

Common Sense on Boys, Girls, and Media Messages



What's the Issue?

In today's 24/7 media world, girls and boys are flooded with messages about how they should look and act. The images and stories kids see in the media play a powerful role in framing their sense of what's "acceptable" and what isn't. The media often encourages narrow definitions of girls' and boys' roles, and these definitions are now making their way into the digital world. As kids grow older and become more active online, they may encounter more extreme attitudes about differences between girls and boys. Our media landscape has widened — creating new forms and sources of pressure for girls to look pretty and "sexy," and for boys to toughen up and "act like man."

Why Does It Matter?

When kids see the same gender stereotypes portrayed over and over again in media, they can become deeply confused about how the world sees them and what they can grow up to be. They may also form judgments about others based on what they see in stories and images. When kids are exposed to rigid ideas about boys' and girls' roles through their peers — both online or offline — it may be more difficult to convince them not to adopt those ideas.

What Families Can Do

In this digital age, it's important for kids to develop media-literacy skills early on. Parents, relatives, teachers, and other adult mentors are in an important position to help kids make sense of the gender messages they see on TV, at the movies, in ads, in games, and online — and to encourage them not to continue harmful stereotypes.

common sense says

Point out photos that look too good to be true. When you're standing in line at the grocery store with your children, take a look at the magazine covers. Explain how publishers use computers to airbrush images of people. Point out elements of our bodies that would normally be captured in photos but are missing there. Where are the freckles, veins, or wisps of hair?

Seek out positive role models. The characters and stars that kids love may not show a complete picture of boys' and girls' roles. Help them by finding role models in books, on TV, in movies, and in real life that show kids how they can be recognized for their talents and brains rather than their looks.

Challenge assumptions. Depending on your kids' ages, you can talk about common stereotypes and ask your kids whether or not to accept them. Use examples from the real world — like all blondes are dumb, for example — to show that media portrayals often aren't accurate.