



# Girls and Boys and Television

*A few reminders for more gender sensitivity  
in children's TV*



# Why do we need gender sensitivity?

Television is highly appealing to children all over the world. It offers them exciting stories, material for their imagination, access to other worlds they would not come across in daily life – and visions of what it means to be a girl or a boy – a woman or a man.

The goal of any quality children's television is to support both boys and girls in becoming active members of the society they inhabit. But what kinds of world views is children's television offering? What roles is it presenting to girls and boys?

A simple count of the main characters in children's television in 24 countries reveals that in only 32% of cases girls or women are the main characters, while boys and men do so in 68%. In some series women or girls are almost entirely absent. A brief look at the ratio of male to female in *The Smurfs* or among the fish in the ocean in *Finding Nemo* raises the question: Who can really imagine a world in which only one woman features among hundreds of men? This fairly straightforward comparison of numbers already illustrates that television portrays a biased representation of the social world.

Some may argue that questions of gender equality are passé and belong to a previous century. Yet the reality of children's television proves to us that today gender equality is still a long way off. Not only are girls shown in restricted roles, but little attention is given to issues of boys and the crises they confront.

What is called for here is gender sensitivity which offers quality for girls and boys, which draws attention to critical stereotypes and clichés, and points out alternatives, which are beneficial and appealing to girls and boys.

The purpose of this reminder is to provide some explanatory notes with regard to these issues.

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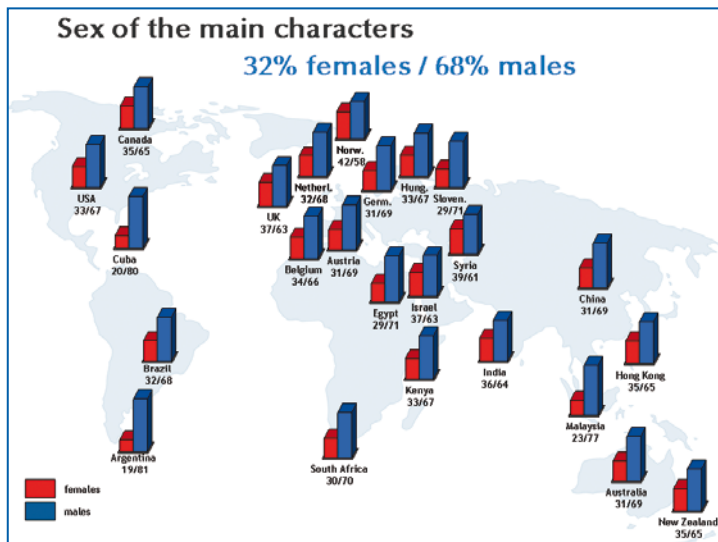
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# The main characters in children's television

In the largest study ever conducted about children's television, we tracked gender representations in 19,664 programmes from 24 countries. We found:



- ◆ Only 32% of all main characters in children's television are female.
- ◆ The ratio of male to female characters in animation programmes, especially if the main character is an animal, monster, etc., is as disparate as 87% male to 13% female.
- ◆ Public broadcasters are even slightly more unbalanced than private channels!

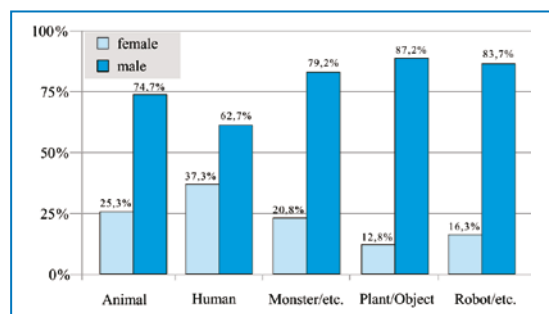
IZI – Children's television worldwide 2007; basis: 5,932 fict. shows, n=25,439 characters

## Action is called for to change this situation!

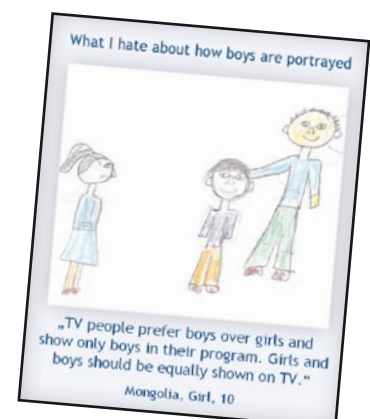
Unlike society generally with 51% females to 49% males, children's television presents a very male world! Such discrepancy continues where race and ethnicity are concerned:

- ◆ 72% of all main characters in children's television are Caucasian.
- ◆ Some of the "whitest children's television" can be found in South Africa, where 81% of all significant characters are white – while in reality only 9% of the population are white.
- ◆ Curiously, on Kenyan children's television there are more Asian girls (16%) than black girls (11%).

Surely, the idea of quality in children's television implies that children could reasonably expect to identify sometimes with characters along the lines of their gender and ethnicity.



