting girls' opportunities to succeed in these subjects, but also removing opportunities for society to benefit from girls' and women's intellect and point of view.
2. **Limitations to boys' educational development.** The gender achievement gap is when girls tend to outperform boys in school, especially in primary school. Typically, boys develop lower reading skills in the early school years and this then impacts on their achievement across all subjects in later years.
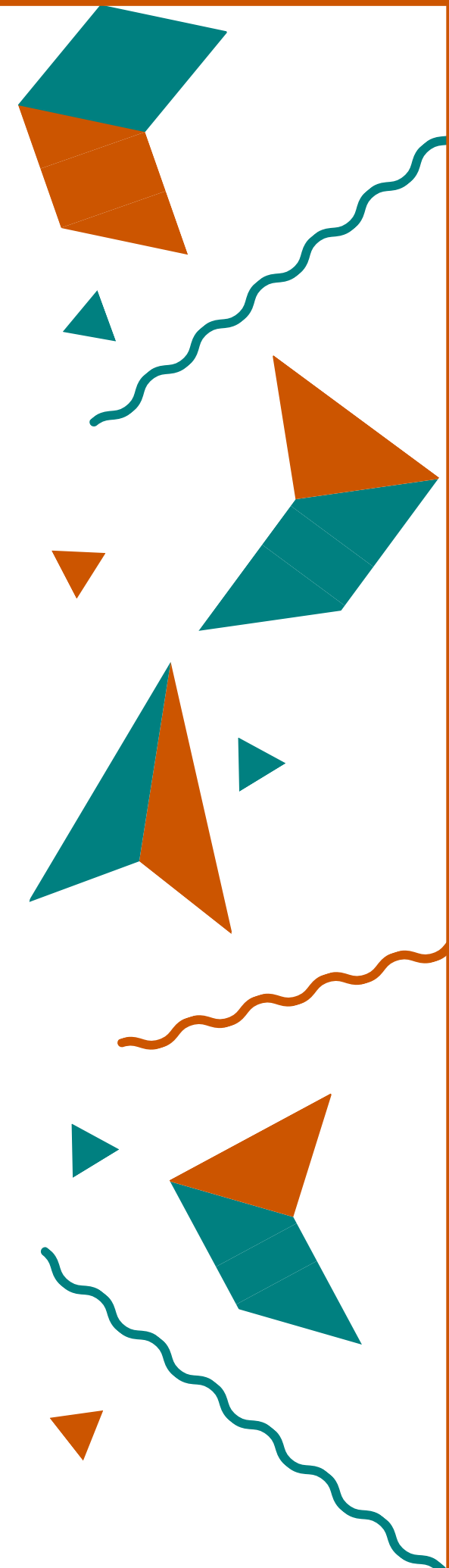
Some key facts

Why is it important to consider unconscious gender bias in the context of raising children?

