

NEWS RELEASE

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New Studies on Media, Girls, and Gender Roles:

MEDIA REINFORCES SOME GENDER STEREOTYPES, BREAKS OTHERS

Women and Girls Are Under-Represented Across Many Media

Survey Finds Girls Most Often Identify Male TV Personalities As "Most Admired"

Across a range of media today, women and girls are more likely to be depicted as concerned with romance and dating than work or school, and their appearance is frequently a focus of attention. However, women and girls in the media also often are shown using intelligence and exerting independence. These are highlights from a new content study of gender roles portrayed in six different types of media conducted for Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation by Dr. Nancy Signorielli of the University of Delaware. It is the first study of its kind to look at gender messages across a range of media heavily used by teenage girls, including the television shows and commercials, movies, and music videos they watch, and the teen magazine articles and advertisements they read.

Along with a companion survey of girls and boys, the research finds that young people today are likely to get conflicting messages about women both personally and professionally. Following are the findings:

Work, Romance, and Dating

- In television shows, male characters were more likely to be shown "on the job" than female characters: two out of five (41%) male television characters as compared to 28 percent of females were seen working. In the movies, the gender differences were more striking: men (60%) were almost twice as likely to be shown on the job as women (35%).

Men in television shows were also more likely to *talk* about work than women (52% as compared to 40%). In the movies, women and men were equally likely to *talk* about work (60% and 58%, respectively).

- Women, on the other hand, were more likely than men in both television shows and movies to be shown as *talking* about romantic relationships: 63 percent of female characters as compared to 49 percent of male characters in television, and 65 percent of female characters as compared to 38 percent of male characters in the movies, *talked* about romance or dating.
- In teen magazines, one in three articles (35%) focused on "dating," while just 12 percent discussed either school or careers.

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Providing Role Models

- Women and girls in television shows and, especially, movies are shown actively using their intelligence (34% of female characters in television shows; 69% in movies) and acting independently to achieve their goals (39% of female characters in TV shows; 62%, in movies).
- Television shows, movies, and teen magazines also stress women's and girls' self-reliance to solve problems (35% of female characters in TV shows; 35% of female characters in movies; 28% of teen magazine articles).
- Teen magazines articles also include a focus on friendship (28%), as well as other important issues facing young people today, though with less overall frequency, such as self confidence (19%), sexual issues (9%) including sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, and unintended pregnancy, and drugs and smoking (3% each).

A Focus on Appearance

- In movies, particularly, but also in television shows and the accompanying commercials, women's and girls' appearance is frequently commented on: 58 percent of female characters in movies had comments made about their looks, as did 28 percent in television shows and 26 percent of the female models in the accompanying commercials. Mens' and boys' appearance is talked about significantly less often in all three media: a quarter (24%) of male characters in the movies, and 10 percent and 7 percent, respectively, in television shows and commercials.
- One in every three (37%) articles in leading teen girl magazines also included a focus on appearance, and most of the advertisements (50%) used an appeal to beauty to sell their products.
- The commercials *aimed* at female viewers that ran during the television shows most often watched by teen girls also frequently used beauty as a product appeal (56% of commercials). By comparison, this is true of just 3 percent of television commercials *aimed* at men.

An important overall finding is the fact that fewer women and girls than men and boys were represented in almost all the media reviewed.

- in television shows, 45 percent of the characters were female (55%, were male);
- in television commercials, 42 percent of the models were female (58% were male);
- in the movies, 37 percent of the characters were female (63% were male); and
- in music videos, 22 percent of the people shown were female performers (78% were male performers or actors).

The only exception to this were the teen magazines, which are specifically marketed to teenage girls: seven out of ten (70%) of the models in the photographs that accompanied articles in these magazines were women or girls (30% were men or boys). The advertisements in the magazines were even more likely to feature female models (82%) over male models (18%).

“The combined effect of these studies provides all concerned about America's girls with a clear agenda: give girls an unequivocal message that they are valued for who they are, what they do, and who they want to become. Media leaders can take pride that they portray many women as intelligent problem solvers, but they should also be aware of how often they just paint a pretty picture,” observed Lois Salisbury, President of Children Now.

