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See It, Be It:

What Children Are Seeing On TV

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.™

 Nielsen



Executive Summary

Since 2004, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media has advocated for greater inclusion and better representation in global entertainment media through research and advocacy. In our effort to continue to move the needle forward, we analyzed the inclusion and representation of six groups (women, people of color, queer people, people with disabilities,¹ people ages 50 and older, and people who are fat²) in two different types of media content. First, we looked at inclusion and representation in **popular** programming with children ages 2 to 11 according to Nielsen metrics, which includes the 10 most popular broadcast, cable, and streaming shows, inclusive of Spanish-language programming.³ Second, we analyzed inclusion and representation in **current** children's programming, including shows that premiered in 2021 and shows that didn't *premiere* in 2021 but were still airing new seasons.⁴ In this full report, we look at differences in representation and inclusion within each type of media content, as well as compare across these formats. We refer to them as **popular** and **current**, and split out *new* content from **current** content, occasionally.

We focus on **popular** programming because, as frequent consumers of scripted TV shows,⁵ we think it is critical to understand what young people are seeing. As ample research has found, the effects of media on the social, psychological, and physical development of children is profound.⁶ We focus on **current** programming to get a sense of how the entertainment industry is responding to calls for more diverse and dynamic children's content. Audiences seek out content that tells their stories, and we need more diverse storytelling and characters to meet that demand. Moreover, programs with more diverse casts yield higher audience ratings, compared with programs with less diverse casts.⁷ The analysis of inclusion and representation in **current** (and new) programming will serve as a benchmark to track further change and progress in television media made for children.

Is Gender Parity in Children's TV Slipping?

In past reports, we have found gender parity among lead characters in our research about children's television. This year, we report that in the 2021 season of TV made for children, most lead characters are male (61.6%). So, what happened? There are two important factors that can help us see this issue more clearly: datasets and character types.

As just described, this year, we are examining children's television from two perspectives: what is **popular** with children and what is **current** (this includes shows made for children that are currently **on air**). Our past reports have focused on **popular** programming.

This year, 48.8% of leads in **popular** TV shows are women — about a 4-percentage-point increase from 2019 but still below 2018, when 52.0% of leads were women. The parity we have previously observed and celebrated remains.

However, what is popular with kids isn't necessarily what is made for kids. With this in mind, this year we expanded this study by adding a second dataset of **current** children's TV shows -- that is, scripted television shows, made for children, that released new episodes in the 2021-2022 season. There, we find the numbers regarding gender are a little bit different. In **current** children's programming, most lead characters are male (61.6%, compared to 38.1% female). This is concerning. However, when we look more closely at the data, we find an interesting quirk: near gender parity exists among human characters (52.2% male compared to 47.6% female). But 66.5% of nonhuman characters are male compared to 33.1% who are female. In other words, animals, anthropomorphized objects, and zombies or monsters are much more likely to be male. This suggests that creators are striving for parity when they're thinking about character identity, but they're slipping when identity is less salient — when the characters aren't human. This suggests that unconscious bias may be playing a role in the disparity.

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More Key Findings

POPULAR PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN (AGES 2 TO 11) IN 2021

• GENDER

- Among lead characters, 48.8% are women — about a 4-percentage-point increase from 2019 but still below 2018, when 52.0% of leads were women.
- Among notable supporting characters, 45.6% are women. Among supporting characters, 47.2% are women. Among minor characters, 39.5% are women.
- Male characters are more likely than female characters to be fat (6.3% compared with 1.7%).
- Female characters are more likely than male characters to be objectified (2.4% compared with 0.3%) and be shown in revealing clothing (9.6% compared with 4.2%)
- A higher percentage of male characters have jobs than female characters (34.9% compared with 25.4%).