3. **Poorer wellbeing** among children who have more gender stereotyped views or whose friends do. This includes:
   a. lower self esteem in boys and **less ability to talk about their emotions**.
   b. 36% of girls aged 7-10 feeling their looks are their most important attribute, leading to **body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and suicide attempts in later life**.
   c. The expectation of men being 'stoic' and the main breadwinner contributes to **higher male suicide rates**.
   d. There is significant research which shows that challenging gender stereotypes in early years **can reduce violence against women and girls**.
   e. Gender stereotypes **intersect** with stereotypes about race to cause harm, from exclusion of Black boys to assumptions about submissiveness of Muslim girls.
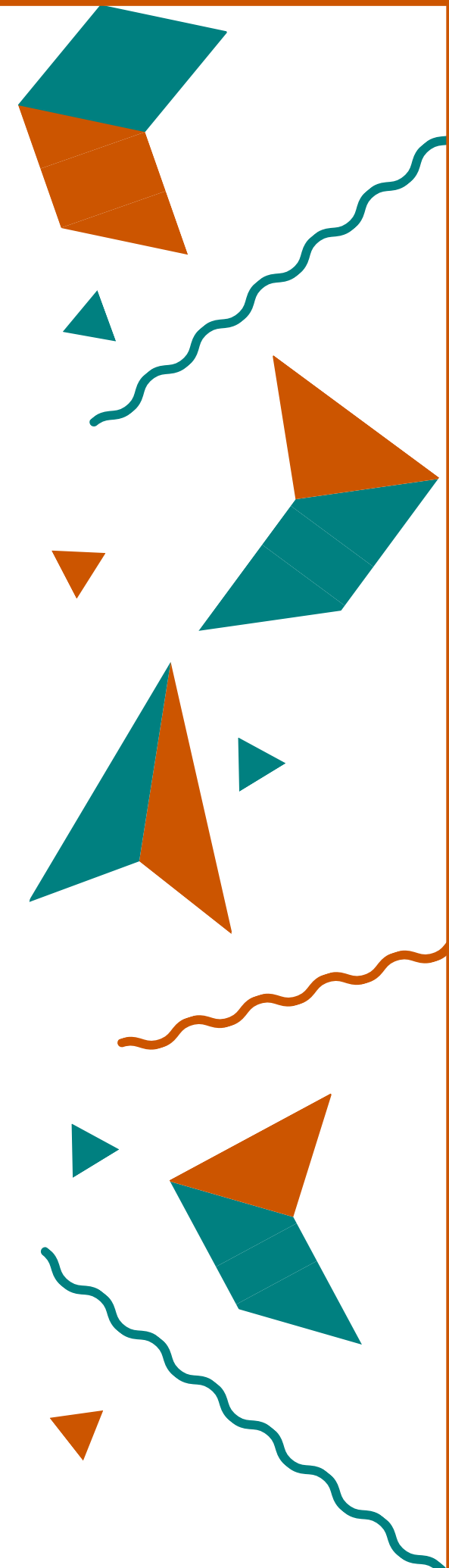
'Unlimited potential: Report of the commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood' The Fawcett Society, 2020.

Some key facts

What is gender?

Take a minute to think about your understanding of the terms 'gender' and 'sex'.
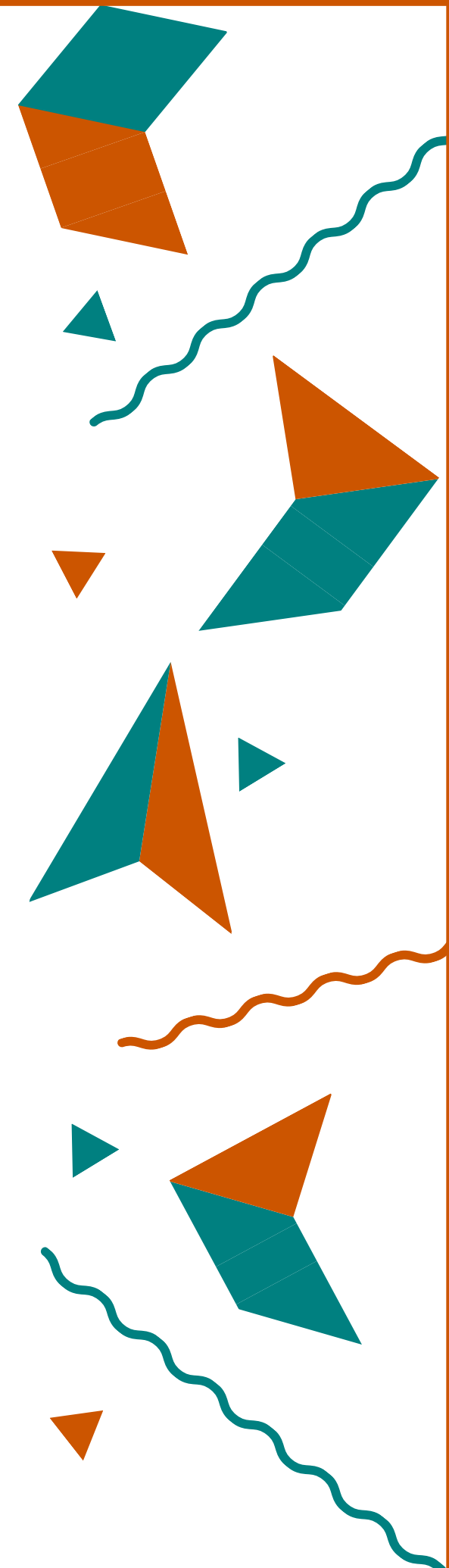
Some key facts

