

“Raising Girls When All the Heroes Are Boys”

Gender conscious parents raising daughters today are well aware of the stereotypes women have battled against in previous generations. Most are committed to swimming against the tide of gender bias. Since women now serve in congress, anchor news programs and perform surgery, young females can fortunately observe the fruits of labor that feminists fought to produce and now know they have a wide variety of career choices. It remains important, however, for parents to continually examine the less obvious ways in which daughters are still being given the messages of subservience and passivity.

While real-life role models influence children, so do characters in books. Every parent of young children should take the following challenge: Gather all of the children’s books in the house. Sort the books into two piles: one pile for all of the books in which a male character is the central figure, does the primary action or is the main hero and the second pile is for books in which female characters hold these same roles.

The results are typically very skewed toward books starring boys. This is a result of the historical role of men and women in our country (men have a large head start in leadership positions). The upsetting revelation is the number of male-centered books there are for every female-centered book. It’s not unlikely that even the most gender conscious parents can find a 3 to 1 ratio residing in their children’s bookshelves.

Children often choose literature based on familiar characters from TV, films, games and merchandise. In the preschool world the central figures are Barney, Elmo, Arthur, Pooh, Franklin and Clifford – boy, boy, boy, boy, boy and boy. Yes, they are only dinosaur, monster, aardvark, bear, turtle and dog, but they are also central male figures in children’s lives as they read about their world. Some of the frequent youth centered messages these characters deal with are sharing, healthy eating, holidays, friendship and family. While these lessons are unarguably beneficial to youngsters, the indirect message is clear and should not be ignored: our role models and heroes are boys.

With that discovered, the next question is obviously, “So what?” Does it really matter if girls grow up being read to about *boy* dogs sharing toys, *boy* turtles being afraid of the dark and *boy* bears brushing their teeth? Aren’t the lessons, not the characters, the focus and benefit? The answer is a resounding, “No!” Research has shown time and time again that when male is the norm, females are programmed for invisibility. Females make up 51% of our population, but “female” makes up 100% of a little girl’s mind, self-esteem and image. How many books does she need surrounding her to impress upon her what she can do with her life, what she means to the world and what role she plays in her family and friendship circle? The answer is possibly, “more than are written.”

It is difficult to develop and sustain a well-stocked library for young girls. Assuming that they have selected favorite books starring males, designate those as the male representatives and fill the rest of the shelves with books about *girl* mice performing on stage, *girl* kittens buying gifts for their grandmothers and *girl* monsters learning to ride bikes. Giving girls heroines and characters that they can naturally identify with is a deposit in their bank of self-esteem. It’s a gift that truly will last a lifetime and it is never too early to start.

Suggested literature:

Twins, Two by Two by Catherine and Laurence Anholt

Little Rabbit’s Loose Tooth by Lucy Bate

Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans

Anna Banana and Me by Lenore Blegvad

The Biggest Nose by Kathy Caple

Harriet and the Garden by Nancy Carlson

Norma Jean, Jumping Bean by Joanna Cole

Angelina on Stage by Helen Craig

Sheila Rae the Brave by Kevin Henkes

Winter Days in the Big Woods adapted from the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Maggie and the Pirates by Ezra Jack Keats

Millicent the Monster by Mary Lystad

The Funny Little Woman by Arlene Mosel

The Adventures of Isabel by Ogden Nash

Noisy Nora by Rosemary Wells

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