



Out of the Box: Freeing Our Children

Stereotypes & What We Can Do About Them

Research Brief
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It's one of a parent's worst fears: someone is telling your child who to be and how to act. Suddenly someone you don't really know or trust can affect your child's values, ideals, and aspirations.

What's worse, this person has been telling your child that they're not good enough. Your daughter has to be thinner, prettier, and sexier; your son should be tougher, more aggressive, and less cerebral.

You worry that your child will end up boxed in, limited and confined, losing touch with their real interests and talents almost before they have a chance to discover them.

It's not just a new teacher, an in-law, or a neighborhood playmate. Media is the new "super-parent" in the room, wielding tremendous power to shape children's culture through thousands of messages each day that tell children who and what they should be as boys and girls.

Moreover, harried schedules have pushed many parents to accept media – TV particularly – as their children's new teacher, playmate, and nanny.

Children view an average of 8.5 hours of media daily -- including 100+ commercialsⁱ -- more time than they spend talking with their parentsⁱⁱ or in a classroom. Media interaction is now the dominant activity in many children's waking lives.

Yet despite this proliferation of content, media pounds out the same steady drumbeat of narrow stereotypes that boxes boys and girls in from the very start of their lives—as different as Mars from Venus.

- Girls are pretty, long-haired, thin, revealingly dressed, and love anything pink. They worry about their looks. They want to be nurses, mommies and princesses. They are nurturing, sensitive and often in need. Finding a boy to love is a key concern. They cry, they may nag or whine, but seldom are allowed real anger. They tend to rely on others and are usually in or around the home. They are *never ever* professors, egg-heads, leaders or figures of power.

- Boys are smart, strong and aggressive. They are figures of action. They are independent and lead, and are usually seen in action outside the home. They are unconcerned with romance but want to overcome something. When they grow up they will be cowboys, pilots, or doctors and they aspire to be big, strong and muscular. They are dressed in dark colors and even if they're nerds they *never, ever* go near pink. They can get angry or energized but they can never whine, cry or show weakness. They do most of the talking.

Most of these stereotypes would be right at home in the 1950s. Unfortunately, unlike the '50s, three major trends have emerged that we're only just beginning to understand that make the effects of these narrow stereotypes much more powerful – and potentially harmful -- than ever

“These stereotypes and media messages limit opportunities for children to develop as whole people and undermine the very foundation necessary for children to actualize their full potential... often leading to serious problems in later years,

So Sexy So Soon



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First children no longer get their media exposure over the family TV during dinner-time, monitored by parents.

Cable, DVDs, video games, websites and cellphones now give media access to young children 24-hours a day. This is not only an unprecedented level of access, but it is also direct, unmonitored, and largely beyond parents' reach.



Second, the line between children's media and advertising has evaporated. Children don't watch their media *with* commercials – the media *is* the commercial.

Marketers have combined products and programming into brands like Bratz Girls, Transformers that are marketed exclusively to kids as a specific demographic.

This means that when children watch shows video games, or movies, they are *already* watching brand commercials. And to be heard above clutter, marketers have increasingly relied on an acronym they call KGOY: *Kids Getting Old Younger*.

KGOY means using images for elementary school-age girls and boys the used to be for teens. This includes sexualization images of scantily-clad females, and levels of very intense aggression and violence. Extreme images attract and hold children's attention, even if they don't understand them, even if they're unsettled or upset by them.

What we are beginning to understand about these trends is that this steady exposure to boy-girl stereotypes not only discourages children from being themselves and exploring their full potential.

The effects go much, much deeper.

Since the early 1990s a growing band of researchers working mostly from major universities have produced a tide of new studies crystallizing the links between early exposure to stereotypes and a host of serious problems later among teens.

Since conforming to social expectations is a major motivation, stereotypes' effects touch a spectrum of behaviors. Foremost among these are early sexuality, bullying, eating disorders, and academic under-achievement. Consider findings from a few key studies:

- Boys who buy into stereotypic ideas of masculinity as by power and aggression are more likely to bully, have disciplinary problems, and stop- or drop-out of school.
- Girls who believe in rigid, traditional ideals of femininity tend to have earlier and less unprotected sex and more unplanned pregnancy.
- Internalizing images of reed-thin beauty is so common that dieting and body-image problems are now the norm among young girls: 70% of third-graders are already "very scared" of being fat,ⁱⁱⁱ and 30-50% of girls age 5- 8 are worried they're fat or dieting.^{iv}
- Both boys and girls who internalize masculine and feminine stereotypes get lower grades; girls are less likely to take or excel at math, science or computers, boys are more likely to bully, avoid obvious achievement, or drop out early.

