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Body Representation and Portrayals in Children's Television

GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

Media plays a powerful role in shaping how children see their bodies and others' bodies, and that influence begins early. By 15 to 18 months, children start recognizing themselves in a mirror and connecting movement to identity.[1] At first, they focus on what their bodies can do. But as they grow, that focus shifts to how their bodies look, making the images they see on screen especially impactful in shaping body image, belonging, and self-worth. From an early age, children begin forming ideas about what an "ideal" body looks like. As these ideals take hold, young people learn to judge both themselves and others based on appearance.

Unfortunately, bodily self-awareness commonly escalates into body dissatisfaction, and body dissatisfaction can occur as early as the ages of three to six years old.[2] Moreover, body dissatisfaction is consistently higher for girls than boys, though boys exhibit body dissatisfaction as well.[3] Longitudinal studies show that body dissatisfaction increases between middle school and high school—and continues to rise into young adulthood.[4]

How do ideas about the "ideal" body develop? Decades of research show that media plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of physical attractiveness.[5] Children and teens internalize body ideals not just from peers or family but also from the characters they see on screen. These repeated images send strong signals about which bodies are admired, accepted, or ignored. Contributing to unrealistic ideals is the reality that fat characters remain rare on screen. One study found that in top primetime shows, male characters are almost twice as likely as female characters to be fat.[6] If larger body types are invisible, this sends a clear message about whose bodies are considered acceptable and worthy of being seen. It reinforces harmful norms and denies children the opportunity to see the full spectrum of human bodies as normal and valued.

This report uses the term "fat" as a value-neutral descriptor that is not rooted in harmful medical practices (such as "obese" or "overweight"). As a description, "fat" is not suggestive of being outside of some sort of "norm" or "average" (unlike terms such as "plus size" or "bigger").

Media representation of bodies outside of a thin, perceived "ideal" are rare. Many people grow up watching TV shows where characters with larger bodies were shamed for their size, or served mostly as a punchline. Heard early in life, these messages can shape how viewers understand which bodies are valued and which are mocked. That's why accurate, diverse, and multidimensional body representation in children's television matters.

Representing a wide array of body types in media can affirm that all bodies and shapes are normal, and encourage children to understand this reality from an early age. We know from social psychology

research that how bodies are portrayed in media can either reinforce harmful stereotypes—especially about fat people—or actively work to dismantle them. At the Geena Davis Institute, we believe that when children see inclusive and affirming portrayals on screen, it helps build a more equitable and accepting world off screen.

To understand body representation in children's television and its potential real-world impact, we analyzed new English-language scripted series that originated in the U.S. from 2022 to 2024, across cable, broadcast, and streaming platforms, based on data from Luminate Film & TV, by *Variety*.

Key findings:

- **Fat representation is uncommon.** Across all years, 15.5% of characters in new children's television programs are fat. When limited to human characters, 11.9% of characters are fat. Among nonhuman characters, 20.6% are fat. All told, fat representation is highest among animated nonhuman characters, suggesting there is more effort to visually communicate body diversity among animated nonhumans than among human characters.
- **When fat representation is shown, those characters are likely nonhuman.** Fat characters are significantly more likely to be nonhuman characters than human characters (55.2% of fat characters were nonhuman, compared with 44.8% who are human).
- **The more prominent a character's role, the less likely they are to be fat.** Out of all leads/co-leads, just 12.0% are fat. Of all notable supporting roles, 13.5% are fat. Of all supporting roles, 18.3% are fat.
- **Fat animated characters have distinguishable features that highlight them as different from the rest**. Animators make intentional choices to communicate fatness in animated characters. Common ways include highlighting the neck area (e.g., having no neck, a saggy neck, or a double chin), clothing choices that are too small, fat rolls, unique facial features, wideness, and making these characters much larger in stature than other characters in their worlds.

