



PREPARE & PROTECT YOUR CHILD

The following simple, 7-step procedure is adapted from Chapter 6, "Rebel Resist, Refuse: Sample Conversations with Our Daughters" in Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes, by Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brow. © 2007 St. Martin's Griffin Press. All rights reserved.

You don't have the resources and money to do promotions and contests, co-branding, viral marketing, advergaming, or program-length commercials, but you do have your relationship and your voice. But from the age of about four years on, as a parent you have so much power to bring your child a reality that competes with the limited fantasies show on television and other media. Take advantage of it:

1. Engage

The best way to provide your child with a healthy resistance to narrow, stereotypic images is to help him or her name them and experience a little distance from what they see.

2. Question

Your job is to question the images and remind them that the world is much richer than what they're being sold. If you question, they'll question. A great way to begin is to ask your child about things so that they'll notice the repetition. Referring to clothing ads, you might ask, "Why are the girls/boys always in pink/dark colors? Where is the bright orange you love so much?" or "Why do the girls sit or pose and the boys run and do things? You and your girlfriends love to run hard and play with action figures like the boys in this ad/You and your boyfriends like to sit and talk like the girls in this ad, so where are they?"

While watching a commercial or shopping for toys, you might ask, "*Barbie's so skinny and walks on her toes. Do you know any girls who really look like that?*" Or "*Hulk has such large huge muscles. Does he look like any of the boys you know?*" And then "*I wonder how it makes girls/boys feel to play with someone that doesn't look at all like them.*"

3. Listen

This is really important because what you'll hear from your child is their real wishes and fantasies about themselves and how they understand their world. "*Why is she in pink?*" "*Why do you think they chose a girl who was so pretty and skinny to play the role?*" Your child might answer with "*Because she's a girl*" and "*Princesses are supposed to be pretty and skinny.*"

"Why is he in dark camouflage on that box cover holding a toy gun" or "Why do you think they chose to have the prince rescue the princess three times?" Your child might answer "Because that's what boys like" or "Because boys are supposed to do the rescuing."

4. Don't Argue: You can agree in part

"Yeah, it sure seems from what we're seeing that pink and shopping are girl things." Or "You're right, it does seem like boys are always supposed to be strong and athletic and do all the rescuing." These provide an opening for a discussion of stereotypes.

5. Reflect, Share Discomfort, and Provide Counterexamples

Begin the discussion with a definition: *"Stereotypes are things we think or we're told are true about all girls or most girls, but they aren't really true or are only true for some. You see them so often that sometimes you come to believe they're true when they're not.*

"One stereotype is that only boys play sports, and a lot of what you see in movies and on TV is boys playing sports. But do only boys play sports?" They'll say no proudly. You can then ask, "Who do you know who plays sports?" They may point to an older cousin or a neighborhood girl or a babysitter if she's a girl. If it's your daughter you can add, "You, too! You may not be on a team yet, but you swim and have such a good arm when we toss the ball. You'll probably be on some sports teams. TV should show that girls can be as good at sports as boys!" You can do the same thing with stereotypes that only girls like to dance or paint or shop.

It's important to provide a reality check with counterexamples whenever you can: *"But we love to wrestle on the floor" or "You can be much quieter than Dora sometimes, so that doesn't quite hold true, does it?"*

Open up space for your child to be more than a stereotype by affirming their complexity: *"You like to be sweet sometimes and to play rough other times." Reflect on the narrow choices and share your discomfort: "It makes me sad when people say girls can only be some things and boys can only be others when kids want to do it all. I loved it when people told me I could do anything. I think you can do anything, too."*

If your child has noticed that once again a boy has rescued a girl, you can say. *"I've noticed that too. And it's bothered me because girls can rescue boys, and the girls I know, probably wouldn't wait for someone to rescue them." Or "It bothered me too, because some boys like to sit quietly and read their book just like you. Some play with dolls or like to shop for toys and things. And it must get tiring always trying to act strong and having to be really good at sports."*

You might open the doors wider to "pretty" or "strong" by saying, *"I wish they made a Barbie who looks like Aunt Michelle." Or to being strong by saying, "Daddy is strong but he likes to read or sit and hold the baby, too."*

6. Invest Elsewhere

We don't ask you to roll your eyes or put down the things they love, whether they're toys or television characters. We do suggest that you compete by doing the following.

The important part of this conversation is reinforcing their dreams and turning the opportunity into something more than being pretty or sexy-pretty, strong-athletic. You have an opportunity to say, *"I wonder what would happen if they picked a girl who looked like the girls we know to star in a film like that. They're all so beautiful in their own way."* Or, whenever you see a Lego commercial, for example, with its motors, gears, and such, you can say, *"Hey, where are the girls? Why do they let boys have all the fun on commercials?"* If they're showing a girl holding a baby doll you can say, *"Hey, you like to hold your little brother sometimes. Where are all the boys? Why don't they let boys take care of the babies sometimes? you could sure do something like that!"*

Remember that the object of the conversation is to help your child invest energy and excitement in a range of alternatives. That's all. It's tough to do, but it is probably easier than getting them to eat cauliflower. After all, cauliflower isn't all that delicious, but building a car that moves or buying a new bicycle or painting a picture of their room? That's really cool, every bit as cool, if not more so, than dressing Barbie up or playing with a toy gun, don't you think?

7. Make a Game of It

Point out or ask your child to point out to you when there's a girl dressed in pink – or the reverse: girls dressed in other than pink. Or when there's a boy shown being athletic—or something other than athletic. The point will always be to follow up each stereotype spotted with a disclaimer: Boys can choose any color they like. My favorite color is green. Your grandfather's was yellow. Or, girls do adventurous things, too: Remember Aunt Theresa when she went to climb Mount Everest? And so on. And it doesn't ruin pink or dark colors for them at all. Being educated about a healthy diet doesn't ruin that piece of chocolate cake. You just may choose not to eat it every day after you've been educated about nutrition and balance.

A parent has to make a judgment about where to stop. The goal is getting a child to think outside the box. You don't need to have her think the way you do, and you don't have to come to an agreement. You just need to raise the questions. What you're doing is encouraging them to ask their own questions and not take things at face value. It doesn't really matter if your child just defends the general worldview of boys and girls. If you bring tip a series of questions, they will linger in their mind no matter what they are comfortable voicing at this time.

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Additional Resources

http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip_sheets/gender_tip.cfm

<http://www.parents.com/preschoolers/discipline/behavior/avoiding-gender-stereotypes>