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See Jane 2024 Toolkit

On-Screen Representation in
Children's Television

GEENA DAVIS
INSTITUTE

Nielsen
Foundation

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Executive Summary

At the Geena Davis Institute, we regard television as a potent socializing agent that imparts norms and expectations to its audience, especially shaping perceptions of younger viewers. This is why it is our mission to diversify on-screen representation in media so that it reflects many cultures and identities, particularly in media that children consume. We fulfill our mission through a research-driven approach that underpins our advocacy initiatives. To assess the state of representation and inclusion in television programming, we conduct our annual "See Jane" TV study, which analyzes kids' TV shows for their gender, race, LGBTQIA+ identity, disability, age, and body-size representation.

In the present report, we investigated inclusion and representation of the aforementioned identities in programming **popular** with children ages two to 11 in the U.S., according to Nielsen data; this includes the 10 most popular broadcast, cable, and streaming shows inclusive of all languages, from 2018 to 2023.[1] Second, we also investigated inclusion and representation in **new** children's programming from 2018 to 2023; this includes TV shows actively being made for children.[2]

Why do we investigate **popular** and **new** programming? First, we focus on **popular** programming because it gives us a sense of what children are watching. Children are frequent consumers of TV,[3] and media effects on children have immense developmental consequences.[4] Children learn about the world, including its norms and expectations, through what they see on screen. Second, we focus on **new** programming because it gives us a broader sense of what is being made for children and whether the industry is green-lighting diverse content.

Diverse representation on screen is beneficial not only for children but also for the entertainment industry. Studies illustrate that shows with diverse casts attract higher audience ratings than programs with casts that aren't as diverse.[5] The evidence is clear: We need more diverse storytelling and characters. We believe that this report is one way to continue to drive this change.

Below are the key findings. Key findings include the level of group representation on screen and in leading roles, as well as compelling statistically significant differences between groups for the following portrayals: objectification, revealing clothing, shown dating or in a committed relationship, kissing, sexual activity, with a job, STEM occupation, and leadership.

Key Findings

2023 Popular Programming for Children

GENDER REPRESENTATION

- In 2023 all popular programming, male characters outnumber female characters by 13.4 percentage points (56.7% male characters compared with 43.3% female characters). This is nearly identical to 2022, when 56.9% of all characters were male and 43.1% were female.

- The gap widens when looking at only English-only popular programming (57.5% male characters compared with 42.5% female characters). In 2022 English-only popular programming, 57.7% of all characters were male and 42.3% were female.

- Among leading roles, female characters are 43.8% of leading roles. This is a 7.3-percentage-point decrease from 2022 (51.1%), and a 5-percentage-point decrease from 2021 (48.8%).

- The biggest gender gap across roles is for minor characters. In all popular programming, male characters make up 60.7% of minor characters whereas female characters make up 39.3% — a 21.4 percentage point difference. In 2022, male characters made up 61.3% of minor roles, while female characters made up 38.7% — a 22.6-percentage-point difference.

- Female characters are significantly more likely than male characters to be LGBTQIA+ (1.6% compared with 0.2%).

- Male characters are significantly more likely than female characters to have a job (42.9% compared with 33.4%).

RACE/ETHNICITY REPRESENTATION

- In 2023 popular programming, characters of color make up 52.0% of all characters, compared with 71.9% in 2022.

- In English-only popular programming, characters of color make up 40.5% of characters, compared with 52.7% in 2022.

- Among leading roles, 59.3% are white characters and 40.7% are people of color. In 2022, 29.8% of leading roles were white characters and 70.2% were people of color.

- In English-only popular programming, 68.3% of leading roles are white characters and 31.7% are characters of color. In 2022, 47.2% of leading roles were white characters and 52.8% were characters of color.

- In all popular programming, characters of color are more likely than white characters to have a job (50.2% compared with 37.4%). In 2022, characters of color and white characters are equally shown with a job.

- In English-only popular programs, characters of color are more likely than white characters to have a job (50.5% compared with 32.2%). In 2022, characters of color and white characters are equally shown with a job.

LGBTQIA+ REPRESENTATION

- In 2023 popular programming, LGBTQIA+ characters comprise only 0.8% of all characters, compared with 1.0% in 2022.