- **Male characters and older characters are the most likely to be fat**. Intersectional analysis indicates that fat characters are more likely to be male (64.5% of fat characters vs. 51.6% of characters who are not fat) and about three times as likely to be 50-plus (14.1% vs. 4.5% for characters who are not fat).
- **A double standard exists between gender, body type, and revealing clothing**. While fat female characters are significantly *less* likely than female characters who are not fat to be wearing revealing clothing (3.9% compared with 9.2%), fat male characters are significantly *more* likely to be wearing revealing clothing than male characters who are not fat (5.0% compared with 2.6%).
- **Fat characters are significantly more likely to be portrayed with negative traits—but are equally shown with positive traits**. When comparing characters who are fat with characters who are not fat, both groups are equally shown with an occupation, dreams and aspirations, as smart, and as funny. But there are notable differences with negative traits examined: Fat characters are significantly more likely to have poor personal hygiene (1.6% compared with 0.5% for characters who aren't fat), to be lazy (1.4% compared with 0.5%), "dumb" (8.8% compared with 2.2%) and to be the butt of the joke (12.2% compared with 8.5%).
- **Fat characters are less likely to be involved in physical activity**. The stereotype that fat people are inactive and sedentary is reinforced in children's television shows. Fat characters are significantly less likely to exercise (6.2% compared with 9.4% for characters who are not fat) and participate in sports (4.2% compared with 7.6%).
- **Fat characters are more likely to be shown displaying food-bingeing tendencies but are equally shown eating**. There are no differences between fat characters and characters who are not fat in terms of whether they are shown eating, the nutritional quality of what they are eating, and other eating behaviors. But fat characters are more likely to express food-bingeing tendencies, such as eating large amounts of food at a quick speed or with hyper fixations about food.
- **Fat characters are shown facing body-size microaggressions**. Episodes that contained at least one fatness-related microaggression are significantly more likely to include at least one fat character in that episode.


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Introduction

Media plays a powerful role in shaping how children see their bodies and others' bodies, and that influence begins early. By 15 to 18 months, children start recognizing themselves in a mirror and connecting movement to identity.[7] At first, they focus on what their bodies can do. But as they grow, that focus shifts to how their bodies look, making the images they see on screen especially impactful in shaping body image, belonging, and self-worth. From an early age, children begin forming ideas about what an "ideal" body looks like. As these ideals take hold, young people learn to judge both themselves and others based on appearance.

Unfortunately, bodily self-awareness commonly escalates into body dissatisfaction, and body dissatisfaction can occur as early as the ages of three to six years old.[8] Moreover, body dissatisfaction is consistently higher for girls than boys, though boys exhibit body dissatisfaction as well.[9] Longitudinal studies show that body dissatisfaction increases between middle school and high school—and continues to rise into young adulthood.[10]

How do ideas about the "ideal" body develop? Decades of research show that media plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of physical attractiveness.[11] Children and teens internalize body ideals not just from peers or family but also from the characters they see on screen. These repeated images send strong signals about which bodies are admired, accepted, or ignored. Contributing to unrealistic ideals is the reality that fat characters remain rare on screen. One study found that in top primetime shows, male characters are almost twice as likely as female characters to be fat.[12] If larger body types are invisible, this sends a clear message about whose bodies are considered acceptable and worthy of being seen. It reinforces harmful norms and denies children the opportunity to see the full spectrum of human bodies as normal and valued.

Why does fat representation matter?

Kids start judging their own bodies as early as age three. By 15–18 months, children begin recognizing themselves in the mirror. By preschool, they're comparing and assigning value to bodies.

What they see on screen teaches them:

- Which bodies deserve love and friendship (i.e., popularity).
- Which bodies are "funny."
- Which bodies get to lead.
- Which bodies don't belong.

Media is a mirror—and a teacher. When fat bodies are left out, stereotyped, or reduced to jokes, kids learn to do the same—to themselves and to others.

FOR CONTENT CREATORS:

Ask yourself:

- Does this joke punch up—or down?
- Would I write this moment if the character weren't fat?
- Is the "joke" really about a body—or a bias?

Small narrative choices shape big beliefs. Write with intention.

When asked to describe the ideal body, individuals often describe the types of bodies they see on screen. For instance, studies suggest that women find thin or "slim-thick" bodies to be "ideal" (i.e., small waist, flat stomach, shapely hips and butt).[13] Contrarily, men idealize a muscular physique.[14] These body types are common in entertainment media, especially with respect to leading characters who play the hero, love interest, or are in other aspirational roles. The fashion industry also plays a role in perception of what body types are desirable. For several years, there were efforts to broaden size inclusion on the runway, though some report this trend is reversing.[15]

Frequent exposure to thin female bodies or especially muscular male bodies as the ideal body types in the media can be harmful to children's self-esteem, body satisfaction, and mental health. One study among preadolescent girls found that the more television that girls consumed, the higher their chances were for disordered eating and thin body ideals later on in life.[16] Another study found that media-ideal internalization predicted adolescents' scrutinizing of their own bodies from other peoples' point of view (i.e., self-objectification), which then predicted negative emotional experiences about their appearances and their relationships with their bodies.[17]

Media can also perpetuate body dissatisfaction and self-objectification when characters with larger body types are on screen but are portrayed through limiting, often demeaning stereotypes. Instead of showing fat characters as fully developed individuals, they are frequently reduced to comic relief, sidekicks, or visual gags—rarely the heroes, love interests, or leaders. This narrow framing reinforces stigma and signals that fat bodies are less worthy of love, complexity, or attention.

