

Rowdies, blockheads and softies

What children don't like about boy characters in children's television



Boy, 10, Mongolia: "I don't like that boys beat up one another and frequently fight on TV."



Boy, 9, Argentina: "I find annoying that boys are so violent – they should make them less violent, and make the girls just a little bit more violent."



Boy, 9, Kenya: „I don't like boys crying on TV, I would change that he is happy.“

What do children worldwide criticise in regard to the representation of boys in children's television? What kind of improvements do they suggest? For the IZI study "Picture letters to TV producers" about 1,000 children between 8 and 11 years from 21 countries¹ sent us their opinions on the topic "Gender representation in children's television". The children drew pictures and wrote short letters to TV producers showing their points of criticism and suggestions for improvement.

Rowdies and thugs

What children dislike most frequently about boy characters in children's television is the aspect of violent behaviour. Boys on TV are often regarded as "too aggressive" (boy, 10, Brazil) or "very angry and violent" (boy, 10, Mongolia). Children do not like to watch boys who "fight with their friends" (boy, 10, Turkey) or "carry dangerous weapons" (boy, 9, South Africa) or to see boys "kill one another" (girl, 9, Romania). They justify their dislike by stating: "It's bad to fight" (girl, 8, Kenya) and fear that the violence shown on television could have a negative effect on young people: "It brings violence into people's minds" (boy, 10, India) or "It persuades boys to fight" (girl, 10, USA).

Especially in those countries where the 8- to 11-year-olds can choose only among few children's TV programmes they also criticise adult programmes. Children disapprove of violence and aggression in relationships of girls and boys or women and men. They name a wide range of incidents from harmless situations like "boys think they are cooler than girls and they play pranks on girls" (girl, 9, Pakistan) to situations of abuse and rape of girls/women like "they abuse us" (girl, 9, India), "boys treat girls very badly" (girl, 10, Pakistan) or "boys force girls to sleep with them" (boy, 8, Kenya). Other important topics for some children are crime and drugs: "I don't like that they take drugs and carry weapons" (boy, 9, Argentina).

"Change violence into non-violence" (boy, 10, India)

What do children want to have changed? Children do not like to watch violent boy characters but strong and courageous heroes: "[I want to see] fearless boys" (boy, 9, Brazil). Whenever a character is shown as too aggressive or a story becomes too violent, children wish to renounce any sort of violence: "Change violence into non-violence" (boy, 10, India) or at least they wish to keep violent aggression under control: "I want him to control his anger" (boy, 10, India). However, children do not entirely reject aggression as a means to an end – it has to serve a just cause or should be directed against the evil: "He should be good and use his power against the wicked forces" (boy, 10, Romania).

Softies and blockheads

Apart from that, children mainly criticise two different stereotypes: On the one hand a lot of children don't like an overly emotionalised, "weak" depiction of boys on television: "I don't like it when boys are soft-hearted" (boy, 10, Hungary), "when boys cry on TV" (girl, 10, India) or "when boys are shown as weak and pathetic" (girl, 9, Mongolia). Instead, boy characters should rather be "[...] strong enough to do things in their own way" (girl, 10, India). On the other hand they also disapprove of boys who are silly or appear to be blockheads: "I find it annoying when they seem to know nothing" (boy, 9, Portugal) or "I think it's stupid that SpongeBob has a brain full of jelly" (boy, 9, Germany) and claim to "make him brainier by teaching him" (girl, 11, UK).

However, boys should not be exclusively strong and intelligent. There are a lot more character traits that play an important role for children. Boys should be funny: "Be funny!" (girl, 10, Egypt), happy: "I would change him into a happy boy" (boy, 9, Kenya), friendly: "I would like them to smile" (girl, 9, Romania) and last but not least also physically fit and active: "He should be fit and adventurous" (boy, 10, UK).

"He should be fit and adventurous" (boy, 10, UK)

Body image: too delicate, too plump or too muscular

When it comes to the body image and outside appearance of boys on television children find annoying other aspects than with girl characters (see Bulla/Herche in this issue). Some children find it inappropriate that some characters are too short, too skinny and too weak: "I think it's stupid that boys are sometimes small and weak" (girl, 9, Germany). Other children, however, regard it as just as unacceptable when boys are shown on television as too big, too muscular or even too chubby: "He is too chunky" (boy, 10, Fiji), "He is too big" (girl, 8, Egypt), "I don't like big muscles" (girl, 10, Hungary) or "He is really fat and ugly" (girl, 9, UK).

No tight clothing

Children criticise boys' tight clothing which accentuates the male figure and the genitals: "I don't like the fact that their trousers are so tight" (boy, 10, Romania) or reveal their body: "I find it annoying that he is nearly naked" (girl, 10, Fiji). Even in humorous situations children don't accept nudity: "I didn't like it when he [Bart Simpson] was skating naked" (boy, 10, Fiji).

Other than that, children often wish that the characters are not represented like adults but like children: "I don't like the fact that they dress like adults and behave like adults, too" (girl, 10, Argentina) – children should dress like children and also act accordingly. They should "dress a little cooler" (girl, 9, Germany) – in short: "[...] just like boys do nowadays, like me for example" (boy, 10, Argentina).

NOTE

¹ For this article we used data from 18 out of 21 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Fiji, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Kenya, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey, UK. The other countries were USA, Bhutan and the Ukraine.

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Boy, 12, Turkey: „Stupid guys shown on TV make me angry.“



Girl, 10, Hungary: „He has many tattoos and muscles (in TV films), or he is too short (in fairy tales).“



Boy, 9, India: „I don't like that SpongeBob only wears an underpant.“