The greater the degree of creative freedom, the more the gender ratio is biased towards male characters.



*Children's television needs a more balanced and more colourful ethnic blending of both main and supporting characters.*

# Common stereotypes in children's television

## Girls and women in children's television are often:

- ◆ conventionally beautiful, underweight, and sexualised
- ◆ rarely elderly or even adult
- ◆ motivated frequently by a romantic interest
- ◆ shown as dependent upon boys
- ◆ often stereotyped in 2 ways: as blonde – both the nice girl or the “blonde bitch”; or as red-haired – the headstrong and cheeky tomboy

Women/girls are more often depicted as being modest, tidy, and conventionally moral. Beauty is their main attribute and source of power. Women are there to complement men, to encourage and support them, and as incentives for their endeavours in life. They are primarily characterised by “non-masculine” features whether as caring and sensitive, or silly, capricious and fearful or they are cheeky, self-opinionated, and nasty.



*A (stereo-)typical girl character  
Girl, 11, Ukraine*

However, there are programmes which place the focus on girls and their perspective. Examples such as *Lizzy McGuire*, *iCarly*, *Suddenly Mermaids*, *Mortified*, or *Kim Possible* point out that girls on television can be multifaceted and interesting. Overall, however, as these make up 10% of all fictional programmes, such girls as protagonists remain exceptions.

## Boys and men in children's television are often:

- ◆ loners or leaders
- ◆ more frequently antagonists
- ◆ more frequently overweight
- ◆ even more frequently Caucasian
- ◆ often stereotyped in 4 ways: the lonesome cowboy, the emotional soft-boy, the clever small guy, the dumb blockhead

Men/boys are automatically heterosexual, interested in, but simultaneously looking down on, women. They have to be tough, the body being a machine that has to function by way of disciplinary action. They tend to assume power and authority and this superior status often has to be defended. Alongside these more traditional forms of “male hegemony” there is also a variety of cheeky little boys who continuously violate the rules and norms of society and who assert themselves with their wit.



*A (stereo-)typical boy character  
Boy, 11, Germany*

*Gender equality means to overcome one-dimensional, traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity, which over-simplify and fall short of reality and in contemporary society are neither beneficial to girls nor boys.*

# Why is there so little change?

## Blind spots and self-fulfilling prophecies

While producers' understanding and knowledge of the gender category is quite diverse, some similarities are evident: male characters far outnumber female characters in children's television globally, in both domestic and imported productions, on public and commercial television. This is astonishing in a modern world in which 196 nations have declared the equality of men and women. This equality does not apply to children's television!



## Blind spot:

### To be male is the norm, to be female stereotypically different

In many classic examples of children's fiction such as *Bugs Bunny*, *The Smurfs* or *Winnie the Pooh* little heroes are automatically male. Sometimes one or two girls exist alongside hundreds of male characters – like Smurfette, the sexy, beautiful, blonde girl-smurf. Even so, while every male smurf is named by his special feature – for example Clumsy Smurf, Brainy Smurf, and so forth, Smurfette's distinguishing feature is merely being female, the deviation from the male norm. This female status is limited to a few stereotypes. As noted by Simone de Beauvoir in the middle of the 20th century, to assume that women are the “the other sex” indicates a blind spot. Those in power, those who fit this male norm, create new stories and characters starting from their own experience. Because a lot of the creators of children's television are white men, they tend to present their fictional characters as 'pale males'. Yet if this blind spot – this assumption that females are merely the other sex – is recognised it can be modified and open up and renew creativity.

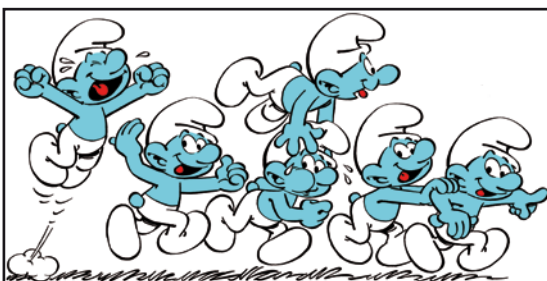


*If there are a lot of boys and a single girl, the girl has to stand in for all girls. Increase the number of girls and the possibility of several personalities is opened up!*

## Self-fulfilling prophecy:

### Boys identify only with boys while girls identify with both sexes

One of the arguments producers commonly cite to justify current practice is that girls can identify with boy characters, while boys cannot identify with girl characters. This is a fallacy, since attractive girl characters such as Kim Possible, Dora the Explorer or Bibi Blocksberg also appeal to boys who identify with them as well. However, without a doubt girls name male characters as their favourite characters more frequently than boys mention female characters. But this preference must be seen for what it is – it corresponds precisely to the gender ratio found on television. The fact that male characters seem more popular is primarily a question of what is available and, hence, a self-fulfilling prophecy.