• RACE/ETHNICITY

- Among characters with races, 68.5% of characters are Latinx, largely due to the inclusion of Spanish-language programming⁸. About one-tenth of characters are white (10.2%). Middle Eastern and North African characters (8.1%) and Asian and Pacific Islander characters (8.0%) appear at similar rates. The least commonly shown racial groups are Native (2.8%), Black (1.9%), and Multi-Racial (0.6%) characters.
- Among lead characters, 70.2% of characters are people of color — a sharp rise from 2019, when that share was 31.9%, and 2018, when that share was 26.1%. The increase in people of color in leading roles is largely due to the inclusion of Spanish-language programming this year.
- Among notable supporting characters, 86.3% are people of color. Among supporting characters, 89.5% are people of color. Among minor characters, 97.9% are people of color.
- Characters of color are more likely than white characters to be in a committed relationship (21.5% compared with 9.8%), express romantic interests or intentions (43.0% compared with 16.4%), and be shown kissing (17.3% compared with 0.0%).
- Characters of color are more likely than white characters to be shown as a leader (24.2% compared with 16.4%).

• LGBTQIA+

- Among lead characters, 1.2% are LGBTQIA+ — a 0.7-point increase from 2019, and a 1-point increase from 2018.
- Among notable supporting characters, 0.5% are LGBTQIA+. Among supporting and minor characters, 0.3% are LGBTQIA+.

In current children's programming, most lead characters are male (61.6%, compared to 38.1% female)

There are no lead characters with a disability.

- **DISABILITY**

- There are no leading characters with a disability. In 2019, 0.3% of leads had a disability, and in 2018, 0.5% of leads had a disability.
- Among notable supporting characters, 0.5% have a disability. Among supporting characters, 0.3% have a disability. Among minor characters, 0.7% have a disability.

- **FATNESS**

- Among lead characters, 3.8% are fat. In 2019, that share was 5.9% — a decline of 2.1-points between then and 2021.
- Among notable supporting characters, 2.8% are fat. Among supporting characters, 4.4% are fat. Among minor characters, 4.8% are fat.
- Fat characters are over twice as likely as nonfat characters to be violent (32.0% compared with 15.5%) and to commit a crime (28.0% compared with 10.9%).

- **AGE (50+)**

- Among lead characters, 2.5% are ages 50 and older — a 1.5-point increase from 2019.
- Among notable supporting characters, 12.7% are ages 50 and older. Among supporting characters, 20.6% are ages 50 and older. Among minor characters, 23.3% are ages 50 and older.
- Characters 50 and older are also almost twice as likely as characters under 50 to be shown as a leader (25.5% compared with 13.4%).

CURRENT CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

- **GENDER**

- Most lead characters are male (61.6%). Male characters also outnumber female characters in notable supporting (56.2%), supporting (58.9%), and minor roles (63.2%).
- Male characters are more likely than female characters to be fat (6.8% compared with 4.5%).

- **RACE/ETHNICITY**

- Among lead characters, slightly more are white than people of color (52.8%). White characters outnumber characters of color in supporting (58.6%) and minor (54.6%) roles. Among notable supporting roles, half (50.7%) are characters of color.
- Among characters with races, 55.0% are white. Just under one-fifth of characters are Black (19.5%). About one-tenth of characters are Asian and Pacific Islander (10.0%) or Latinx (11.3%). The racial groups shown the least are Native (1.7%), Multi-Racial (1.5%), and Middle Eastern and North African (1.0%) characters.
- Characters of color are more likely than white characters to have a job (29.3% compared with 19.8%) and be a leader (24.2% compared with 16.4%).

- **LGBTQIA+**

- Among lead characters, 1.4% are LGBTQIA+. But in **new** programming, just 0.5% of leads are LGBTQIA+.
- Among notable supporting characters, 2.4% are LGBTQIA+, and 1.4% of supporting characters and 2.0% of minor characters are LGBTQIA+.
- Although LGBTQIA+ characters are just a small share of all characters on screen, they are more likely than non-LGBTQIA+ characters to hold a job, have a STEM profession, and be a leader.

- **DISABILITY**

- There are no lead characters with a disability. Characters with a disability are less than 1% of notable supporting, supporting, and minor characters.
- Disabled characters are more likely than nondisabled characters to be violent (41.7% compared with 11.2%) and commit a crime (50.0% compared with 7.3%).

