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Toolkit for Improving On-Screen Representation in Children's Television

GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE

At the Geena Davis Institute we believe that what children see shapes what they believe is possible for themselves. Our motto, "If they can see it, they can be it," drives our work. Our annual TV study, *GDI's 2025 Children's TV Report: Record Number of Female Leads in New Shows* in partnership with the Nielsen Foundation, analyzes popular and new children's programming from 2018 to 2024 to analyze onscreen representation.

In new 2024 programming, gender parity was nearly reached in leading roles (51.2% of leads are male, 48.8% are female). But more work remains to be done. This toolkit provides industry leaders with recommendations for improving the representation of marginalized communities in television content consumed by young viewers.

Recommendations

Aim for gender parity in all types of roles. Female characters are vastly underrepresented in minor roles and animated nonhuman roles.

When casting older characters, think intersectionally. Characters who are ages 50 and older are more likely to be white and male. This means that older characters in kids' favorite shows lack gender and racial diversity. To address this, intentionally cast older characters who are women, people of color, or from other underrepresented groups. Pair this with storylines that highlight their experiences, strengths, and perspectives, ensuring these characters are visible, meaningful, and multidimensional rather than tokenistic.

Show LGBTQIA+ identities in new ways. An easy way to communicate to audiences that characters are LGBTQIA+ is by showing them in same-sex relationships. But it is important to feature LGBTQIA+ characters in roles that don't have to do with romance, and this may require more nuanced and subtle screenwriting to show that these characters are LGBTQIA+.

Bring disability to the screen in new ways. In new programming, disabled characters are significantly more likely to be ages 50 and older than under 50, which may reinforce associations between disability and aging. To broaden representation, include disabled characters of all ages and backgrounds, and depict a range of abilities, experiences, and roles. Ensure these characters are central to storylines, with personalities, goals, and achievements that go beyond their disability.

Special considerations for animated content

Given the dominance of animation in children's programming, it is important to evaluate the diversity and inclusion within it. Distinguishing between representations in animated and live-action characters, we have a better sense of where scripted TV shows are making progress and where that progress might be stalled.

Diversify gender in nonhuman **animated characters.** In 2024 new programming for children, animated *nonhuman* characters are significantly more likely than animated *human* characters to be male (64.8% compared with 48.9%). Also, female characters steadily made up about a third of all animated *nonhuman* characters in new programming from 2022 to 2024. When the industry strives for gender parity in children's programming, it also opens opportunities for female voice actors, writers, directors, and animators.

Continue to feature animated POC characters. In 2024 new children's programming, animated characters are significantly more likely to be Latinx (9.7% compared with 4.2%), and people of color (50.6% compared with 40.0%) than white.

Diversify animated characters' disabilities, body size, LGBTQIA+ identity, and age (50+). In 2024 new children's programming, animated characters are significantly less likely than live-action characters to be disabled (1.5% compared with 4.3%), fat (9.6% compared with 15.7%), and 50-plus (7.0% compared with 11.7%). By diversifying animated stories in children's television, more children feel seen onscreen.

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