*Gender sensitivity means to reflect and be aware of one's own prejudices and question assumptions about gender that have become normalised through repetition.*

# Problematic body images of the global girl



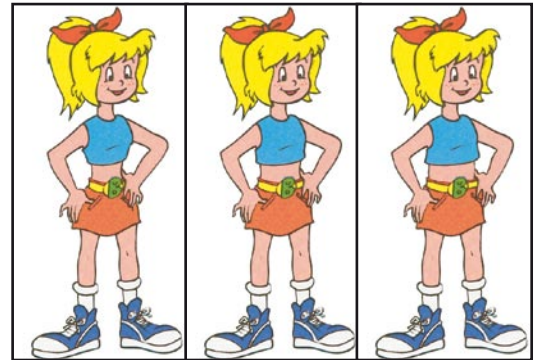
Video print of Bloom (Winx Club) with measurements

84% of fictional children’s television is made up of animation. Here a very troubling issue has emerged relating to girls’ body size and shape – 2 out of 3 female characters were found to have unreachable long legs and a wasp-like waists which no cosmetic surgery could achieve. We seem to be confronting girls continuously with body shapes they can never attain. This can foster discontent and eating disorders.

## Sexualisation of girls

Wasp-like waists and overly long legs imply a sexualisation of girl characters whose power lies mostly in their attractiveness to the opposite sex. They get what they want by flirting – male characters then succumb without resistance.

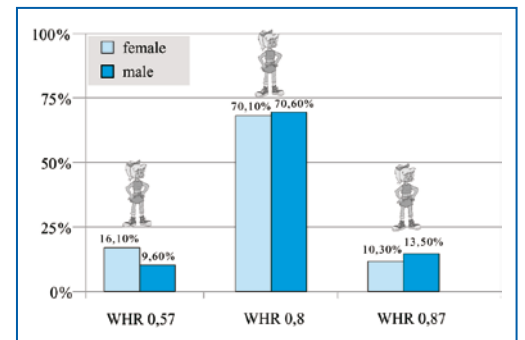
The images and behaviours are very distant from actual children’s bodies and child-like behaviour, but are the stuff of adult fantasies. In particular animation programmes in the tradition of Asian mangas the bodies and clothes are hyper-sexualised and simultaneously infantilised.



© Kiddinx

## How should Bibi Blocksberg look like?

We asked 1,055 3- to 12-year-olds.



**The result:** Children prefer a childlike healthy body for a child character

## Girls and boys don’t want it!

Girls and boys themselves don’t want the sexualised female bodies. Studies showed that they would prefer for child and women characters to have natural body shapes. Especially the boys would like a less sexualised body shape.



## Flirting as power?

Hyper-sexualisation is particularly controversial when inserted in many cultural contexts. In these instances, respect for intimacy and the boundaries of common decency are often ruthlessly overstepped and behavioural patterns are promoted that are inappropriate in these situations. In Western culture, flirting may be approved of or condoned as ‘cute’ within certain limits. In non-Western contexts (that is, most of the world), however, such behaviour can quickly jeopardise one’s reputation and have grave social consequences.

*Gender sensitivity means to reflect on the kinds of body shape that are appropriate and to question the role of sexualisation in the story.*

# What girls are looking for:



Girls and boys are looking for narratives and characters that represent their interests and ideals, and that provide suspense, humour, and involvement. Even though these preferences tend to be gender-specific, there is a huge potential for variety in the roles and identities of these girls and boys.



Life according to Rosa

## Being special and recognising one's complexity

Girls are drawn to characters that reflect their experience of life. They seek recognition and appreciation of their identity with all its complexities, abilities, and shortcomings. Girls enjoy multifaceted and multilayered characters who also fail at times, yet manage to win through in the end. They take pleasure in humour, even directed at their own weaknesses, and it helps them deal with their personal problems.

## Learning in relationships

Commonly, girls are looking for reliable relationships with a character which becomes their role model, girlfriend, ideal mother, or erotic friend etc. They often enjoy being engaged in those scenarios where characters progress gradually through trial and error and reflection. Girls enjoy narratives that examine events from various perspectives and that give them the opportunity to learn through relationships.



Mortified: Learning through relationships



Genji: Taking action

## Girl Power

Girls are looking for characters and narratives which help them understand themselves as special, independent, and assertive individuals. While these, preferably female, characters may temporarily fail, they ultimately reach their goals: recognition, independence, and team spirit. Girls appreciate heroines who take control of their own destiny, find their way, and make things happen.