This research is being presented at a Children Now conference on media and gender, *Reflections on Girls in the Media*, April 30-May 2, in Los Angeles, which will be attended by many industry leaders, including television network executives, movie producers, advertisers, magazine editors, and product designers. It was conducted to help contribute to the dialogue at this event.

A National Survey of Kids on Television and Gender Roles. A survey of children between the ages of 10-17, conducted by Lake, Sosin, Snell and Associates during the first week of April 1997, also for Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation, which examined girls' and boys' perceptions about gender roles in television shows. Some of the most noteworthy findings from the survey include:

- Seven out of ten (69%) of girls -- and 40 percent of boys -- say they have ever *wanted* to look like a character(s) in television. About a quarter (31% of girls and 22% of boys) say they *did* change something about their appearance to be more like a television character.
- A majority of children say there are enough good role models today for *girls* in television (52% of girls and 53% of boys); however, a significant percentage -- 44 percent of girls and 36 percent boys -- say there are too few. As girls age they are less likely to think there are enough good role models for girls in television: 46 percent of 16-17 year old girls say there are enough as compared to 56 percent of 10-12 year old girls.
- Most children (61% of girls and 57% of boys) say women are shown as "equal" to men on television. Almost the same percentages as say girls and boys are equal.
- When asked to name people they most *admire* on television, the top ten selections by boys were all male. Seven out of ten people most frequently named by girls were also male. The women included on the top ten list offered by girls are: Brandy, Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O'Donnell.
- Children are aware of the emphasis on appearance, especially for female characters, in television shows: 57 percent of girls and 59 percent of boys say the female characters in the television shows they watch are "better looking" than the women/girls they know in real life. Girls, in particular, also say female characters in television shows are generally thinner than the women they know (61% say thinner) or their girl friends (42%). Older girls are most likely to feel this way (71% of 16-17 year old girls as compared to 51% of 10-12 year old girls say female television characters are generally thinner than women they know).
- Worrying about appearance or weight, crying or whining, and weakness are all things both girls and boys say they associate more with female characters on television than male characters. Playing sports and wanting to be kissed or have sex, on the other hand, are more often thought of in association with male characters than female.

Girls and boys think of qualities such as confidence, problem solving, intelligence, as well as wanting to be in a relationship and doing well in school, as being equally likely to be associated with male as female television characters.

"Television clearly makes an impression on kids today, whether it's what they think they should look like or the qualities they associate with women and men. The media is a powerful tool that can either reinforce negative stereotypes or present strong role models for young girls and boys today," said Matt James, Senior Vice President, Kaiser Family Foundation.

METHODOLOGY

The content analysis reported on in this release is based on an examination of six different types of media: (1 and 2) television shows and accompanying commercials, (3) movies, (4) music videos, and teen magazines, including (5) articles and accompanying photos and (6) advertisements. The samples included: 2 weeks of the top 23 television shows (and accompanying commercials); 15 movies; 3 weeks of the top 23 music videos; and 4 issues each of the four leading teenage girl magazines (including related print ads) that were most likely to be seen by teenage girls. All media, except movies, overlapped in November 1996. A complete methodology is included in the full-report.

The survey findings reported on here are based on a nationwide survey of 1,200 children ages 10 to 17 designed jointly by Children Now, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Lake Sosin Snell & Associates, and was conducted by Lake Sosin Snell & Associates. The interviews consisted of a base sample of 400 girls and 400 boys ages 10 to 17, with over samples of African American and Hispanic boys and girls (100 of each). These over samples were weighted into the base sample so that each of these demographic groups reflects their actual contribution to the total population of children. The sample size with these weights applied is 800 cases. The poll, which was conducted between April 1 and April 7, 1997, has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent.

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Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children, paying particular attention to the needs of children who are poor or at risk. Children Now uses innovative research and communications strategies to pioneer solutions to the problems facing children.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a non-profit independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

The complete findings from the content analysis and survey reported on here are available by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's publication request line at 1 (800) 656-4533 (Ask for publication #1260).

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