- **FATNESS**

- Among lead characters, 4.1% are fat. In **new** programming, just 2.1% of leads are fat. About 6% of notable supporting, supporting, and minor characters are fat.
- Fat characters are more likely than nonfat characters to be violent (32.0% compared with 15.5%) and commit a crime (28.0% compared with 10.9%).

- **AGE (50+)**

- Just 0.3% of lead characters are ages 50 and older. In **new** programming, there are no lead characters 50 and older. Characters 50 and older are better represented in notable supporting (5.1%), supporting (9.7%), and minor (11.0%) roles.
- Characters 50 and older are more likely than younger characters to be a leader (25.5% compared with 13.4%).

ANIMATION VERSUS LIVE ACTION

- **GENDER**

- Animated human characters approach gender parity, with slightly more male characters than female in **popular** (50.9% compared with 49.1%) and **current** (52.2% compared with 47.6%) programming.
- Animated nonhuman characters (such as talking animals) are much more likely to be male in **popular** (68.1% compared with 31.9%) and **current** (66.5% compared with 33.1%) programming.
- Animated characters are less likely to be nonbinary than live-action characters in **current** programming. There are no nonbinary animated characters in **popular** programming.

**16.2% of
animated
characters
are Black—
compared with
28.2% of live-
action.**

- **RACE/ETHNICITY**

- In **current** programming, Black representation is better among live-action characters than animated characters. 16.2% of animated characters are Black compared with 28.2% of live-action. There are no statistically significant differences between animated and live-action representations for Asian and Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native, Middle Eastern and North African, or multiracial characters.
- In **popular** programming, the racial differences between animated and live-action characters are more pronounced due to the popularity of telenovelas, in which Latinx characters make up 82.0% of live-action characters, compared with 5.0% of animated characters. Middle Eastern and North African characters are also more common in live-action programming than animated (9.3% compared with 2.5%). Further, 16.4% of animated characters from **popular** programming are Native, whereas there are no Native live-action characters.
- In **popular** programming, just 0.4% of live-action characters are Black, compared with 9.2% of animated characters. Just 0.4% of live-action characters are white, compared with 56.3% of animated characters.

- **DISABILITY**

- Because of low visibility for these types of characters in general, there were no statistically significant differences between disability representation as animated and live-action characters.

- **FATNESS**

- Fat characters are more prominent as animated than as live-action in **popular** programming — 8.3% of animated characters were fat, compared with 1.2% of live-action characters.

- **AGE (50+)**

- In **current** programming, characters 50 and older are more prominent as animated than as live-action (7.8% compared with 4.1%).
- In popular programming, the reverse is true — characters 50 and older are 25.5% of live-action characters compared with 6.9% of animated characters.

- **IMPLIED RACE**

- While many characters did not have an explicit race, plenty had characteristics or traits that implied a race, especially in animated shows. A character's race is implied when they are styled, written, and/or performed with racialized affectations, or when cultural cues are suggestive of individual races or ethnicities. In **current** children's programming, 3.1% of characters had an implied race, compared with 1.3% of characters in **popular** programming.
- In **new** programming, 37.5% of characters with an implied race are suggested to be Black, while another 30.0% are suggested to be Asian or Pacific Islander. In **current** children's programming, over half of all characters with implied races are suggested to be as Black (54.1%).
- In **popular** programming, most characters with an implied race are Native Mesoamerican characters (42.9%), which is due to one series.



Recommendations

Show more female characters in animated roles. Animated characters, especially those that were nonhuman, were mostly male. Adding more gender diversity to these nonhuman animated characters will provide more dynamic portrayals of female characters to audiences, and more opportunities to female actors and talent.

Increase the visibility of queer characters of color. Queer characters (especially nonbinary characters) were more likely to be white or non-raced. Historically, the intersection of racism with homophobia and transphobia has led to the erasure of LGBTQIA+ people of color in the media, which can limit acceptance of queerness in communities of color. For LGBTQIA+ roles, consider intersectional representation by increasing portrayals of queer communities of color.

Diversify racialized animated characters. Over one-third of characters with an implied race were suggested to be Black. Animation has a long history of appropriating Black culture as well as making Black characters nonhuman. It is important that young children of all races see Black characters on television, so consider roles for Black characters that are explicitly Black. And among characters with an implied-race, incorporate a broader array of cultures.