*Gender sensitivity means to take girls and their preferences seriously.*

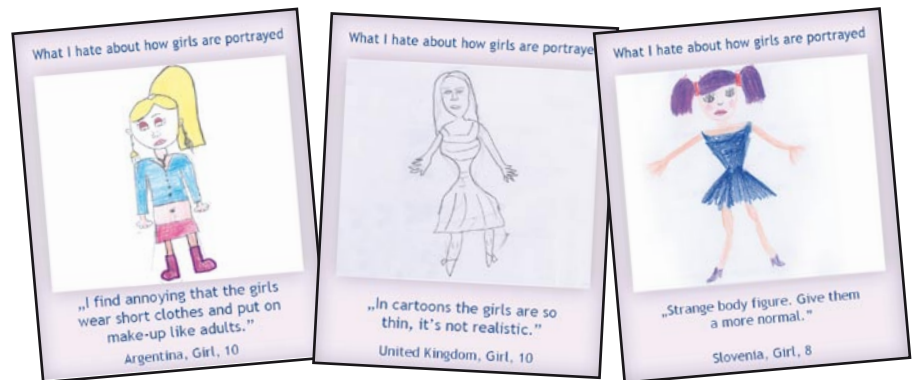
## Picture letters to producers:

# What bothers girls and boys about how girls are portrayed

Over 1,000 children and young people worldwide drew and described their critiques. Here are the critiques mentioned the most:

### Sexualised clothing, make-up and far too skinny

Children worldwide criticised the female characters' dress style as far too sexualised, with too much Make up and far too skinny bodies.



### Stereotypes of snobbish girls and drama queens

Children worldwide criticised that girls are characterised as snobbish, always devalue each other and acting overly emotional.



### Cute, but boring girls?

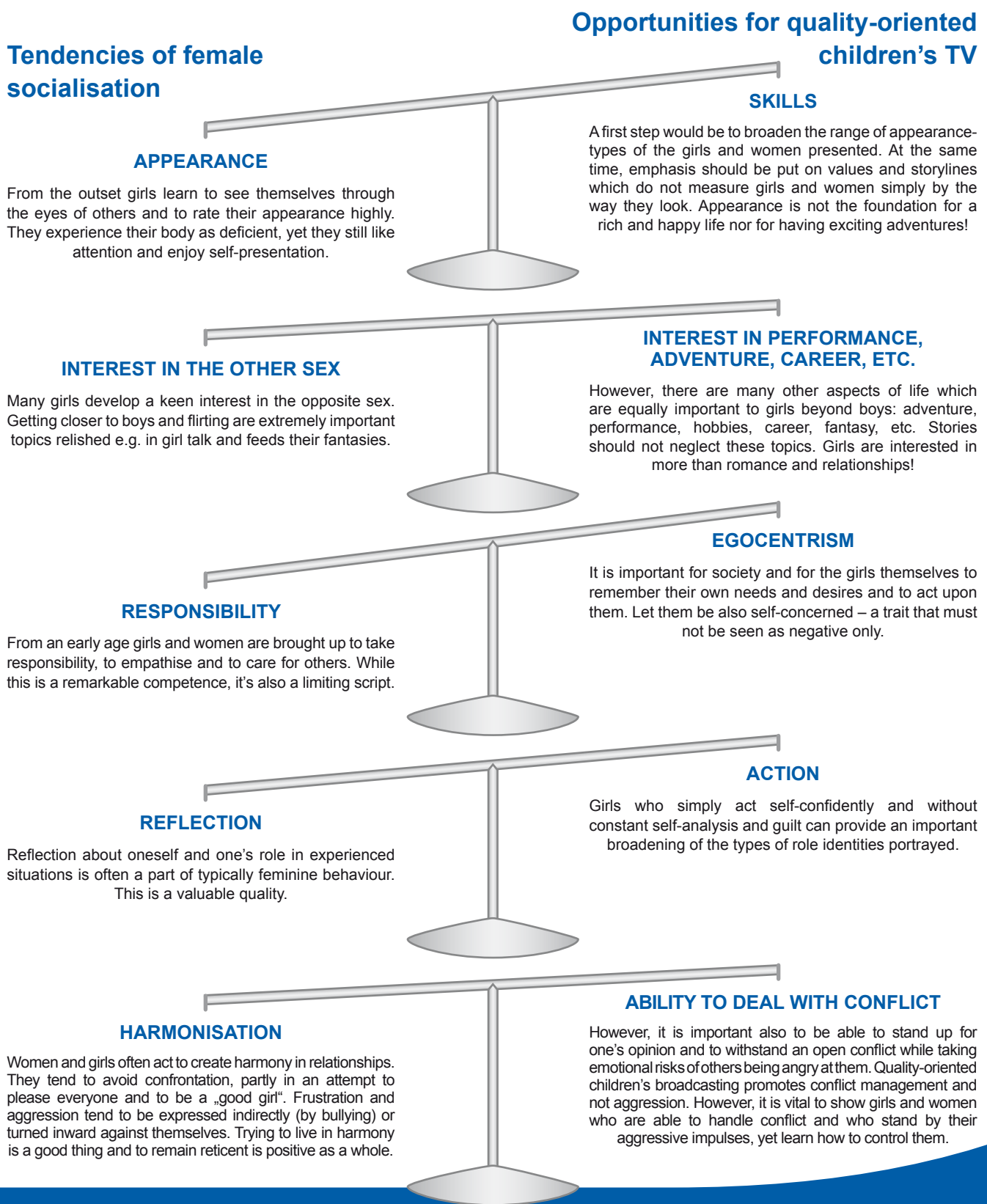
The TV-girls are criticised as too passive, helpless and just boring!



