

“They are skinny and boring”

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



Girl, 10, Argentina: “I find annoying that the girls wear short clothes and put on make-up like adults.”

In co-operation with partners worldwide, we asked about 1,000 children between the ages of 8 and 11 years from 21 countries¹ to draw and describe in a short letter to producers what they don't like and what they would change about the portrayal of girl characters in children's TV.

Sexualised clothing, make-up ...

Children worldwide criticised the female characters' dress style as far too sexualised because you could see too much skin. They generally dislike how “little girls dress like adults” (boy, 10, Argentina) with “short clothes” (girl, 9, India) in which they “look like prostitutes” (girl, 9, Kenya). Instead, girl characters should “dress like children” (boy, 10, Argentina) with “proper clothes which cover the body” (boy, 10, India).

“Girls use too much make-up and always show off” (girl, 10, Fiji)



Girl, 10, United Kingdom: “In cartoons the girls are so thin, it's not realistic.”

In addition, they find it annoying that “girls use too much make-up and always show off” (girl, 10, Fiji). Instead, the children prefer them not to “put so much make-up on their faces” (girls, 9, Romania) so that they look “younger and childlike” (boy, 12, Turkey). The children we asked are well aware of the aspect that beauty is something which gets staged by the media. They realise that girls are specifically equipped with “braces, glasses and ugly pig tails” (boy, 9, Argentina) in order to embody particularly clever characters. The children wish for something else: “Make the smart girls cool people” (girl, 10, Fiji).

... and far too skinny

Apart from their clothing and make-up, a lot of children dislike the female characters' far too skinny bodies.

They reflect critically upon the thin ideal of beauty and they are aware of the fact that “their parents and the people on television tell them they would look prettier being thin” (girl, 10, Argentina). However, they do not like to see girls which are too skinny but normal size female characters who reflect reality. Therefore they ask the producers to “make the girls a tiny bit fatter” (girl, 10, UK).

Snobbish girls who fight with others ...

Snobbish female characters who are “bossy and scream all the time” (boy, 9, Argentina) are not welcome in children's television.

Instead of girls who are characterised as “naughty and mean on TV” (boy, 10, Mongolia), “rude and bossy” (girl, 9, UK) and “always fight with each other” (girl, 9, Fiji), children would prefer to see female characters who deal with one another in a more friendly way and “talk to each other” (girl, 9, Germany).



Girl, 10, Pakistan: “A girl who makes fun of a girl that has freckles.”

... and drama queens, who react overly emotional

An excessive display of emotions like exaggerated crying or unexplained emotional impulses is not well received: "Cloe [from *Bratz*] is very afraid and she overreacts when she is excited or when she is scared" (girl, 9, UK). Children also complain about some girl characters' manner of speaking: they talk far too much and far too fast.

Girls are "depicted as being touchy" (girl, 9, Germany)

Some of them criticise the girl characters' exaggerated or, to the contrary, missing sense of humour. For instance, they don't like it "when ladies laugh like mad people" (boy, 9, Pakistan), when they are "not funny" (girl, 10, Egypt) or simply because "they tell bad jokes" (boy, 9, Argentina).

Cute, but boring girls?

Girl characters are not only criticised for being touchy and snooty but also for being boring, especially when they are assigned the part of a standardised ideal beauty: "I don't like that they are skinny and boring. They don't play, they don't dress like me, they are all the same and put on make-up." (girl, 10, Argentina). Many point out that girls are too passive, helpless, and don't take initiative: "Girls are girly and never play sports or be the hero" (girl, 10, Pakistan). This boy also complains about the limited range of roles for girls in children's TV programmes: "There are no action girls in cartoons, they only go shopping or do witchcraft" (boy, 11, Brazil).

Other children second this: Girls should not come across as "too sweet" (girl, 8, Fiji), but they want to see that girls on TV "like things like football" (girl, 10, Brazil). What kind of suggestions do children have in mind for producers in order to improve the presentation of girls' characters? "Make the girls more normal in the way they really are" (boy, 11, Pakistan).

A gender comparison shows...

... that the interviewed children think it's unfair when girl characters are treated more special, e. g. "in cartoons if a girl hits a boy, he can't hit her back" (boy, 9, Pakistan) and when they are favoured by their parents in a fight, because "usually parents believe the girl" (boy, 10, Pakistan). The children criticise that female characters are typically portrayed as smarter and more often take centre stage compared to male characters: "Girls are always smarter than the boys" (boy, 10, Pakistan) and "girls are always the main people" (boy, 10, Fiji). But the opposite is noticed as well: the children dislike that girls are discriminated against because of their gender and (need to) behave differently from the boys. Especially girls notice "that girls are not the boys' equals" (girl, 8, Romania), and that they get assigned not all but only a few stereotypical roles: "Girls are defenceless and never the heroine" (girl, 10, Brazil).

The changes the children suggest point in the direction of more gender equality. They demand from producers to show "girls and boys being equal" (boy, 10, Fiji) and state: "Girls should be stronger, too" (girl, 8, Romania).

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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Girl, 9, India: "Girls crying and overacting."



Girl, 10, Brazil: "Girls are defenseless and never the heroine." – Please note that "Socorro" in the drawing means "Help".



Girl, 9, Fiji: "I find annoying that girls are too sweet."