What is gender?

GENDER

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.
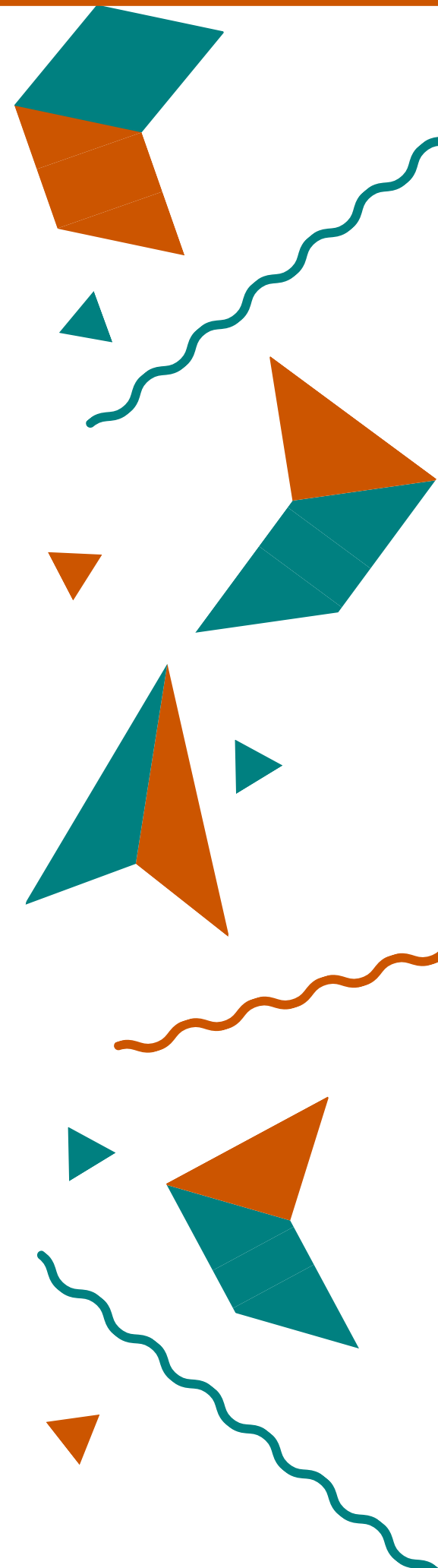*World Health Organisation*

SEX

Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.
The Oxford Dictionary

Some key facts

There are many different ways people present themselves in terms of gender. Gender is often referred to as a spectrum; below are some of the terms that you might come across. For more detailed information on the gender spectrum visit: https://genderspectrum.org/

Third gender

Two spirit

Agender

Genderqueer

Cisgender

Non-binary

FTM

MTF

Gender fluid

Pangender

Gender nonconforming

Questioning

Transgender

Boys vs Girls: Stereotypes, Nature vs Nurture

Take 5 minutes to **create two lists** of all the words/phrases you can think of associated with boy children vs girl children, anything you hear people say from bump to babies and beyond.

Are there general trends we can see looking at the lists? Are they 'true'? If these are the words we use to talk about our babies from before they are even born, is it **nature or nurture**?

Boys vs Girls: Stereotypes, Nature vs Nurture

In Gina Rippon's book 'The Gendered Brain' she explains that development in brain scanning and imaging has shown there is very little difference between male and female brains.