*Create more interesting girl characters and avoid these stereotypes.*

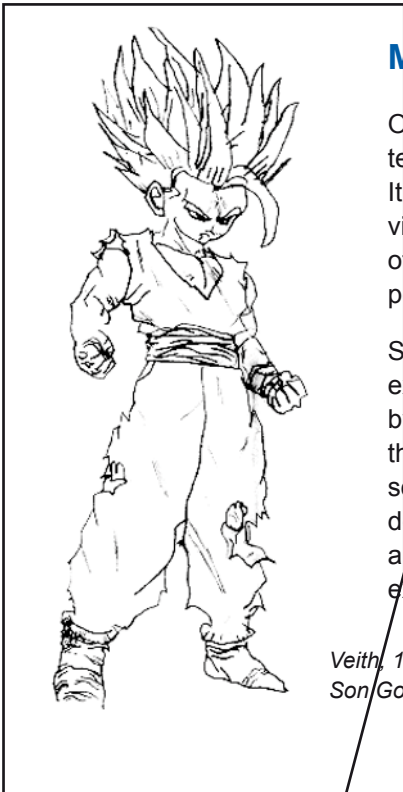


# How can children's television reach girls and help broadening femininity?



*Quality in children's television means taking girls seriously and presenting them with perspectives which offer them spaces beyond the obvious interests and typical stereotypes.*

# What boys are looking for:



## Mastering challenges

One of the key interests with which boys approach television is to find out how to deal with challenges. It is not boys' continuous desire for top performance, victory at all costs, or power over other people – as often presumed. Dealing with and managing external performance requirements are in the focus.

So-called getting-over characters who overcome hurdles or high standards and expectations have a particular appeal to boys. They weather every stormy situation by ceaselessly acting and reacting to the demands they are faced with or by applying their knowledge of rules and regulations. Other boys, in turn, are more fascinated by so-called getting-under characters or non-compliant ones who defy social norms and define their own standards. They make light of every situation, they come up with ideas, and they always have a smart quip up their sleeve, and invariably manage somehow to extract themselves from tricky situations.

Veith, 10, Germany:  
Son Gohan, ready to defend the earth.

## Solution characters appeal – problem characters do not

Most boys at children's and kids age have little interest in the profound, highly differentiated presentation of problems and characters exposed to them. Instead they respond more strongly to solution processes and problem management. They virtually never identify with victim characters.



Typical "getting-under" characters



A typical "getting-over" character

## Action characters appeal – talky characters do not

Boys are attracted by characters who provide "compressed communication" rather than those who consider things from all angles in a talky communicative style. They usually deem lengthy conversations and the unfolding of relationships as uninteresting.

*Gender sensitivity means to take boys and their preferences seriously.*

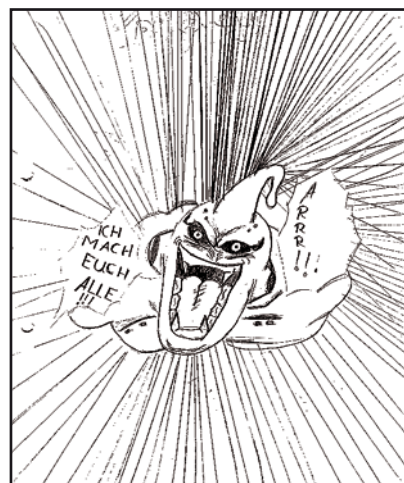
## Problems in boys' television preferences:

# Only action, violence, and dominance?

Spiderman beats up the villain, the X-Men fight with the supernatural forces available to them, and Son Goku saves the world by defeating the monsters. Audience studies and ratings alike confirm: Boys prefer action and characters with a propensity for violence and aggressive actions in a way that makes adults shake their heads. What is the motivating force?

## What appeals is the action – not “violence per se”

Boy-related research has shown: It is not violence per se they are enthused about, but rather the involved aspect of mastering challenges and progressing. On children's television, however, violence is almost exclusively used to address this interest. In this particular case violence tends to be evidence for producers' lack of originality.

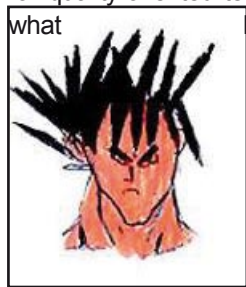


Tarek, 12, Germany: I kill you all!!!

## Aggression as threat and energy

Nevertheless aggression itself is also an issue for boys (and some girls). This concerns the “good” aspect of aggression, the energy that is part of it, and which motivates a person “to tackle” issues and problems head on, entering conflicts energetically and solving them.