These problems behaviors can be compounded in under-resourced communities. For instance, African-American and Latino boys who buy into traditional arrow ideals of being



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tough, silent and aggressive are especially prone to engaging in bullying, and to have others sometimes unfairly expect violence from them. At the same time, boys who don't fit these narrow masculine stereotypes are more likely to be targeted as victims for bullying.

Fortunately, there are concrete positive steps parents can take to combat the effects of media stereotypes on their children.

First, they can get involved with organizations like TrueChild that are working to improve children's culture and holding the media accountable.

Second, they can use our TrueChild Report Cards© to help them pick better TV shows, toys and websites for their children.

Third, they can use our plain English Research Briefs like this one to help understand the full effects of children's stereotypes.

Finally, as TrueChild Parents© they can use simple, everyday techniques that experts have developed. Here are seven steps from our publication: "Preparing Your Kids," 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 Brown. (© 2007 St. Martin's Griffin Press. All rights reserved).

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

Remind them 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. "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

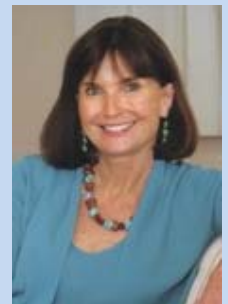
commercial or shopping for toys, you might ask "Hulk has such large huge muscles. Does he look like any of the boys you know?" And then "I wonder how it makes girls/boys feel to play with someone that doesn't look at all like them."

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."

Many parents I talk with say that violent entertainment media is a mighty and pervasive force, too strong to combat, hard as they try. It is so much harder to be a parent in the marketing culture of today and parents can't do the job alone. Everywhere they turn, children are bombarded with messages... that undermine the lessons parents are trying to teach.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige EdD



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"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 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 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. 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."

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 turning the opportunity into something more than being pretty or sexy-pretty, strong-athletic.

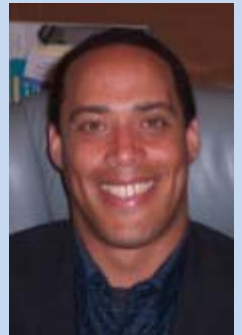
You have an opportunity to say, *"I wonder what would happen if they picked a girl who looked like the girls we know to star in a film like that. They're all so beautiful in their own way."* Or, whenever you see a Lego commercial, for example, with its motors, gears, and such, you can say, *"Hey, where 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!"*

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.



Don McPherson's 200 lectures, seminars and presentations over two decades have reached over one million people.

Don was an All-America quarterback at Syracuse University and then played quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles in the NFL. He is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame.

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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 a series of questions, they will linger in their mind no matter what they are comfortable voicing at this time.^v



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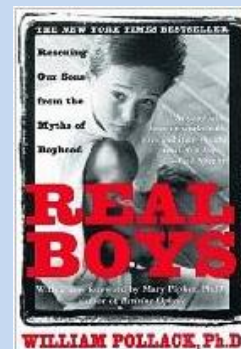
For further information on this and other topics related to stereotypes effects on children, please check our website at www.truechild.org :

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True Child is the leading national organization helping all children -- boys and girls -- break through stereotypes so they can be true to themselves and reach their full potential.

True Child works directly with the creators of children's programming and toys to help them improve their products. True Child was founded by a core group of parents who had grown concerned and frustrated with the harmful messages their children were getting day after day: narrow, stereotypic and inappropriate.

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ⁱ *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood, and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*, Jean Kilbourne and Diane Levin, 2008, pg 35.

<http://www.amazon.com/So-Sexy-Soon-Sexualized-Childhood/dp/0345505069>

ⁱⁱ *“Children and Watching TV,”* Facts for Families, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, No 54, March 2001.

http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/children_and_watching_tv

ⁱⁱⁱ *“Fear of Fat, Disregulated Restrained Eating, and Body-Esteem: Prevalence and Gender Differences Among Eight- to Ten-Year-Old Children.”* Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, Susan Shapiro, Michael Newcomb and Tamra Burn Loeb. 1997.

^{iv} *“3rd Graders: “Very Scared” of Being Fat, Say Girls Should Be Thin”* Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, Susan Shapiro, Michael Newcomb, and Tamra Burn Loeb, 1997. <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a783760255~db=all>

^v 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 Brown. (© 2007 St. Martin's Griffin Press. All rights reserved).