How is gender portrayed in children’s TV and films?

- Much of children’s TV content continues to have strong overtones of “male/female jobs.” (Smith, 2013)

  Some research suggests that media exposure is associated with children’s tendency to gender-stereotype jobs (Wright et al., 1995)

- One analysis broke down the TV shows into 3 age categories: TVY (suitable for all children), TV7 (suitable for 7 & above), and TVG (suitable for all ages).
  - Males occur roughly twice as often as females across shows. (Smith, 2008)
  - In TVY there were 1.64 males to every 1 female; for TVG there was 1.48 males to 1 female.
    - the younger the show’s target, the less female representation.
  - Females in animated content were almost 4 times as likely as males to be in sexy clothes and twice as likely to have tiny waists and unrealistic body shapes.

- In an analysis of 9 Disney movies (England, et al., 2011),
  - Gender stereotypes, such as females being associated with submission, affection, fearfulness, and domesticated work, were prevalent in current films as well as earlier ones.
  - All the Disney movies portrayed heterosexual love as a sudden, quick emotion that always won, leaving a happy ending to the story.

- Another analysis found that Disney films associate beauty with goodness, and a follow-up study found that children observe this association. (Bazzini et al., 2010).
  - When perceived beauty increased so did perceived friendliness, goodness, intelligence, a more favorable ending, and romantic involvement.
  - Disney films reinforce that attractive characters are more likely to achieve positive life outcomes and to experience more happiness throughout life.

How do these portrayals affect children’s gender role beliefs?

It is difficult to measure gender stereotypes in children, but two studies try to determine the relationship between watching TV and children’s knowledge of adult sex-role stereotypes (McGhee & Frueh, 1975 & 1980).

- Girls and boys in grades 1, 3, 5, & 7 were grouped into heavy and light TV viewing groups. The children were then given a ‘Sex Stereotype Measure’ to see how prevalent their stereotype attitudes changed were over time.
  - Heavy TV viewers had more stereotypes than light media users.
  - Among light TV viewers the perception of male stereotypes goes down with age.
  - Among heavy TV viewers, male stereotypes are maintained with increasing age.
  - Among 3-6 year-olds, heavy TV viewers held more stereotypes of occupations appropriate for each sex than did light viewers.
In the other study, children were similarly grouped into heavy and light viewers then scheduled to watch a set of TV shows. During which, they filled out a ‘TV watching survey’ (McGhee & Frueh, 1975).

- Higher TV viewers scored higher in holding stereotypical views.
- Boys also scored higher for holding stereotypes.
- The older the kids were (range of kindergarten to grade 6), the higher the stereotype scores were.

In an international study (Germany, United States, and China) 4-6 year old boys and girls were asked to choose videos they would most like to watch (Knobloch, et al., 2005).

- Across the countries and cultures, both sexes preferred watching shows with protagonists of their own sex, and with protagonists behaving in gender-stereotyped ways (e.g., girls as peaceful; boys as aggressive).
- This pattern increased with age, suggesting it is socially learned, not biological.

**What can be done to reduce effects of stereotypical gender roles?**

It is suggested that active mediation can reduce effects of exposure to stereotypical gender roles through TV content (Nathanson et al., 2002). There are false beliefs that viewing counterstereotypical content alone is helpful in reducing stereotypes, children often ignore this type of content.

- **Active mediation** consists of actively drawing children’s attention to TV content creating a dialogue of the pros/cons with them about it.
- Active mediation can work to draw a child’s attention to the counter-stereotypical content so they cognitively process the information they might otherwise not notice.

There are two suggestions for using active mediation:

- It should occur during the content or immediately after to prevent ignoring the counter-stereotype.
- Repetition of active mediation increases the likelihood that counter-stereotypical content is not forgotten.

In addition, a study looking at kindergarten and second graders’ gender role attitudes found that having greater knowledge of stereotypical and nontraditional gender roles as seen in “The Cosby Show”, “Growing Pains” and “Who’s the Boss” may lead to a more flexible view of gender roles (Rosenwasser, et al. 1989).

- Second graders were more open to both males and females working in a specific occupation; the kindergarteners were more consistent with traditional gender roles.
- The older children comprehended the nontraditional shows and had more knowledge of traditional gender roles than the younger children.
- As children are exposed to nontraditional content they gain gender role knowledge which leads to higher gender role flexibility.
References