However, the more problematic and threatening aspect of violence is also an issue, on the one hand with regard to boys' potentials and powers – particularly concerning the question how one's aggressive impulses can be dealt with appropriately. On the other hand boys live in a world in which they are directly and indirectly confronted with violence: by their peers and adults, as well as, for instance, by road traffic, social exclusion (through poverty and migration), the threat of unemployment, or lack of prospects. Boys seek to cultivate their aggressions. The negation of aggression is hardly recommendable for quality-oriented television. But it is up to us to decide what kind of material and which frame of references we want to present boys with for them to interpret.

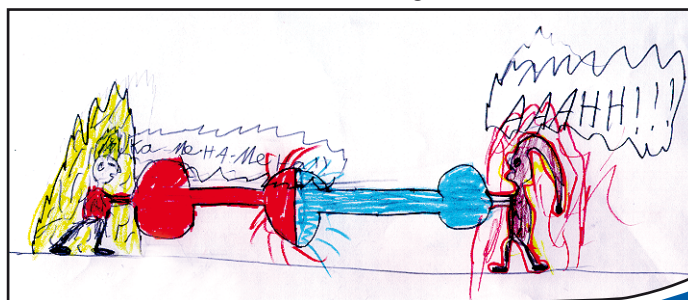


Erik, 8, likes wild men.

Gabriel, 11, likes it when characters use their power.

## Combat and defence as reduction of complexity

Children and young people today are growing up in an increasingly complex world. Stereotypes of masculinity suggest that boys that they ought to assert themselves, to stand their ground as men (the true definition of which is more and more obscure in modernity). Faced with the prevalence of women in everyday life, the often encountered intellectual superiority of female peers, and the demands of stereotypical versions of masculinity, working out how to act and be is a very complex enterprise. In the world of the imagination it is possible for boys to avert an attack through physical and armed force or they can save humankind through targeted actions. In these fantasies boys can be heroes – they can help them manage the complexities of being a modern male. Yet, it is up to us to decide which strategies and which symbolic material we want to feed their imagination with.



*Gender sensitivity means to find new ways of taking boys' issues seriously without using only violence.*

## Picture letters to producers:

# What bothers girls and boys about how boys are portrayed

Over 1,000 children and young people worldwide drew and described their critiques. Here are the critiques mentioned the most:

### Rowdies and thugs

Children worldwide mainly criticised that boy characters are being portrayed as aggressive, bullying and violent.



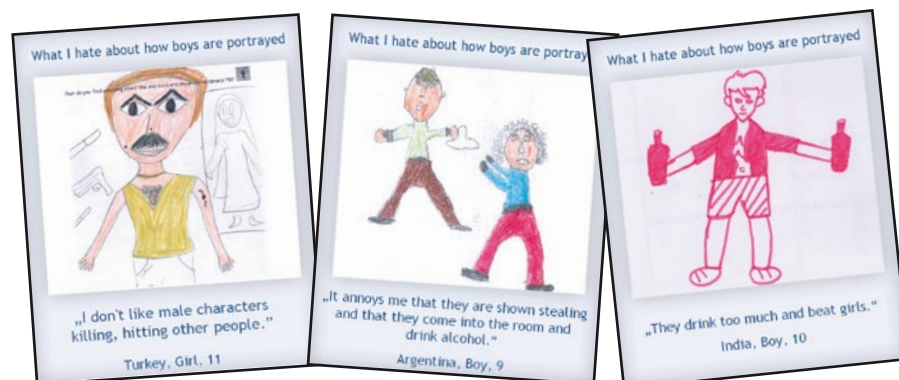
### Softies and blockheads

Children complain about two stereotypes which they see how boys in children's television are depicted: the weak, crying boy or the silly blockheads. Both are not wanted.



### Boys are bad

Children complain about the depiction of boys and men that boys seem to be only focussed on sex, drugs and alcohol. They clearly can see racist stereotypes like  all black men are criminals“ and  not supportive to their family“.