Content analytic research confirms that fat female characters are less likely than thinner female characters to be portrayed as attractive, to communicate with a romantic partner, or to show physical affection. Fat male characters are also less likely to engage romantically and are more likely to be shown eating—highlighting persistent and harmful tropes.[18] Thus, the types of bodies in television—and portrayals of such bodies—can have tremendous impact in determining what the "ideal" body is, and can play a role in children's mental health or self-esteem later on, as well as reinforce ideas of what fat people should and should not do in real-life.[19]

Research on body representation in children's media can tell us what children are seeing and how body representation is communicated to them. This report is an effort to bring awareness to parents, researchers, media consumers, media creators, and executives in the entertainment industry. The research is guided by the following research questions:

- How is fatness communicated through animated characters?
- How frequently is fatness represented?
- Who is fat?
- Are fat stereotypes reinforced in children's TV narratives? Are they shown as:
  - Deserving of romance and love?
  - Sexually objectified?
  - Aspirational?
  - Stereotypical?
- What is the association between body type and eating behaviors?
- How are messages about bodies shown on screen?

Methodology

This study uses a content analytic methodology. Content analysis is an objective way of quantifying themes and patterns across messages, such as television programs. The approach necessitates the operationalization of variables to capture messages about body representation and diversity in TV narratives. Nine expert analysts took part in a training to reach acceptable levels of interrater reliability before independently analyzing the shows in the sample.

Sample

We were primarily interested in characters in children's television and the diversity of body representation on screen. To investigate this question, the analysis consists of children's television series[20] originating in the U.S., airing new content from 2022–2024, on cable, broadcast, and streaming services, according to Luminate Film & TV, by *Variety*.[21]

We included only children's series that were released in English, which yielded a total of 329 television series. From each of the 329 series provided by Luminate Film & TV, the second episode from each respective season year was selected to build the final sample. If a series had more than one season in a given time frame, the second episode from the first season that aired during that respective year was included. This process generated a total of 329 unique episodes for analysis and a total of 3,633 characters in leading/co-lead, notable supporting, and supporting roles.[22]

TABLE 1

Total number of episodes per year

Year	Number of Episodes
2022	133
2023	106
2024	90
Total	329

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Findings

HOW DO WE IDENTIFY "FAT" CHARACTERS?

This report uses the term "fat" as a value-neutral descriptor that is not rooted in harmful medical practices (such as "obese" or "overweight"). As a description, "fat" is not suggestive of being outside of some sort of "norm" or "average" (unlike terms such as "plus size" or "bigger").

Adult human characters are counted as "fat" based on average waist circumferences for adults in the U.S., according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The average man aged 20 or older has a 41-inch waist, while the average woman of that age group has a 38-inch waist. For children 19 and younger, the average waist circumference varies by age group, though the same resource was referenced.[23] Characters are counted as fat when they are evaluated to have a waist circumference that was greater than the average, based on their gender and estimated age.

However, our sample contains a significant number of characters who are animated and nonhuman[24] (such as dogs, squirrels, monsters), which complicates the operationalization of fat. A total of 43.9% (*n* = 1,289) characters are nonhuman overall, compared with 56.1% (*n* = 1,644) who are human. Nearly all nonhuman characters are animated, with a few exceptions (such as puppets).[25] To identify whether nonhuman characters are fat, we relied on narrative and visual cues, which we discuss in more depth below.

All told, fat representation is highest among animated nonhuman characters, suggesting that there is more effort to visually communicate body type diversity among animated nonhumans than among human characters (live-action or animated).

TABLE 2

Distribution of body types among human, nonhuman, and animated characters in children's programs

	Percent of fat characters who are...	Percent of characters who are not fat who are...
Human, not animated	3.9%	10.9%
Human, animated	40.9%	50.2%
Not human, animated	55.2%	38.7%
Not human, not animated	0%	0.2%
Total characters	100%	100%


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How is fatness communicated through animated characters?

Given that fat characters are more commonly represented in animated content than in live-action content, a closer analysis was conducted to examine how fatness is communicated through animation. Seven prominent patterns in characters' physical appearance emerged across both human and nonhuman animated characters to communicate fatness:

1. **Neck appearance**: The most common way fatness was communicated among animated characters was overwhelmingly with their necks. Often, the absence of a neck was used to communicate that the character was fat. Additionally, characters were shown with a saggy neck or with a double chin to communicate that they were fat.

