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GDI's 2026 Children's TV Report: Industry Toolkit

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Key Findings at a Glance

In 2025, children's TV hit a record high for characters of color, but female representation slipped and LGBTQIA+ and disability representation remained low.

Most parents want to see the real world reflected in the media their children consume, and inclusive storytelling is associated with stronger audience engagement. The backslides identified in our report showcase a missed opportunity for both revenue and mitigating bias in children's television.

43.2%

Female leads fell to 43.2% in 2025 new programming, which is a 5.3 percentage point decrease from last year.

64.2%

Characters of color reached record highs: 64.2% of leads and 58.5% of all characters in 2025 new programming for kids.

0.5%

LGBTQIA+ characters dropped to 0.5% of all characters, and there were no LGBTQIA+ leading characters in 2025.

The Business Case

Inclusive storytelling offers clear benefits for the entertainment industry: Diverse casts are associated with stronger audience engagement and performance (UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report, 2024), and audiences also want to see more of their own identity group on television (Nielsen, 2024). Among parents of children ages 2-23, 78% want their children exposed to media that shows cultures and lifestyles different from their own (Common Sense, 2021). Children's media is a powerful intervention tool to counter biases and stereotypes, and it is also good for business.

WHAT TO DO:

- ◆ Build inclusion into development from the beginning: Set representation goals and standards when projects are greenlit, and hire writers, consultants, and talent from underrepresented communities to help meet those goals and improve onscreen portrayals.
- ◆ Close clear representation gaps by balancing episode-level focus, not just cast lists. Work to deliberately balance which characters lead episodes across each season, rather than counting on a balanced cast to produce balanced leads.

A Showrunner Checklist

Children's TV reached a record-high for racial diversity in 2025, but female leads declined, LGBTQIA+ and disabled characters were barely present, and white characters are more likely than characters of color to be shown as leaders and with an occupation. Most of these gaps start before casting in script production, character design, and programming decisions.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❑ **Script review for each episode:** Make sure characters from underrepresented groups are clearly shown or named, and check across episodes to see who leads each episode's main storyline.
- ❑ **Be purposeful in assigning gender when creating nonhuman characters:** When creating or casting nonhuman characters, decide each one's gender intentionally instead of defaulting to male, especially for leads.
- ❑ **Bring in writers and consultants from the underrepresented groups your stories are about:** Review the characters from underrepresented communities, and hire writers or consultants with similar lived experiences to ensure each character is authentically portrayed.

WATCH FOR	TRY INSTEAD
Nonhuman characters defaulting to male.	Treat a nonhuman characters' gender as an intentional and creative choice. When you write a nonhuman character into a script, cast women/girls as goblins, monsters, or animals as often as men/boys. Make sure you check the full cast of nonhuman characters for balance in the very early stages of script production.
Mostly white characters are associated with leadership cues.	Think about who is shown doing what and what it says about that group. Look at who has authority in a story. Things to look out for are who you are assigning to with occupation, what types of occupations, and who gives directives. Ensure you give these traits to characters of color as often as you do to white characters.

About the Study

We used a content analytic methodology to analyze 220 episodes of children's television from 2025, where we identified a total of 2,638 characters. Our sample included two episodes per series in new programming (164 episodes) and popular programming (56 episodes). After training and ensuring inter-rater reliability across coders, our team of coders independently coded each character's demographics and portrayals. The report includes analysis over eight years (2018-2025) for new programming and seven years (2018-2019, 2021-2025) for popular programming.

Full report: <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/childrens-tv-representation-report-2026/> |

Contact: Dr. Meredith Conroy for presentations, or a session with your writers' room.