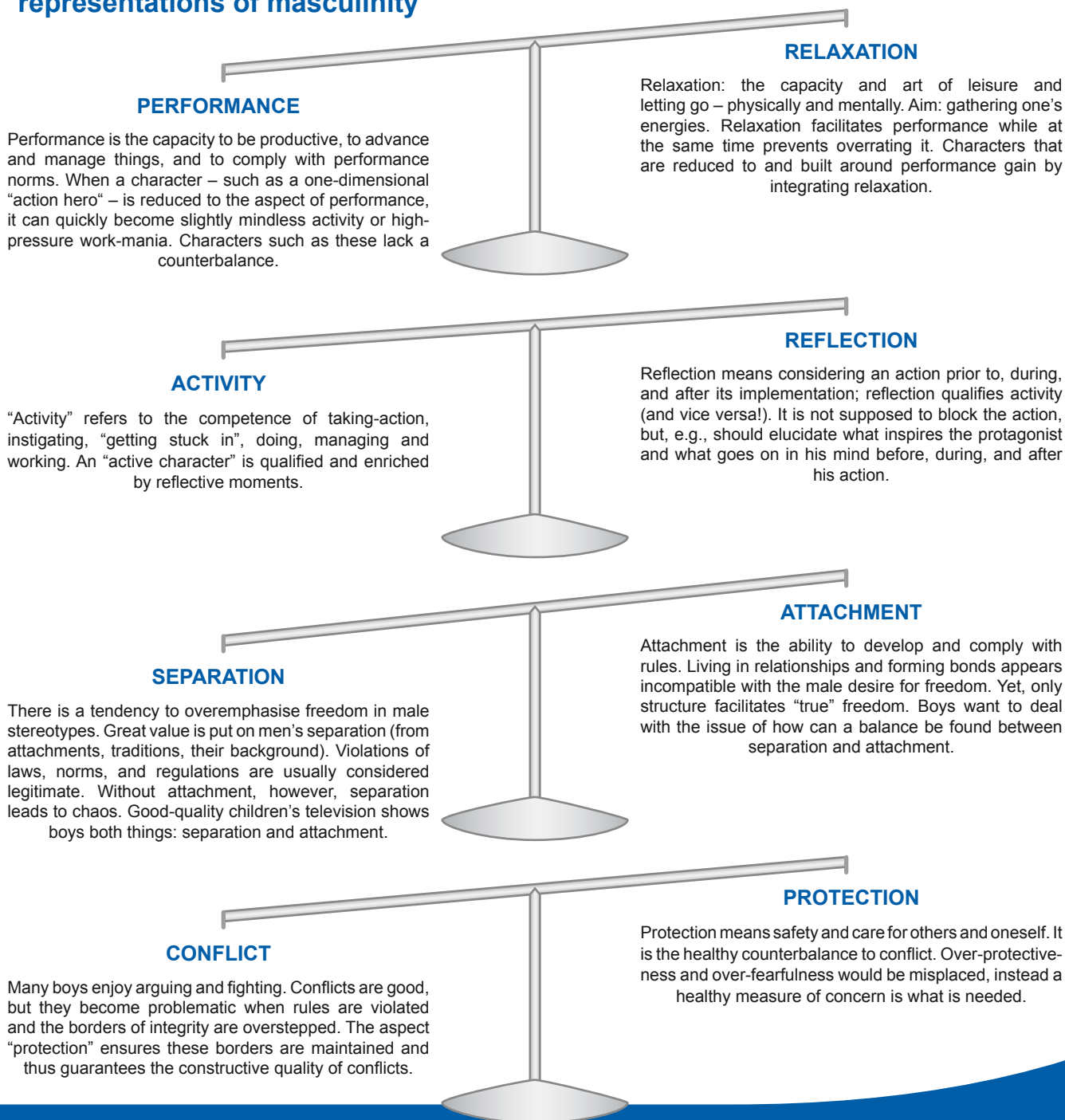
*Create more attractive boy characters without stepping into the trap of clichés.*

# How can children's television reach boys and help broadening masculinity?

Boys grow up with stereotypes of masculinity. These stereotypes limit characters in the same way educationally over-modelled characters do, who usually fail to work anyway. To improve the quality of children's television, the aim should be to offer a much broader spectrum of masculinity.

## Tendencies of stereotypical representations of masculinity

## Opportunities for broadening



*Attaining excellence in children's TV means taking boys and their preferences seriously and moving beyond apparent stereotypes.*

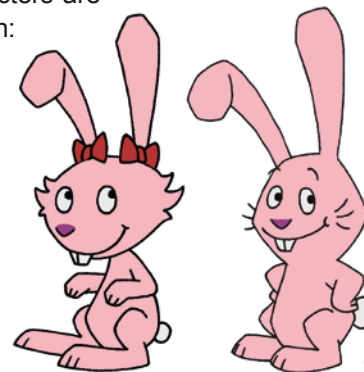
## Less gendered characters

In quality programmes for preschool-age children in the last few years a different interesting trend can be observed: gender stereotypes are not only broken deliberately or replaced by counter-stereotypes, but characters are deliberately less gendered. Well-known examples are (the female dog) Blue from *Blue's Clues* or the 3 Wonder Pets (2 of whom are girls and one is a boy). In their cases, the personal attributes as well as their shapes are not referring to gender stereotypes, but leave the issue more open.

In a representative quantitative study we tested different layouts of characters and the result shows: The less gendered characters are more attractive for preschool-age boys and girls. One reason: They are more open to the children's own perspective whether this is a girl or a boy. Often they construct the sex of the character parallel to their own – a clever way to break stereotypes and make a character more attractive for boys and girls.



The Wonderpets: Two girls, one boy



### Which version is more appealing?

We asked 657 3- to 8-year-olds.

The rabbit on the right is more attractive for both, girls and boys.



Odd one out: From Lucas to Luus.

## Courage on the gender issue

Programmes which explicitly address the issue of gender are sometimes frowned upon by producers. As an example, shows about a boy who is convinced of being a girl are dismissed by experts with comments such as "I believe the programme only confuses young children". Yet, children and young people often tend to be much more open-minded about and interested in precisely such marginal topics: "I liked the fact that the topic was brought up and now the boy has become accepted that he is a girl" (girl).

