



2009 TrueChild Television Analysis & Report

I. Introduction

Just as schools are breaking for the summer, TrueChild is releasing its first annual TrueChild Report Cards for Children's Television which grade the most popular shows in children's television for preschool children (ages 0-5) and school-age children (6-12). Shows like *iCarly*, *That's So Raven* and even *Hannah Montana* received high marks for breaking through stereotypes for boys and girls, while *Jonas* misses the mark by showcasing outdated stereotypes for boys and girls.

Preschool programs from Noggin, PBS Kids, and Playhouse Disney and school-aged programs from Nickelodeon, Disney and the Cartoon Network were rated and reviewed. The report cards, based on an in-depth review across many behavioral and physical indicators, demonstrate that narrow and limiting stereotypes about what it means to be a boy or a girl in today's culture are alive and well in children's entertainment, and are used in progressively more extreme ways as children get older.

II. Major conclusions about all children's programs reviewed

A. Girls need more lead roles:

- Girls represent only 33% of the lead characters on the shows
- Nearly half (43%) of children's programs reviewed feature 0 female lead characters

B. School-Age shows need to maintain the presence of strong female characters like those featured in preschool programs:

- While 94% of preschool shows feature confident girl characters, only 42% of the school-age shows feature confident girls
- Only 19% of the preschool shows feature boys as more intelligent than girls, that number jumps to 46% in school-age shows

C. We are making some progress:

- The main female archetypes often featured in children's television (bossy girl, boy-crazy girl, nerdy unpopular girl) are not present in lead female characters.
- Leading female characters tend to be strong leaders, smart and confident

III. General information about analysis

A. Methodology

The criteria used in the selection of shows to include in this analysis include:

1. Shows must air during prime-time schedules (6-9am, 3-9pm weekdays; 9am-12pm weekends)
2. Shows must either be currently in production or still be featured as a leading show on the network (Based on cable ratings and popularity with viewers)
3. Shows were created post 1999
4. Shows must be storyline driven rather than a musical/variety show (e.g. *Sesame Street*, *Yo Gabba, Gabba*, *Imagination Movers*, etc.)

B. Definitions

For the purpose of this analysis, the following definitions have been used:

1. Lead character – The show is named for the character(s) and/or the character plays a single or co-equal primary role. The character is not part of an ensemble cast.
2. Major character – Character is not a lead character but plays a major role in the show or is part of an ensemble cast.
3. Minor character – Character has a recurring role in the show but is featuring as a supporting cast member.

IV. Results

A. 0-5 Shows (Preschool)

Representation

5 out of 16 (31%) of shows are female-led shows – that is with a female lead character and with plot lines focused on the female lead.

8 out of 16 (50%) of shows are male-led shows – that is with a male lead character and with plot lines focused on the male lead.

- Girls represent:
 - 38% of the lead characters
 - 28% of the major characters
 - 60% of the minor characters
- With the exception of *Dora the Explorer* and *Pinky Dinky Doo*, there are no shows that feature girls in leading roles. Similarly, in 44% of the shows, boys represent more than half if not all the lead characters.

Appearance

- 56% of the shows use stereotypical colors for boys and girls or use these colors to identify gender. Examples of this include several of the tools in *Handy Manny*, Wheezie the Dragon in *DragonTales*, Lulu the elephant in *Ni-Hao, Kai-lan* and Uniqua in *The Backyardigans*

Interpersonal Skills

- Preschool shows tend to feature assertive and confident girls. 81% of shows feature assertive girls and 94% portray confident girls
- In contrast, boys are often shown in more diminutive roles with only 38% of shows portraying boys as assertive and 31% featuring confident boys.
- Ironically, despite the fact that girls are featured in such strong roles, they are not as frequently featured in leading roles. Preschool shows often feature more passive lead male characters such as Max in *Max and Ruby* or Miguel in *Maya and Miguel* or Beast in *Maggie and the Ferocious Beast*.
- On a positive note, there are very few bossy female characters portrayed in preschool shows with only 6% featuring a bossy female character. One example is Beaver on *Franklin*.

Leadership

- Again, because preschool shows often portrays boys in a more passive way, girls more often are portrayed as leaders even if they are not in leading roles. 81% of shows feature girls as leaders while only 38% feature boys as the predominant leaders. Examples include Francine in *Arthur*, Alicia in *Go Diego Go* and Beaver in *Franklin*.
- 63% of shows feature girls as predominantly initiating actions (not waiting for directions from others) and 31% feature boys as predominantly initiating actions
- 50% of shows feature girls as predominantly initiating conversations (rather than chiming into conversations) and 19% of shows feature boys as predominantly initiating conversations

Skills and Intelligence

- Intelligence and aptitude is demonstrated differently in preschool shows in that girls and boys are constantly problem-solving. Only 19% of shows portray boys as more intelligent than girls and that is often because there are more boys featured in the show.
- Similarly, in most of the preschool shows, boys and girls are almost equally likely to be participating in the arts. Many of shows feature boys and girls singing, playing musical instruments, etc. However, despite this, 31% of shows portray girls as

having a greater aptitude for arts than boys. In these cases, like *Maya and Miguel*, the boys tend to be more focused on sports.

- 25% of shows portray boys as having a greater aptitude for math and science than girls. Shows like *Higglytown Heroes* feature one girl character, Twinkle, and she is portrayed as very girly and not adept at math and science.