2. **Clothing fit**: Clothing fit communicated that characters were fat. This included pants that were too small for the character, resulting in excess skin hanging over the waistline, or in shirts that did not fully cover the character's belly.
3. **Generalized "otherness"**: Fatness was communicated by nonhuman characters through choices that made them physically unique from an otherwise homogenous community. For instance, one episode included chipmunks who had different attributes but were all the same size, except one who was much larger.
4. **Exaggerated body parts**: For many characters, especially animated human characters, only certain body parts were exaggerated. For example, there were characters with very thin legs and arms but an exaggeratedly round and protruding belly. Other exaggerated body parts included cheeks, bust area, excessively wide hips or thighs, and large buttocks.
5. **Skin rolls**: Characters' fatness was communicated with skin rolls. Rolls were most commonly shown on characters' bellies.
6. **Facial exaggerations**: Fatness was communicated with the way facial features were designed. For example, some characters had very small eyes but a very large face, or very large and round cheeks.
7. **Wide bodies**: Some fat animated characters were simply designed to be very wide. Their wideness was distributed throughout their entire body or in just a specific area of the body, such as the middle.

Fat characters in kids' animation aren't accidental—they're drawn to stand out. These are the most common visual signals: no neck, double chin, too-tight clothes, exposed bellies, a big belly with tiny limbs, saggy skin, visible rolls, puffy cheeks or other distorted facial features, extremely wide bodies, or by being one oversized character in a group.

FOR CONTENT CREATORS:

Design with care.

If your only fat character is visually "othered," ask yourself: What story are we telling about that body?

Try this instead:

- Normalize a range of body sizes across your cast—not just one exaggerated outlier.
- Don't make the fat character the biggest, slowest, or goofiest one.
- Reflect real-world diversity, not visual punchlines.

How frequently is fatness represented?

Overall, 15.5% of all characters in our dataset were fat.[26] Between 2022 and 2024, fat representation remained steady, with a 2-percentage-point increase from 2023 to 2024. (See Table 3.) When looking at human characters alone, we identified similar patterns: 11.9% of characters were fat in children's programs from 2022 to 2024, reaching a high of 12.6% in 2024. Looking at nonhuman characters, 20.6% were fat overall, also reaching a high of 21.8% in 2024.

TABLE 3

Fat representation in children's programming (2022–2024), among all characters

	Overall (2022–2024)	2022	2023	2024
Fat	15.5%	15.1%	14.8%	16.8%
Not Fat	84.5%	84.9%	85.2%	83.2%

Who is fat?

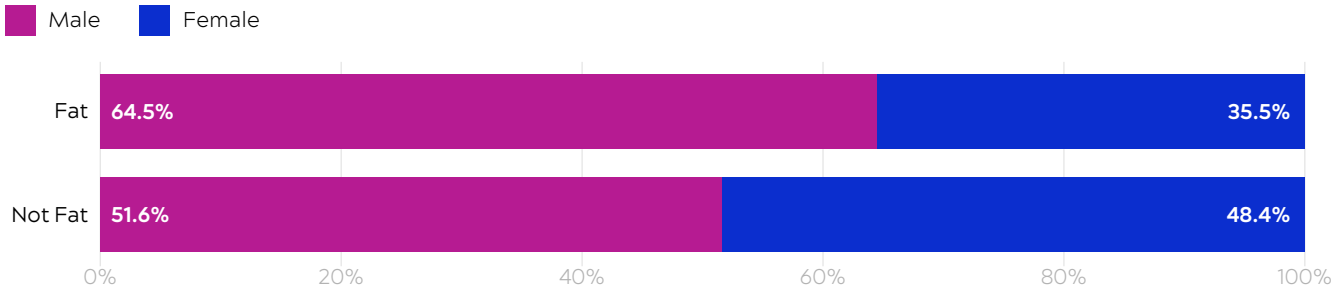
Intersectional analysis indicates that characters who are the most likely to be fat are male characters and older characters. Fat characters were equally represented across race, disability, and LGBTQIA+ identity. (See Charts 1–5.)

When looking at just human characters, fat characters were more likely to be ages 50 and older (21.6% compared with 4.7%), but gender differences are not statistically significant. When looking at nonhuman characters, fat and characters who were not fat were equally balanced in terms of their gender, age, disability, status, and LGBTQIA+ identity.[27] Therefore, among all characters, fat characters were more likely to be men and older, but otherwise, they were as diverse as characters who were not fat.

In other words, the reality that children see on television is that men and older individuals have more diverse body types ranging from thin, average, and fat. Contrarily, women and younger individuals have more restrictions in their bodies and are held to a narrower standard.

CHART 1

Gender intersectionality of body-type representation, among all characters



Note. Characters without a skin tone were not included in race analysis. Fat characters are significantly more likely than characters who are not fat to be male (64.5% compared with 51.6%), but characters who are not fat are significantly more likely than fat characters to be female (48.4% compared with 35.5%).

