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JUNE 2026

Toolkit: Body Representation and Portrayals in Children's Television

This toolkit provides creators in entertainment and media with recommendations for improving the representation of fatness and more types of bodies on screen. The full report, *Body Representation and Portrayals in Children’s Television*, analyzes the representation of body size in new English-language scripted children’s series that originated in the U.S. from 2022 to 2024, across cable, broadcast, and streaming platforms, based on data from Luminare Film & TV, by Variety.

In this toolkit, we use 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”).

Checklist for creators to improve body representation on screen

Diversify body types on screen.

GDI’s study found that fat characters are rare, especially among human roles. Try this:

- 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.

Show more fat girls and young fat characters.

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. Try this:

- 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.

Cast fat characters as leads.

The data are clear: fat characters are often relegated to the sidelines in children’s television programs. Try this:

- 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.

Address clothing bias.

This study found that fat male characters are more likely than fat female characters to wear revealing clothes. Try this:

- Avoid over-covering fat characters unless it serves the character, not the stigma.
- Where possible, let actors have input on their wardrobe.

Subvert fat tropes.

According to the analysis in this report, fat characters are still commonly shown as lazy, messy, or dumb. Try this:

- 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.

Show fat characters being active.

Fat characters are significantly less likely than characters who are not fat to be shown exercising or playing sports, according to the analysis. Try this:

- 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.

Normalize eating.

Fat characters are more likely than characters who are not fat to be portrayed bingeing food. Try this: 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.

Explore further

<p>Why does fat representation matter?</p> <p>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.</p> <p>What they see on screen teaches them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Which bodies deserve love and friendship (i.e., popularity). ◆ Which bodies are “funny.” ◆ Which bodies get to lead. ◆ Which bodies don't belong. <p>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.</p>	<p>What can you do?</p> <p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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? <p>Small narrative choices shape big beliefs. Write with intention.</p>
<p>How are fat characters portrayed in animation?</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>What can you do?</p> <p>Design with care.</p> <p>If your only fat character is visually “othered,” ask yourself: What story are we telling about that body?</p> <p>Try this instead:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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
<p>Are fat stereotypes still showing up in kids' TV?</p> <p>Yes—and they're reinforcing harmful ideas about fat people.</p> <p>What does this teach kids?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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. 	<p>What can you do?</p> <p>Try this instead:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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.
<p>How are messages about bodies shown on screen?</p>	
<p>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 <i>twice as likely</i> to be in those episodes.</p> <p>These moments tell viewers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Fat friends are here for laughs, not leadership. ◆ Their bodies are problems to work around. ◆ They're different in ways that exclude them. 	