

## Teens and Media Stereotypes

from the PBS website Growing With Media  
www.pbs.org/parents/issuesadvice/growingwithmedia

### How to Combat Gender Stereotypes

Teens are trying to make sense of who they are and how they fit in - among their friends at school, within their families and in the world. Images from TV, movies and magazines may be influencing how teens think about beauty, personal character and how men and women treat one another. What's more, people in the media, both fictional characters and the actors who play them, may be guiding the choices that teens are making.

Although societal attitudes about gender shape children's development from the time they are born, teenagers in particular are exposed to many new expectations about who they are and how they are to behave. The teen years are characterized by physical changes, the allure of relationships and increased independence and responsibility. With all of the confusion that accompanies this time of exploration, teens look inward - to themselves and the people closest to them - and outward - to societal messages in song lyrics, "must-see" TV shows and magazines articles. Teens may be internalizing negative body images and stereotypes from music videos. Teens may be learning about women who have succeeded in male-dominated professions through documentaries. Or they may be developing a false understanding of romantic behavior based on TV commercials. You won't know what your teen is taking from the media unless you ask her or him.

Now is a good time to talk to your teen about who he/she admires and who he/she is trying to imitate. Look for connections that your teen may be drawing between body and self-worth, and discuss what your teen thinks is possible solely because of gender and how he/she thinks this differs for the opposite sex.

### Going Beyond Gender Stereotypes

- **Question negative portrayals of men and women and boys and girls in the media.** Point out gender differences and get your teen asking questions: Why are male actors allowed to age, playing romantic leads and strong characters in a way that female actors aren't? When is a female character not allowed to do or be something because she's "a girl" or "just a woman?" Why are men who display a "feminine side" funny or possibly gay?
- **Talk to your teen about her or his self-image.** Find out what comparisons your teen is making between her or his appearance and how actors and models look. Encourage your teen to develop good eating habits and a healthy exercise regimen. Watch out for erratic behavior aimed at losing weight or other efforts meant to make her or him look more like a two-dimensional image seen in the media.
- **Help your teen build self-esteem by offering lots of praise and encouragement.** In addition to praising your teen, praise positive portrayals that you see in TV shows, music videos, films and magazines, and criticize unrealistic or unhealthy stereotypes. Be sure to consider your own stereotypes or assumptions - if your teen hears you speak enviously about a star's appearance, he or she is likely to think that that is what you value.
- **Inspire your teen to make films, take pictures and write stories that shatter stereotypes.** Use the creations of youth producers at organizations like [Listen Up!](#) who refuse to be silent about stereotypes and have come up with creative ways to express their opinions. Look for film festivals and contests, like [If I Made the Movies Essay Contest](#) where your teen can submit her or his ideas.
- **Introduce your teen to alternative media resources and organizations that confront distorted images of men, women, boys and girls.** [About Face](#) and [Gurl](#), two Web sites, and the [Real Boys Workbook](#), a print resource, are a few examples.
- **Encourage local libraries to offer resources that critique media images.** The Media Education Foundation offers a number of

videos, like [Killing Us Softly 3](#), which examines the way females are represented in advertising, and [Tough Guise](#), which looks at violence, media and masculinity. And check out resources like [Women Make Movies Girls Project](#), which is a collection of films and videos centered on girls' lives around the world.

## **How to Combat Racial Stereotypes**

Raising questions about racial stereotypes and speaking out against inaccurate portrayals of people and cultures in entertainment and news media is your first line of defense. After all, reinforcement of a stereotype comes from repetition. If your teen sees something enough times, he or she is likely to accept that it's true unless you teach him or her to question it.

Despite the overwhelming number of media images to which your teen is exposed, each media product has a limited amount of time to get his or her attention. Outdoor ads, like those on bus stops and the sides of buildings, have only a few seconds as she or he passes by; magazines, only the flip of a page; and TV, just the click of the remote. Because time is tight, media promoters often use shortcuts. Wanting to establish a character's identity or get a quick reaction from their audiences, they rely on stereotypes and easily recognized images to make their point.

Although the use of a stereotype may provide the quick hit the writer is after - the audience laughs at the expense of a character who is a racial minority or the hero gets to strut his stuff and beat the villain whose ethnicity is "foreign" - the long-term effect may be harmful. Because stereotypes are shaped by prejudice and inaccurate representations, they promote one-dimensional notions of who people are. At best, stereotypes are oversimplifications. At worst, they become the basis by which your teen will interact with people.

### **Promoting Diversity**

- **Encourage your teen to pay close attention to characters in TV, film and other**

**media.** Talk to your teen about the assumptions about race and economics that underlie certain portrayals. Listen to accents and speech patterns and watch for clothing and other indicators attached to an identity, like how characters earn a living, the environments in which they live and how they treat and are treated by other characters. Point out when you see a stereotype - don't let it go unquestioned.

- **Point out when representations of cultures, races and genders are missing.** In addition to talking to your teen about stereotypes of people, pay attention to who is left out. Take note of how limiting a film, TV show or radio program is when only one ethnic group, lifestyle, culture or economic strata is represented.
- **Talk to your teen about the inequalities among ethnic groups in print and TV advertisements.** You might ask: "Are white and black athletes shown doing the same thing?" "How do certain common 'props,' like books and eye-glasses, show an Asian student's work ethic?" and "How do they differ from props that advertisers give to Latino characters?"
- **Encourage your teen to confront portrayals of ethnic groups with his or her personal experiences.** Ask your teen to compare what is seen on TV to the people he/she encounters in his or her daily life.
- **Expose your teen to diverse people, cultures and arts.** Take your teen to film festivals, book readings, art exhibits and restaurants that will expose him/her to many cultures and languages.
- **Use media representations of historical events as gateways to deeper exploration.** If your teen is drawn to a film or TV show that presents an abridged or a one-sided version of a group of people during a specific time period, encourage him or her to learn more. Check out books, e-mail a historian or watch other films on the same subject.