- In English-only popular programming, 1.0% of all characters are LGBTQIA+ , compared with 1.5% in 2022.

- In all popular programming, LGBTQIA+ characters are not represented in any leading or minor roles. In 2022, no LGBTQIA+ characters were represented in any leading roles, but 0.6% were cast in minor roles.

- LGBTQIA+ characters are significantly more likely than non-LGBTQIA+ characters to be married or in a committed partnership (71.4% compared with 11.6%). When limiting the sample to English-only popular programs, these findings remain statistically significant.

DISABILITY REPRESENTATION

- In 2023 popular programming, only 0.9% of characters are disabled, compared with 1.9% in 2022.

- In English-only popular programming, 1.0% of characters are disabled, compared with 1.6% in 2022.

- Disabled characters are most represented in supporting roles, at 1.4%.

- There are no disabled leads in popular programming from 2023. In 2022, 1.1% of leading roles were disabled characters.

BODY-SIZE REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 popular programming, fat characters make up 6.1% of all characters, compared with 7.1% in 2022.

◆ Fat characters are significantly more likely than characters who are not fat to be male (73.1% compared with 26.9%), and this finding remains statistically significant when limiting the sample to English-only popular programming.

◆ Fat characters are significantly more likely than characters who are not fat to be wearing revealing clothing (10.0% compared with 2.5%). In 2022, the difference was not statistically significant.

◆ The representation of leading fat characters decreased in 2023, even when limiting the sample to English-only popular programming. In 2023 popular programming, fat leads decreased by 0.9 percentage points (2.1% in 2022 compared with 1.2% in 2023). And in 2023 English-only popular programming, fat leads decreased by 1.2 percentage points (2.7% in 2022 compared with 1.5% in 2023).

AGE REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 all popular programming, 50-plus characters make up 15.7% of all characters, compared with 16.9% in 2022.

◆ In English-only popular programming, 50-plus representation is 9.8% of all characters, compared with 11.8% in 2022.

◆ Characters who are 50-plus are significantly more likely than characters under 50 to be LGBTQIA+ (3.3% compared with 0.5%). And this finding remains statistically significant when limiting the sample to English-only popular programming.

◆ Characters who are 50-plus are significantly more likely than younger characters to be married or in a committed partnership (34.1% compared with 9.1%). And this finding remains statistically significant when limiting the sample to English-only popular programming.

◆ Characters who are 50-plus are more likely than characters under 50 to have a job (53.4% compared with 40.3%), but this finding turns nonsignificant when limiting the sample to English-only popular programming.

2023 New Children's Programming

GENDER REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming and among leading roles, female characters hit a record-breaking high of 47.8%. This is a 3.5-percentage-point increase from 2022 (44.3%), and a 7.4-percentage-point increase from 2019 (40.4%).

◆ In all roles, 55.5% of all characters are male, compared with 44.4% female and 0.1% nonbinary. This is nearly identical to 2022, when 55.5% of all characters were male.

◆ Among minor roles, 41.7% are female characters, up slightly from 38.9% in 2022.

◆ Female characters are significantly more likely than male characters to be married or in a committed partnership (6.9% compared with 4.3%).

RACE/ETHNICITY REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming, characters of color hold 63.4% of leading roles, an increase of 7.3 percentage points from 2022 (56.1%).

◆ In total, 56.9% of all characters are people of color, an increase of 5.6 percentage points from 2022 (51.3%).

◆ Among characters of color, 26.8% of all characters are Black, 14.6% are Asian, 8.2% are Latinx, 1.6% are multiracial, 1.1% are Native, and 0.6% are Middle Eastern or North African. In 2022 new programming, 23.8% were Black, 14.8% were Asian, 7.4% were Latinx, 2.5% were multiracial, 1.9% were Middle Eastern or North African, and 0.9% were Native. In 2022, among characters of color, 23.8% of all characters are Black, 14.8% are Asian, 7.4% are Latinx, 2.5% are multiracial, 1.9% are Middle Eastern or North African, and 0.9% are Native.

◆ White characters are significantly more likely than characters of color to be married or in a committed partnership (10.2% compared with 5.2%).