B. 6-12 Shows (School Age):

General

- 13 of the 24 (54%) shows are animated and the remainder are live action sitcoms

Representation

6 out of 24 (25%) of shows are female-lead – that is with female lead characters and with plot lines focused on the female leads

12 out of 24 (50%) of shows are male-lead – that is with male lead characters and with plot lines focused on the male leads

- Girls represent
 - 28% of the lead characters
 - 45% of the major characters
 - 47% of the minor characters
- *Animated* shows, girls represent:
 - 23% of the lead characters
 - 38% of the major characters
 - 57% of the minor characters
- *Live action sitcoms*, girls represent:
 - 33% of the lead characters
 - 61% of the major characters (because boys are primarily featured in the lead roles)
 - 37% of the minor characters
- 29% of the shows feature more girls than boys in the lead roles but in all of these shows there is only one female lead
- In contrast, 50% of the shows that feature boys as leads, have two or more boys in the leading roles

Appearance

- 82% of shows feature girls primarily with long hair
- 40% of shows feature boys who are underweight and have skinnier-than-average waists

- 60% of the shows feature girls who are underweight with skinner than average waists
- In contrast, shows that have girls in leading roles, only 38% feature girls who are underweight

Interpersonal Skills

- 54% of shows feature a lead or major female character who exhibits assertiveness as opposed to 66% who feature boys in the same way
- In contrast, 100% of the shows who have girls in leading roles feature a lead or major female character who exhibits assertiveness
- 42% of shows feature a lead or major female character who exhibits confidence as opposed to 63% who feature boys in the same way
- Again, 100% of the shows that have girls in lead roles feature confident girls
- 46% of the shows feature at least one bossy female character but these girls tend to be in either major or minor roles – they are never lead characters. Examples of this include the antagonistic characters like Portia in *The Mighty B* or Candace on *Phineas and Ferb* whose sole mission in life is to get her brothers into trouble with their mom and coerce them to do whatever she wants them to do.

Leadership

- 33% of shows feature girls in leadership roles. These are primarily the shows that have leading female characters.
- In contrast, 63% feature boys in leadership roles.
- On a positive note, lead girls are always portrayed as leaders while lead boys are often portrayed as goofballs as in the case of Josh in *Drake & Josh* or Cody in *The Suite Life*. These shows employ the buddy model where one lead is the leader and the other is the goof-off.
- 58% of shows have boys initiating actions and conversations as opposed to chiming in or waiting for direction.
- In contrast, only 38% of shows feature girls in the same way. Again, this tends to be guided by whether or not there is a lead female in the show. If there are both boys and girls in the leading roles, girls typically tend to be featured as the more dominant character as with Alex in *Wizards of Waverly Place*. As the middle sister in the family, she tends to dominate the action in the show while sharing the lead with her two brothers.

Self Image

- 49% of shows feature at least one girl who is overly preoccupied with her appearance. Again, these typically are not the girls in leading roles. They often are featured as a stereotypical girl to contrast a strong lead female character or as a minor character who also tends to be overly-fascinated with one of the leading male characters as with Macy in *Jonas*. London, in *The Suite Life* shows in another example of a girl who is preoccupied with her appearance and she is deliberately featured as a classic stereotype of a live Barbie doll.
- 17% of the shows portray boys as overly preoccupied on their appearance. Examples of this include many of the overtly stereotypical characters on *Total Drama Island* such as Justin or Chad on *Sonny with a Chance*
- 46% of shows feature female characters who will adopt new behaviors in order to attract boys. Again, these characters tend to be in supporting roles such as Candace in *Phineas and Ferb* who wants nothing more than to get the attention of Jeremy Johnson. She has been featured as showing an interest in sports, changing her attire, etc in order to get him to like her. Another example is Caitlin on *6Teen* who has changed her hair and her clothes and feigned interest in different activities in order to attract an array of different boys.
- Boys are actually almost as often portrayed in this way as in the case of Cory in *Cory in the House* who signed up for the pep squad to attract a girl or Eddie on *That's So Raven* who will do whatever it takes to attract a girl he has a crush on.

Skills and Intelligence

- 46% of shows portray boys as more intelligent than girls. In the other cases, either the girls are smarter or intelligence is equal amongst boys and girls
- While there are close to an equal number of intelligent male and female characters on these shows, intelligence in boys is more often portrayed as a dominant trait than it is with girls. There are many examples of genius boys featured on shows such as Wade in *Kim Possible*, Zack in *Zack and Cody* and *Jimmy Neutron*. In contrast, intelligent girls such as Jazz Fenton in *Danny Phantom* or Maddie in *The Suite Life* or Jen in *6Teen* often have their intelligence stifled and overshadowed by their more “girly” behavior.
- 54% of shows portray girls as having a greater aptitude for arts than boys. The typical form of art that boys are featuring engaging in is music. 29% of the shows feature boys either playing an instrument of some kind or playing in a band. All of the boys on *Sonny with a Chance* are actors and the brothers on both *Drake and Josh* and *Jonas* are musical artists.
- 63% of shows portray boys as having a greater aptitude for math and science than girls. While shows like *Danny Phantom* and *Jimmy Neutron* portray both boys and girls with an aptitude for math and science, it is unusual to find many female characters who have an overt talent for the sciences. Interestingly, several shows like *Kim Possible* and *Danny Phantom* feature mothers who have a very high

aptitude for science. In both these cases however, the mothers are often “feminized” by showing them baking cookies for their families or tending to household chores.