## Respecting boundaries


Gender issues are potentially rejected when they don't match the viewers' developmental stage or violate their culturally conditioned feelings and sensitivities. Boys who openly talk about girls and sexuality are of interest only from an adolescent age on... A boy who knows he really is a girl or any issues dealing with homosexuality are topics that, when asked their opinions, boys from Qatar feel fairly uncomfortable with... HIV/AIDS, how the illness is transmitted, and the fact that it can be fatal are unfortunately problems of everyday life for many children all over the world – and they definitely want to learn and should be educated about this. This issue may, however, be too emotionally demanding for other children... Here, cultural sensitivity and a sure sense of boundaries and their possible extension are called for.

*Gender sensitivity means to see chances for gender issues and being brave to play with stereotypes.*

However, please keep in mind:

## Girls and boys are diverse

Gui'hyong (9 years), South Korea



Wants adventure stories with dinosaurs - but they should not be each other's prey (they should die naturally).

Seo'young (8 years), South Korea




Wants stories about the forest of Hogwarts (*Harry Potter*) but with pink rabbits and magical creatures playing together.

Patricia (3 years), Germany



She likes to see animals on TV.

Sandro (9 years), Peruvian origin, grows up with a strong single mother and an absent conservative father




Looks for stories to find the balance between thrill and care. He likes all kinds of animés.

Shubha (15 years), India, good in school but knows she will have no chances to study



Likes to watch the news and stories which empower women.

Sadja (8 years), Iraqi refugee



Wants to see a peaceful Iraq on TV with people from different religions and fairytales from different countries.

Yun'sang (8 years), South Korea




Looks for stories about historic adventures and would love to see a programme about the fight with the first Korean submarine 4,000 years ago.

Luca (4 years), New York/USA



Likes princesses in TV and films because „they have beautiful dresses and beautiful shoes.“

Semir (5 years), Turkish origin



Likes cartoon characters that care for each other and don't quarrel.

Dam'dok (8 years), South Korea




Is looking for educational programmes on TV. Enjoys the fantasy of flying with his family and exploring the earth from outer space.

Evi (9 years), Germany, horse fan



Looks for any kind of horse adventures or films with horses.

Bongani (14 years), Soweto/South Africa "We are living with 10 people in one shack"



Likes crime stories on TV which reflect the reality of Johannesburg, but also show that violence can be kept under control.

Saya (8 years), North Korean origin




Likes stories about American natives as symbol for being special and black haired (not like all the other TV-blondes).

Charlotte (7 years), Germany, her older sister just moved out and she is missing her a lot




Wants to have fun with TV characters like SpongeBob (what she watched regularly with her sister) and drives her parents crazy with it.

Lucas (9 years), Germany, wants to fulfil the role as the best soccer player in town




Likes cartoons with action and fight. He loves the thrill when he imagines himself being a part of the story.

Tessina (8 years), refugee from Kazakhstan



Looks for documentaries about endangered animals and enjoys the fantasy of a safe island for animals and her self.

Chara (5 years), Germany




Likes characters like Pippi Long stocking, because „she is so powerful and she does funny things, but she is not mean.“

Robby (9 years), Italian origin likes to sing, draw and play theatre



Looks for adventures with dragons and knights or mythic sagas on TV. Enjoys the fantasy of owning a dragon to protect him and to fly by the school windows.

Burhan (11 years), Iraqi refugee



Wants more information on how the Iraqi people feel in the war situation and likes programmes rooted in his own culture.

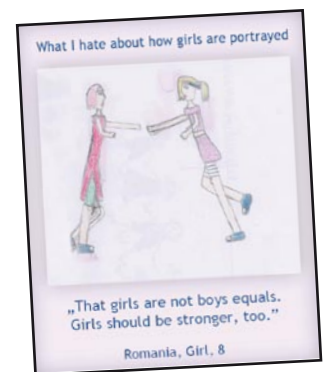
Aliyah: "I'm a 15 year old, Indian, Muslim girl from South Africa"



Likes to watch news and current affairs programmes and is looking for role models of female journalists who are intelligent, confident, attractive and of colour.

# Gender sensitivity means:

- ◆ Acknowledging the under-representation of girls and women and advocating a more equal, realistic gender ratio in the main characters, but also in supporting roles and extras.



- ◆ Overcoming one-dimensional, traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity, which over-simplify and fall short of reality and diversity in modern society.

- ◆ Questioning one's own prejudices and society's assumptions on gender.



- ◆ Taking seriously and broadening the topics and concerns of boys and girls.

- ◆ Understanding and integrating girls' and boys' diversity with regard to looks, physical appearance, ethnicity, and so forth.

- ◆ Taking seriously and broadening the cultural concepts of what it means to be a girl or a boy while taking into account cultural sensitivities and idiosyncrasies.



*More information:*

See our English issue of *TELEVISION*: □ *Girls and Boys and Television*“

[www.izi.de](http://www.izi.de)