LGBTQIA+ REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming, no LGBTQIA+ characters have a leading role, a decline from 2022, when 2.4% of leads were LGBTQIA+.

◆ Only 1.6% of all characters are LGBTQIA+, a slight decline from 2022, when 2.3% of all characters were LGBTQIA+.

◆ LGBTQIA+ characters are significantly more likely than non-LGBTQIA+ characters to be married or in a committed partnership (25.8% compared with 5.2%) and to be kissing (16.1% compared with 0.2%).

DISABILITY REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming, only 1.1% of all characters have a disability, similar to 2022, when 1.2% of all characters had a disability.

◆ Among leads, 0.8% are disabled, compared with 1.3% in 2022.

◆ No disabled characters are shown dating or kissing. The lack of romantic storylines for disabled representation can contribute to harmful stereotypes that disabled individuals are asexual or aromantic.

BODY-SIZE REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming, 7.9% of all characters are fat, compared with 6.3% in 2022.

◆ Among leads, 6.9% of leads are fat, compared with 2.7% in 2022.

◆ Fat characters are significantly more likely to be male than female (65.1% compared with 34.9%).

AGE REPRESENTATION

◆ In 2023 new programming, characters who are ages 50 and old make up 9.4% of all characters, compared with 8.8% in 2022.

◆ No characters who are 50-plus are cast in leading roles.

◆ Characters who are 50-plus are significantly more likely than characters under 50 to be fat (12.9% compared with 7.2%) and disabled (3.4% compared with 0.8%).

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Recommendations for Improving On-Screen Representation

Based on these findings about representation and portrayals in children's programming, we make the following recommendations:

Prioritize achieving gender parity in leading roles. Continue to write stories with female leads in new programming made for kids. Since 2018, male characters have consistently held the majority of leading roles, with 52.2% in new programming and 56.2% in popular programming in 2023. This trend indicates that narratives are predominantly from a male perspective. To ensure that television reflects a diverse range of viewpoints, it is essential to balance the gender representation of leading characters. Doing so will help viewers better understand and value both female and male experiences, ultimately contributing to more inclusive storytelling.

Show variation in the types of jobs characters have. Characters' jobs and occupations are an opportunity to showcase leadership, skills, and ambition. It's also an opportunity to challenge existing stereotypes that certain groups dominate certain occupations. For example, in popular programming, male characters are more likely than female characters to have jobs in the armed forces, security, or law enforcement. Similarly, in English-only popular programming, male characters are significantly more likely than female characters to have a job in the business field, such as a business owner or a CEO, but

female characters are significantly more likely to have a job in education fields, such as a teacher or school principal. Subverting these occupational stereotypes in storytelling can change how children see themselves and others.

Develop more nonhuman female characters. Currently, nonhuman characters—such as monsters, goblins, or ghosts—are predominantly portrayed as male. This contributes to the overall gender imbalance in children's programming, while also reinforcing the idea that boys and men are the default gender. Featuring more nonhuman female characters will bring more gender diversity to nonhuman worlds and their stories. This approach will promote a more balanced representation of both genders, expanding the range of what masculine and feminine characters can look like.

Diversify female characters' body types. In both new and popular programming, female characters are less likely than male characters to be fat. This means that girls and women on screen are likely reinforcing for viewers the notion that the ideal feminine body type is thin. Unrealistic body types in the media lead adolescent girls to struggle with body-image concerns as early as five years old.[9] We need more diversity in the types of bodies on screen for more balanced representation.

Write stories that reflect the diverse experiences of nonwhite racial groups. While this report finds a large share of characters of color on screen, some racial groups are less visible: There is little representation of Native and Middle Eastern or North African groups, and Latinx representation is low in **new** programming being made for children. Greenlight stories that authentically represent the diverse experiences of various communities of color so that people from all racial groups see themselves on screen.

Increase the representation of disabled characters. A total of 27.2% of the U.S. population has a disability,[10] yet only 1.1% of characters in new programming and 0.9% of characters in popular programming had a physical, cognitive, or communication disability, or a mental health condition. Not showing disabled characters on screen stigmatizes disability by rendering it invisible. When disabled characters are shown—with nuance and accuracy—disabled viewers feel validated, and disability is destigmatized.

About the Geena Davis Institute

Thank you!