

Gender Representation on Children's Television

Since children acquire gender stereotypes at a young age, such as more often selecting a male as construction worker, and choosing a female to be a teacher by the age of two or three (Gettys & Caan, 1981, in Matlin 2000) it seems necessary to examine where they encounter and learn them.

One likely source is television, a branch of the media often blamed for negatively influencing children. For example, Thompson and Zerbinos, found that males are shown more often in kids programs, and that boys and girls often engage in activities stereotypical for their gender (1995, in Matlin 2000). They also showed that these representational patterns are noticed by children who watch them (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1997, in Matlin 2000) and are worth further study. My data collection focused on the representation of gender on television aimed at children, in the proportion of males to females and the use or contradiction of gender stereotypes. I chose to watch a variety of children's television shows, on public and commercial stations, in the morning and during the after school hours, to get a broader range of types of shows and to see if any major differences in gender portrayal exists.

On public television I watched an hour-long episode of "Sesame Street" and a half an hour of "Dragon Tales". On the WB I watched "Recess" and "Buzz Lightyear," and "Action Man" on Fox, all of which were a half an hour. I noted the proportion of major or minor male characters to female characters, and the roles they had. Specifically, I looked for violence, action and leadership as stereotypical male characteristics, and emotional behavior and passivity in females, as well as stereotyped activities or occupations, such as sports or crime fighting for males, dolls or motherhood for girls. During commercials I also looked for these stereotypes and their use in selling products, the proportion of males to females, and the presence of male or female narration. The most glaring example of gender inequity I found was the small proportion of females shown. All of shows except "Sesame Street" are narrative based on a group of friends or team members. There were always fewer females than males in these groups, ranging from 4:3 on "Dragon Tales" to 4:1 on "Buzz Lightyear." The only other female characters were either villains, as on "Buzz Lightyear" or teachers on "Recess." On "Sesame Street" girls and boys were pictured fairly equally in the live action segments, but there are more males in the Muppets and other regular characters. In the twenty one commercials aimed at children that I watched, boys were pictured more often, especially in ads for toys such as cars and action figures. In food commercials, either all boys or a group that contained more boys was used, except for in one Trix yogurt ad. There were no ads for stereotypical girl toys, perhaps because only one show, "Recess" had a gender neutral theme, school, on commercial TV. The other two commercial shows were about crime fighting and action. Male narration was also overwhelming - there was only one female narrator in all the shows and commercials. The results of the gender role observations were less clear. On the action shows, female characters were not passive or less competent at the physical demands of their jobs. Both shows featured males as the team leaders, however, and the token female on "Buzz Lightyear" had the special power of mind reading, a more sensitive, emotional task. The female villain on "Action Man" used seduction as well as guns to fight the male protagonist. On "Recess," two boys competed with each other to work as the school's

"A.V. kid," showing stereotypical male behavior as the focus of the show. On "Dragon Tales," a brother and sister ride dragons colored gender stereotypically blue and pink. The episode features the girl dragon discovering that her talent is helping others, which she chooses to do instead of perform at a talent show like the others. "Sesame Street" featured Elmo and Zoe and Big Bird learning to share in a range of activities - playing catch, drawing, and building with blocks - showing the least amount of gender differentiation. The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from my results are that females are under-represented in children's television, consistent with the more formal research. It is possible that girls will find a lack of role models or characters with which to identify. Hopefully, they can look past the gender of the typical male protagonist and admire him for his skills, wit and bravery just as their male peers can. I found the small number of females in the action shows especially unsettling, as this may communicate that women can do what men can, but they are still less important and can't be leaders. While gender stereotypes weren't strictly adhered to, they showed a tendency found in other research (Etaugh & Liss, 1992; Boston & Levy, 1991 in Matlin 2000) - that it is more acceptable and likely for girls to take-part in male activities than vice versa. There was no evidence of men in stereotypically women's jobs, and they only even vaguely emotional or feminine behavior in a boy was when Elmo learned to share. The continued division by stereotypes between shows and commercials aimed at boys, girls, and both seems to benefit advertisers and television executives, as it allows for product specialization and dividing up the market into sectors, increasing the kinds of shows and toys they can sell. It is unlikely that encouraging gender stereotypes has any benefit or the children who watch television, except to prime them to fit into our gender-biased culture.