CHART 2

Racial intersectionality of body-type representation, among all characters

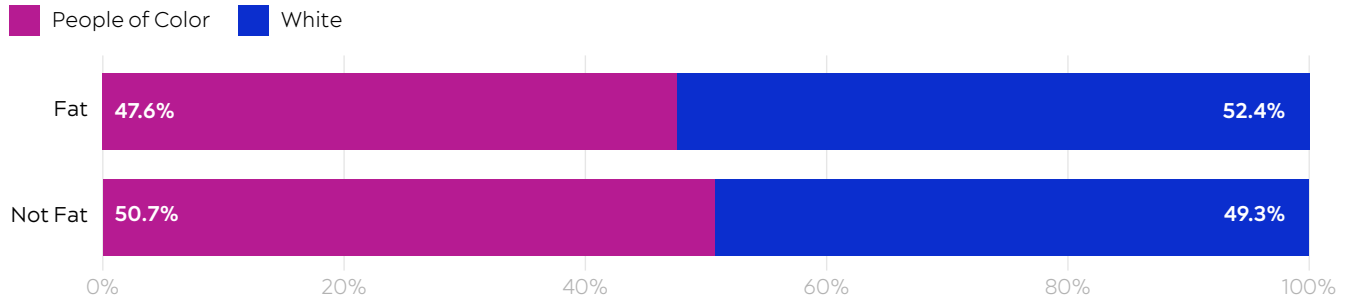
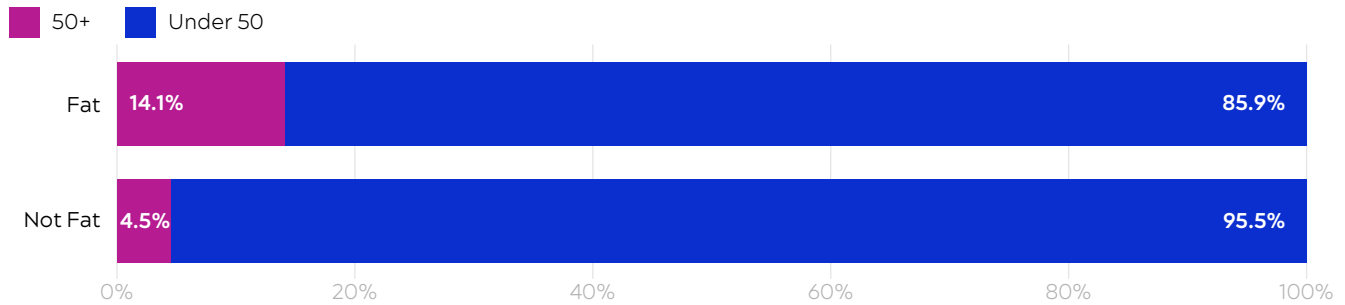


CHART 3

Age intersectionality of body-type representation, among all characters



Note. Characters without a skin tone were not included in race analysis. Fat characters are significantly more likely than characters who are not fat to be 50-plus (14.1% compared with 4.5%), but characters who are not fat are significantly more likely than fat characters to be under age 50 (95.5% compared with 85.9%).

CHART 4

Disability intersectionality of body-type representation, among all characters

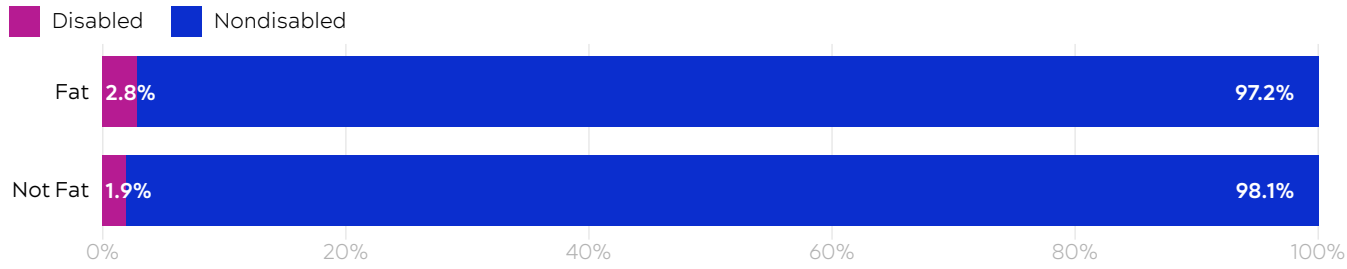
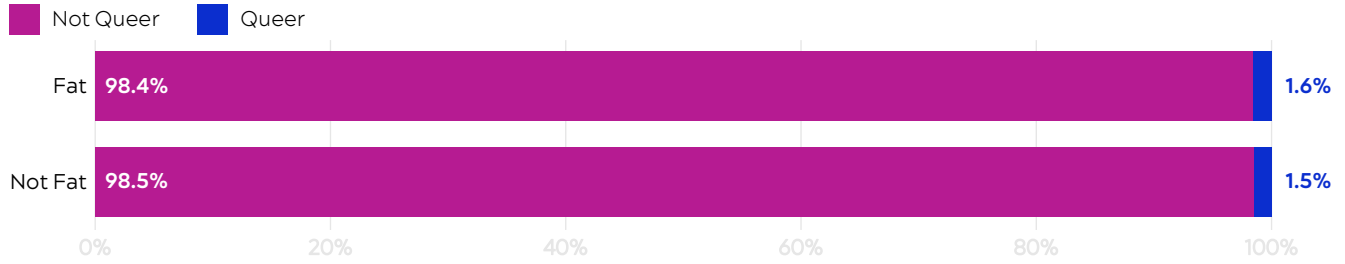