However, the brain is always learning, changing and responding to it's environment, it is hungry for rules to follow and picks up on cues from the environment it lives in.

The key message is that despite no significant biological differences, every brain is unique and a result of it's experiences and environment, so **"a gendered world will produce a gendered brain"**.

Gina Rippon, 'The Gendered Brain: The new neuroscience that shatters the myth of the female brain', 2019.
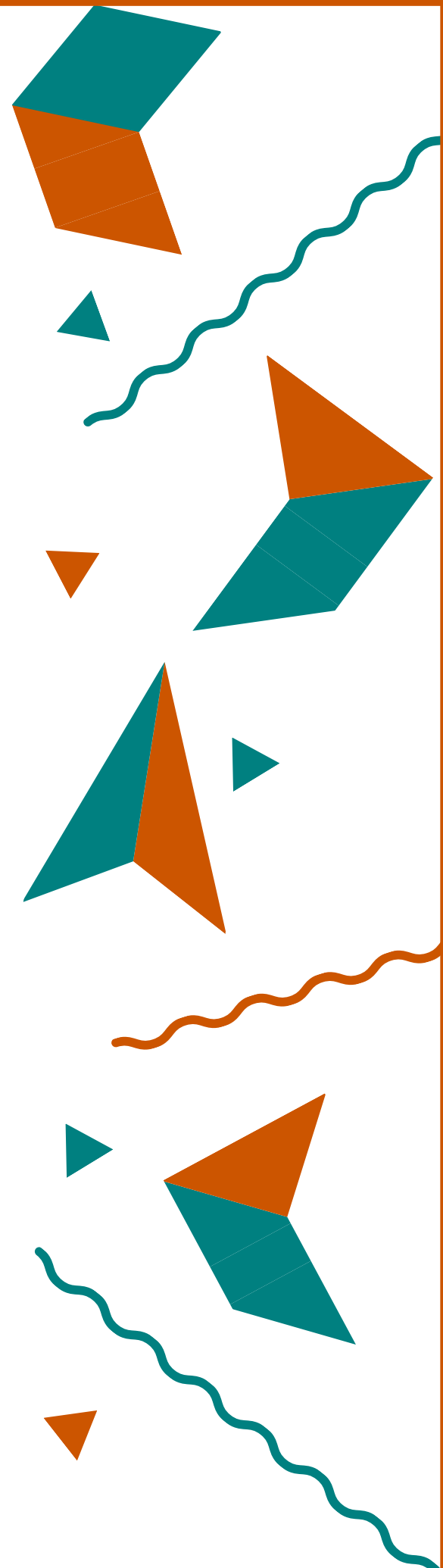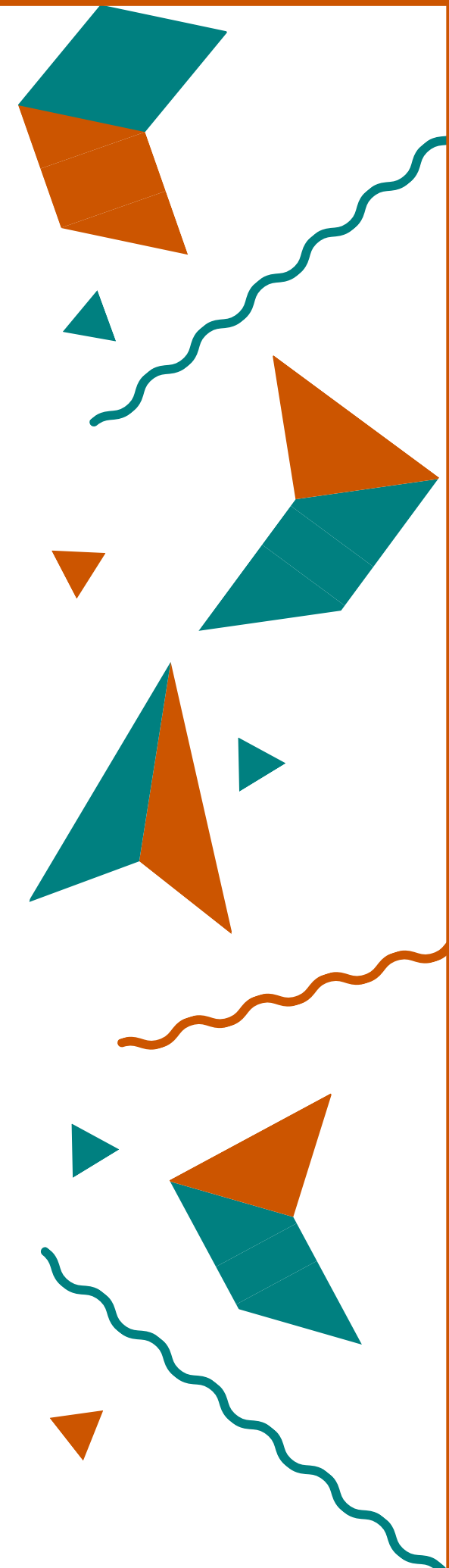
Casting Children in Gender Roles

