

Gender and Early Years: Books and Television



Children's Television, Films and Literature

The world of children's literature, film and television is a never-ending universe of material. As parents of under 5s, we do have some control over what our children read and watch, but the influence of friends, family and the outside world quickly starts to challenge that control. Not to mention, what parent has time to read and watch everything first to judge it's suitability?!

The conversation around gender stereotypes in the context of children's books and telly could go on forever. Can we share the "classics" which we enjoyed as children with our own kids? How can we avoid books/tv with stereotypes? Do we need to? What books/tv are ok? The debate might be neverending, but here is a place to start.



Children's Books

Over a week or so, as you read to your child(ren) or take some time to think about their books and make a note of the roles and characteristics that tend to be associated with girls versus boys in the stories and nursery rhymes.

Note the illustrations as well; how are girls/boys represented in the pictures?

Some books display obvious gender stereotyping; traditional fairy tales and nursery rhymes tend to suffer from this for example. With many books, however, there is more subtle but just as problematic stereotyping.



Questions to help assess a book/film/tv show

Who are the main characters? How many are male/female?

What jobs/tasks are the male/female characters doing?

How are male/female characters represented in the pictures?

Are there platonic friendships between male and female characters?

Could you easily swap the genders of the characters?



Talk it out

If you've assessed a book or programme and found it problematic, does that mean you have to avoid it? That's up to you, but it is not always possible to avoid the books and shows you would rather your child didn't watch. Why not use it as an opportunity to talk about the issues instead?

Ask your child questions, share your own opinions, compare the events/characters in the story with your own experiences.



Talk it out

For example, a 4 year old picks up an old copy of Snow White in the library and insists on reading it. The story sends strong messages about the importance of being beautiful (both in the context of leadership and love), depicts a woman in a stereotypical housekeeping role and ends with a damsel in distress saved by a prince.

While this might be a gender roles nightmare, it can also be a springboard for conversations about why the characters think beauty is so important and what is really important in our own lives. It's a chance to talk about what love is, beyond just 'first sight' and beauty.

Why not even use it as an opportunity to write your own version together where Snow White feels empowered to take on a leadership role and confront her troubles head on?



What else is out there?

There are lots of books out there which challenge stereotypes! We think it can be ok to keep some of the classics if you throw in lots of other stereotype-challenging material to balance it out.

Books are a brilliant way to challenge stereotypes, not just about gender but race, sexuality, ability and more! Here are two lists to get you started:

32 Picture Books That Defy Gender Stereotypes (Children's Library Lady)

<https://childrenslibrarylady.com/gender-stereotypes-picture-books/>

10 of the Best Feminist Books for Children (Book Trust)

<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2017/october/ten-of-the-best-feminist-books-for-children/>



Children's Television

Try the same exercises with the programmes and films your kids watch. Assess the shows, talk it out, look for alternatives.

In our experience, tv can be a trickier one to manage than books. Often you may not be watching with your kids so can miss the opportunities to talk about the issues. Then there's the influence of friends and advertising - trying to pull a kid away from Paw Patrol in favour of the unknown can be a challenge! It is worth a start though, even if it's just an occasional chat or suggestion.

Here is a list to help you look for stereotype-challenging shows:

Feminist Kids Shows for Lockdown (Zero Tolerance)

<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/news/blog/feminist-kids-shows-for-lockdown-/>



Resources

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

- 'Children's career aspirations limited by gender stereotypes and background'
- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2018/jan/childrens-career-aspirations-limited-gender-stereotypes-and-background>
- 32 Picture Books That Defy Gender Stereotypes
<https://childrenslibrarylady.com/gender-stereotypes-picture-books/>
- 10 of the Best Feminist Books for Children <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2017/october/ten-of-the-best-feminist-books-for-children/>
- Feminist Kids Shows for Lockdown
<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/news/blog/feminist-kids-shows-for-lockdown-/>
- 'Everyday Ways to Bust Gender Stereotypes' from the Girl Scouts, including 'Watch, then talk' <https://www.girlscouts.org/en/raising-girls/leadership/life-skills/everyday-ways-to-bust-gender-stereotypes.html>