CHART 5

Queer intersectionality of body-type representation, among all characters



Fat characters were relegated to less prominent roles. Specifically, 12.0% of all leads/co-leads were fat, 13.5% of notable supporting roles were fat, and 18.3% of supporting roles were fat. In other words, the more important the role, the higher the chances are that the character is not fat.

TABLE 4

Body type by prominence, among all characters

	Lead/Co-Lead	Notable Supporting	Supporting
Fat	12.0%*	13.5%*	18.3%*
Not Fat	88.0%*	86.5%*	81.7%*

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference. Supporting roles were significantly more likely than lead/co-leading roles and notable supporting roles to be fat. Lead/co-leading roles were significantly more likely than supporting roles to not be fat, and notable supporting roles were significantly more likely than supporting roles to not be fat.

Are fat stereotypes reinforced in children's TV narratives?

Fat stereotypes refer to oversimplified and generalized assumptions about individuals with larger bodies, often applied indiscriminately across all fat people. This study systematically analyzed both favorable and unfavorable portrayals of fat characters in order to better understand the patterns, nuances, and implications of fat representation in children's television programming.

DESERVING OF ROMANCE AND LOVE?

A common fat stereotype is that fat people are less attractive and struggle to attract romantic partners. However, our analysis found that fat characters and characters who were not fat were shown in romantic relationships at a similar rate (11.5% of fat characters compared with 10.9% of characters who were not fat).

TABLE 5

Share of fat characters in relationships and shown as romantic

	Fat	Not Fat
Romantic Relationship	11.5%	10.9%
Kissing	0.2%	0.9%

Stigmas about fat people and romance also vary by gender. However, we did not find that the intersection between fat women and fat men varied for any of the romance variables.

TABLE 6

Share of fat characters and relationships, by gender

	Fat Women	Women Who Are Not Fat	Fat Men	Men Who Are Not Fat
Romantic Relationship	13.7%	12.1%	10.4%	9.7%
Kissing	0.0%	1.1%	0.4%	0.7%

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

SEXUALLY OBJECTIFIED?

Additionally, fat characters were nearly as likely as characters who were not fat to be shown as sexualized, desirable, and in revealing clothing.

TABLE 7

Share of fat characters in relationships and shown as romantic or desired

	Fat	Not Fat
Sexualization	0.5%	1.1%
Revealing Clothing	4.6%	5.8%
Desirable	0.2%	1.0%

Girls and women are ultimately held to higher body and beauty standards than boys and men, and because of this, they generally struggle even more than boys and men to find romance if they are fat. Our analyses found only one significant finding that varied by gender: revealing clothing. Women who were not fat were significantly more likely than fat women to be wearing revealing clothing (9.2% compared with 3.9%). Contrarily, fat men were more likely than men who were not fat to be wearing revealing clothing (5.0% compared with 2.6%).

TABLE 8

Share of fat characters and objectification, by gender

	Fat Women	Women Who Are Not Fat	Fat Men	Men Who Are Not Fat
Sexualization	0.7%	1.8%	0.4%	0.6%
Revealing Clothing	3.9%*	9.2%*	5.0%*	2.6%*
Desirable	0.7%	1.1%	0.0%	0.9%

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

ASPIRATIONAL?

Fat characters may be less likely to be written in ways that communicate that their lives or attributes are aspirational. To assess the degree to which fat characters exhibit aspirational attributes, the analysis considered characters' positive traits, such as having an occupation, extolling dreams, and speaking dialogue that depicted them as smart or funny.

The analysis did not find fat characters to exhibit any of these attributes to a degree that was different from characters who were not fat. Therefore, we conclude that children's TV is not excluding fat characters from aspirational types of stories or dialogue depicting them as smart or funny.