Give disabled characters dynamic and complex narratives. Characters with disabilities were rarely shown, were not in leading roles, and had almost no romantic attachments. The failure to acknowledge the complex lives of disabled people leads to portrayals that rest on their disability. Further, children with disabilities do not get to see themselves on screen. Disability representation can be increased without reducing disabled characters to their disability.

Allow characters of all genders to be unapologetically fat. Male characters were more likely than female characters to be fat. Gender inequality in body-size diversity contributes to harmful double standards, with boys and men granted more leeway than girls and women in their physical stature and size. Fatphobia is incredibly harmful, and children can benefit significantly from seeing characters of all genders who are fat and also likable, attractive, funny, athletic, and dynamic, where their size is not the source of ridicule, motivation, or shame.

REPRESENTATION PITFALLS:

Common Tropes to Avoid

While advocating for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in entertainment media is important, assessing the quality of on-screen representation is also crucial. At the Institute, we regularly analyze the quality of representations in television and film, and in so doing have identified pervasive tropes that are common in television programming. In storytelling, a trope is shorthand for a concept that the audience will recognize and understand instantly. While not all tropes are harmful, we present a list of common tropes for content creators to consider avoiding, surrounding the six identities under analysis:

GENDER

The Strong Female Character:

- A female character who
- is written to be physically strong and capable.
- She is often used so that it can seem as if the script is providing female role models, but really it just reinforces masculine ideals.

The Sensible Older Sister:

- In children's programming, a female character (usually an older sister) who
- is there to be the "straight man" to the more heroic, but also more impulsive, male character.

The Clueless Father:

- The father who
- is inept
- and does not know how to take care of his children on his own.

RACE/ETHNICITY

BLACK

The Nonhuman:

- A Black character who
- is transformed into an animal. Or, an animal with Black characteristics.

The Magical Negro:

- A Black older character who
- has magical powers and
- shows up to provide support to the white protagonist.

EAST OR SOUTH ASIAN

The IT Guy:

- An Asian character (usually male) who
- is a science nerd.

The Controlling Parent:

- An immigrant parent who
- has very strict rules for their child.
- These strict rules are typically presented as unreasonable, culturally backwards, and make it difficult for the child to navigate U.S. culture.

LATINX

The Laborer/The Help:

- A Latinx character who
- works in a job that centers around manual labor (if male)
- or domestic support (if female).

The Macho Latino:

- A hypermasculine Latino man.
- In children's programming, often an overprotective father.

RACE/ETHNICITY

NATIVE

The Magical Medicine Man/Woman:

- A native character who
- comes to the aid of white characters
- by the use of supernatural or quasi-mystical means.

The Native Allegory:

- This occurs in science fiction or fantasy stories with colonialist themes, where a fictional race is written as a Native/Indigenous metaphor. Especially harmful when written by white creators.

MIDDLE EASTERN/NORTH AFRICAN

The Oppressed Woman:

- A Middle Eastern or North African female character who
- is oppressed by her culture, her husband, and/or other family members, and
- lacks agency to make her own decisions freely.

The Royal:

- A Middle Eastern or North African character who
- is either royalty or
- exceedingly rich.

LGBTQIA+

The Buried Gay:

- A queer character who
- is killed prematurely.

DISABILITY

The Supercrip:

- A disabled character
- who “overcomes” their disability to achieve greatness, and
- they are “inspiration” for non-disabled people.

The Unspoken Autistic:

- This character is written with autistic characteristics,
- but often not labeled as such.
- Their social misunderstandings are played for laughs.

Fatness

The Brawn Hilda:

- A woman
- whose fatness is used as shorthand to suggest that she is not feminine.
- She is unaware of her own size, which is played for laughs.
- Usually foreign.

The Fat Idiot:

- A fat character who is
- especially unintelligent.

Age (50+)

The Sage Guide:

- An older person who
- is wise and provides guidance to the younger characters,
- but does not have any other character traits or flaws.

The Luddite:

- An older person who
- doesn't understand the “new” way of the world, and
- Is grumpy and/or dismissive of anything modern.

About the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

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