In their book 'How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk', Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish describe the habit we often have of casting children into roles (ie the responsible one, the troublemaker).

In these books, the authors talk about how when a child is cast in a role, parents reinforce the behaviour through their expectation of it and then eventually the child starts playing out that role because it is expected.

Gender stereotyping is also casting children in roles.

"What if a child has already been cast in a role, for whatever reason? Does that mean [they have] to play out that part for the rest of [their] life? [Are they] stuck with it, or can [they] be freed to become whatever [they're] capable of becoming?"
   Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, 'How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk', 2013 edition, page 209-10.

Casting Children in Gender Roles

Faber and Mazlish have six tips for freeing children from playing roles, four of which are particularly relevant to challenging gender stereotypes:

1. Look for opportunities to show the child a new picture of himself or herself.

    Example: To a girl who might be at risk of avoiding STEM subjects – "You just figured out how to fix that toy all by yourself, you have a great head for mechanics" or to a boy "Look how helpful you were when that little baby was crying. You were so caring and considerate trying to help them feel better and now they are smiling."

1. Put children in situations where they can see themselves differently.

    Example: Maybe ask your daughter to help with DIY or ask your son to help with looking after a baby sibling.

Casting Children in Gender Roles

Faber and Mazlish have six tips for freeing children from playing roles, four of which are particularly relevant to challenging gender stereotypes:

3. Let children overhear you say something positive about them.
   Example: On the phone to granny, "John is so communicative about his feelings, we had a great conversation today about what makes us sad and what we need when we feel that way" or "Jane has gotten so strong, she carried all the heavy bags from the shop in by herself today".
4. Model the behaviour you'd like to see.

Using these tips, can you **think of a situation from your own life where you can challenge traditional gender roles** with your child(ren)?

Reflection

Unconscious bias affects us all.

The way to start making change is to **identify and acknowledge our own biases and start taking steps to change them** – not criticising ourselves or feeling embarrassed when we realise what we're doing, but feeling empowered to recognise it and take action.

Think about your own practice as a parent, or your preparations for parenthood if you are expecting your first. Can you think of one way in which you might inadvertently be casting your child(ren) in a gender role?

Is there **one thing you could do differently** over the next few weeks to start to change this?

Resources

A few links to websites, resources, videos and blogs that you might find interesting to view when you have the time.

- Downloadable poster for parents on raising children without gender stereotypes: https://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/resources/raising-children-without-gender-stereotypes/
- 'Unlimited potential: Report of the commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood' The Fawcett Society, 2020.
- No More Boys and Girls documentary: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092pjs2
- https://www.amightygirl.com/
- https://www.fathersnetwork.org.uk/
- https://genderspectrum.org/