TABLE 9

Share of fat characters with positive traits

	Fat	Not Fat
Occupation	39.3%	37.7%
Dreams	3.2%	2.1%
Smart	7.6%	8.8%
Funny	26.8%	25.4%

Note. Children were removed from occupation analysis.

STEREOTYPICAL?

Stigmas and stereotypes around fatness were manifested in other notable ways. For instance, while uncommon overall, fat characters were significantly more likely than characters who were not fat to be shown as lazy (1.4% compared with 0.5%), "dumb" (8.8% compared with 2.2%), to have poor personal hygiene (1.6% compared with 0.5%), and to serve as the butt of the joke (12.2% compared with 8.5%).

For example, one fat character was the butt of the joke because she was obsessed with food and carried emergency food with her in case she was hungry. Another fat character was portrayed as "dumb" because he did not understand what "run" meant. These portrayals reinforce the idea that fat people are unintelligent and that their fatness should be the butt of the joke.

TABLE 10

Share of fat characters with negative traits

	Fat	Not Fat
Poor personal hygiene	1.6%*	0.5%*
Lazy	1.4%*	0.5%*
Dumb	8.8%*	2.2%*
Butt of the joke	12.2%*	8.5%*

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

Another common stereotype about fat people is that they are sedentary and physically inactive. This stereotype showed up in children's TV programs in this study; characters who were not fat were somewhat more likely than fat characters to exercise (9.4% compared with 6.2%) and participate in sports (7.6% compared with 4.2%), and the difference is statistically significant.

TABLE 11

Share of fat characters who exercise and/or participate in sports

	Fat	Not Fat
Exercise	6.2%*	9.4%*
Sport Participation	4.2%*	7.6%*

Note. Asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference.

Are fat stereotypes still showing up in kids' TV?

- Yes—and they're reinforcing harmful ideas about fat people.

What does this teach kids?

- These aren't just character quirks. They're shaping what children believe about fat people in the real world.
- When fat characters are consistently framed as unintelligent, unclean, or laughable, kids learn that fatness equals failure.

FOR CONTENT CREATORS:

Try this instead:

- Make fat characters funny without making them the punchline.
- Don't default to fatness being a shorthand for lazy, messy, or clueless.
- Spread the flaws around. Every body type can be silly, forgetful, or messy sometimes.

Taken together, children's programming reinforces three prominent fat stereotypes. First, the idea that it is more acceptable for men and boys to be fat than it is for women and girls. Second, the idea that fat people have poorer personal hygiene and are lazier and dumber than people who are not fat. Third, the analysis finds that children's TV shows suggest that fat people are less physically active or sporty than people who are not fat. The analysis did not identify any counter-stereotypes, or ideas that challenge fat stereotypes by framing fat people in a positive light, such as having major life goals and aspirations, or as being funny without them being the butt of the joke.

What is the association between body type and eating behaviors?

We examined eating behaviors and habits displayed by the characters in their narratives. Generally, we did not find many statistically significant differences surrounding eating as it relates to body type. Both fat characters and characters who were not fat were shown eating on screen, and the eating taking place did not vary by eating forms (e.g., meals, snacks), food outcomes (e.g., negative, such as being grossed out by the foods they are eating; or positive, such as being excited about foods they are eating), food occasions (e.g., celebratory, coping), or by nutritional quality (e.g., salty snacks, protein foods, fruits, vegetables). Therefore, it is positive that food does not carry major importance in body representations. Food is placed on screen as a minor prop, rather than as an asset to help shape identities.

However, fat characters were significantly more likely than characters who were not fat to show signs of food bingeing on screen (6.0% compared with 2.1%), and this finding remained statistically significant when limiting the sample to human-only and nonhuman-only characters. Some examples of food bingeing by fat characters occurred when they were shown eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time, swallowing food whole (i.e., not chewing the food), carrying food with them in inappropriate settings, being preoccupied by food and therefore distracted from other important activities because they smell or want food, or eating large quantities of food when nobody else was.

How are messages about bodies shown on screen?

At the episode-level, we investigated the frequency of messages surrounding the health and appearance aspects of bodies, as well as fatness-related microaggressions. Fat characters and characters who were not fat were equally shown in episodes containing a health reference. A health reference was any reference to the instrumental or health traits of the body, such as referring to a person's blood pressure, flexibility, or strength. Contrarily, appearance references were any references to the appearance aspect of the body, such as telling a person their arms look sculpted or their belly is fat. Again, fat characters and characters who were not fat were equally shown in episodes with an appearance reference.

Fat microaggressions might seem subtle, but to kids, they're loud and lasting. In 1 out of every 10 episodes, these microaggressions appeared. Fat characters were *twice* as *likely* to be in those episodes.

