



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Talking to Kids about Gender Stereotypes

Images of men and women in the media are often based on stereotypical roles of males and females in our society. Because stereotyping can affect how children feel about themselves and how they relate to others, it's important that they learn to recognize and understand gender stereotypes in different media.

Here are some tips to help kids understand how boys and girls and men and women are stereotyped in the media.

Start talking about gender stereotyping early on. Familiarize young children with the concept of stereotyping (simple, one-dimensional portrayals of people, based on generalizations based on gender, race, age, etc.) and help them understand the role gender stereotypes play in the storybooks and cartoons they enjoy. Point out non-traditional heroes and heroines in children's media.

When you see stereotypes in your children's media, explain that when one member of a group is portrayed in a particular way it isn't a problem, but when most or all members of that group are shown that way it can limit how we see other that – and can limit how we see ourselves. In some cases, stereotypes can make us see members of a group just as cartoons and not real people.

Look at how boys and girls are stereotyped in advertisements and in movies and TV programs. Talk about how these images are limiting for children, who may feel they aren't "normal" because they don't fit the mould, for example, a girl who plays sports aggressively or a boy who likes reading and drawing.

Ask kids to think about how realistically males and females are portrayed in the media. Ask them to compare the images of men and women they see on TV with people they know in real life. Are the standards for attractiveness the same for men and women? Are females generally more concerned about personal relationships, while men are more concerned about their careers?

Help kids become aware of the *number* of female and male characters in the media they watch. Female characters are often in the minority in children's programs, and many have only one. Point out to kids that in that situation the character can't avoid being stereotyped as "the girl." To counter this, you can write to the producers requesting more female characters (parent demands led to the addition of a second female character in the popular show Paw Patrol). In the nearer term, you can encourage your children to invent extra characters that they can incorporate into their imaginative play.

Examine advertising for a stereotypical male (someone who is confident, physically active, aggressive, in control) and a stereotypical female (someone who is beautiful, helpless, domestic, sexually attractive). Discuss how such images can influence how we perceive sex roles.



Keep an eye on gender in merchandising. Even when there are female characters in kids' media, they're often missing from the toys, t-shirts, and other merchandising that's spun off from it. You can write to the makers of those products and ask them to include more female characters. You can also ask questions when characters appear differently in merchandising than they do in the original show or movie. For example, if Mulan spends most of her movie dressed as a boy, why is she in girls' clothes on the merchandising?

Talk about the messages kids' media sends about relationships. For example, if your child enjoys Disney movies, ask them: Do you think you can really change an angry person into a nice person, like Belle does to the Beast? Is it worth it to give up your voice and your family for a boy, the way Ariel does?

Watch out for how parents are portrayed. Are characters' mothers only shown in nurturing roles, with "mom" as their whole identity? Are fathers portrayed as the "doofus dad" stereotype, or shown only in non-nurturing roles? Encourage your children to compare the parents they see on TV to their own and their friends' parents.

Talk about the differences in video games designed for boys and girls. How many games only allow you to play a male character? How many female characters in games exist only to be endangered or rescued? How are female characters in popular games portrayed physically? How are males portrayed? Visit one of the "casual game" sites popular with youth and compare the "girl games" section with the other sections. What does it say that "girl games" are their own section? What kinds of games are found there, and what messages about gender do they send?

Look at gender portrayal in popular music. Discuss the marketing of male and female musical artists: how does it differ? What role does attractiveness play in the promotion of female artists: is it the same for male artists? Talk about the sexism and violence directed at women in some music lyrics and videos.

When your children start using social networks, talk to them about the different expectations for boys and girls. How are they expected to present themselves differently, in posts or photos? How are the "rules" around how they're supposed to behave different for boys and girls?

Look for strong, realistic portrayals of men and women. The media can provide engaging, positive and non-traditional role models for boys and girls. Counter the many stereotypical gender portrayals kids are exposed to with media portrayals of sensitive men and strong women.