These moments tell viewers:

- Fat friends are here for laughs, not leadership.
- Their bodies are problems to work around.
- They're different in ways that exclude them.

Finally, we analyzed whether episodes had fat microaggressions. Such microaggressions are subtle slights or insults that reinforce weight-based stereotypes or stigma, and they can emerge in narratives as direct experiences, indirect experiences, clothing exclusion, or benevolent weightism, which are the many ways in which fat people are shamed, blamed, and patronized under the guise of such comments as polite.[28] Fat microaggressions usually unfold in subtle but discriminatory comments regarding body size and weight. We found that 9.7% of all episodes had a fat microaggression. Fat characters were significantly more likely than characters who were not fat to appear in episodes with a fat microaggression (19.4% of fat characters were in an episode with a fat microaggression, compared with 8.5% of characters who were not fat).

In one program, a group of characters were chasing a duck and could not reach it. They called their fat friend to chase the duck and jump on top of it so it would not continue to run away. Other examples of fat microaggressions had to do with clothing exclusion, used to comedic effect. In one example, a fat character was singled out because the thin characters each found hats but the fat character was not able to find one large enough to fit.

MesquitaFMS / E+ via Getty Images

Recommendations for creators to improve body representation on screen

1. Diversify body types on screen

Why? Fat characters are rare, especially among human roles.

What to do?

- ☐ When casting, choose actors of varied body types across all roles, not just sidekicks.
- ☐ In animation, intentionally design a variety of body sizes that feel real and non-stigmatizing.
- ☐ Let body diversity show up in every scene, not just as the punchline.

2. Show more fat girls and young fat characters

Why? Boys and older characters are more likely than girls and younger characters to be shown as fat, sending the message that fatness is more acceptable for men and older people.

What to do?

- ☐ Include fat girls and teens in stories about love, leadership, friendship, and identity.
- ☐ Don’t limit fat representation to “old” characters or one-off roles.

3. Cast fat characters as leads

Why? Fat characters are often relegated to the sidelines in children's television programs.

What to do?

- ☐ Put fat characters at the center of the story, not just as comic relief or helpers.
- ☐ Give fat characters full emotional lives, aspirations, and story arcs.

4. Address clothing bias

Why? Fat male characters are more likely than fat female characters to wear revealing clothes.

What to do?

- ☐ Avoid over-covering fat characters unless it serves the character, not the stigma.
- ☐ Where possible, let actors have input on what makes them feel seen and powerful.

5. Subvert fat tropes

Why? Fat characters are still commonly shown as lazy, messy, or dumb.

What to do?

- ☐ Show fat characters as smart, stylish, driven, funny (without being the butt of the joke), and kind.
- ☐ If a character has a flaw, make sure body size isn't the punchline.
- ☐ Spread negative and positive traits across characters of all sizes.

6. Show fat characters being active

Why? Fat characters are significantly less likely than characters who are not fat to be shown exercising or playing sports.

What to do?

- ☐ Include fat characters in gym scenes, dance parties, and as members of sports teams.
- ☐ Make activity look fun, normal, and inclusive—*not surprising* when fat people do it.

7. Normalize eating

Why? Fat characters are more likely than characters who are not fat to be portrayed bingeing food.

What to do?

- ☐ Let all characters eat without comment or shame.
- ☐ Avoid tying food obsession or binge eating to fatness as a punchline.
- ☐ Show food as fuel, joy, and culture, not stigma.

Every frame tells a story—not just about characters but also about who matters. When fat children see themselves as only the joke, the outsider, or not at all, it shapes how they move through the world and how the world moves around them. It's time to change the narrative—to design characters, cast roles, and write stories that reflect *all* bodies as valuable, complex, and worthy. If they can see it, they can believe it. And every child deserves to believe they belong.

ENDNOTES

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20. The series tags include "children's," "children's animation," and/or "preschool."
21. Thirteen series were excluded from our dataset from 2022 to 2024: One series did not include prominent speaking characters (only narration), four series had not yet aired as of early March 2025, and eight series could not be located digitally.
22. All analysis excludes minor characters.
23. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021). Anthropometric reference data for children and adults: United States, 2015-2018. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_03/sr03-046-508.pd
24. Nonhuman characters consist of animals or mythical creatures that don't have a human-like body, such as monsters, etc.
25. Human characters constitute any character with a human-like body, such as arms, legs, midriff area, etc. Fairies and mermaids are not necessarily human, but they have a human-like body so they were included.
26. We excluded all characters that did not have a traditional body to evaluate, such as inanimate objects (e.g., talking cars) or characters that do not have a body at all (e.g., talking computer devices).
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