Gender Stereotypes in Children’s Books

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Abstract

Children begin learning at a young age what it means to be a girl or a boy. They are exposed to role models and learning materials encouraging them to embrace certain behaviors and to avoid others. These lessons are commonly discovered through reading children’s stories. When children identify with certain characters in books that are repeatedly behaving in a certain manner they gradually build a set of ideas for how they should be acting. Most children’s books contain representations of male and female, whether it is a person or an animal or an object (one given human characteristics). Children are taught what qualities help define certain genders and how individuals from each gender should behave. This exposure to gender stereotypes at a young age has the ability to have a negative and lasting impact on boys and girls and their discovery of their own identity. Contrarily, the absence of these stereotypes may help foster an environment in which children feel safe developing into the person they naturally envision themselves becoming regardless of their gender.

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS

One of the wonderful joys of childhood is the possession of a limitless, vivid imagination when it comes to the future. Children are brought up dreaming of who they will become and having bold aspirations for what they will be when they “grow up”. These aspirations are often built up by compiling traits they admire from their childhood heroes, which can be physical people, but are also found in literature. Heroes portrayed in the world of children’s books can be extremely influential to young people. Children want to reflect their heroes. Therefore it’s logical that it can be challenging for a child when their natural qualities are not necessarily in line with their hero, for example if they are consistently the opposite gender of their hero. What happens in the mind of a child when their heroes are represented in literature as possessing opposing traits to them? To discover the answer it is helpful to look both at how gender stereotypes can be harmful and how removal of gender stereotypes from children’s books can help the child truly thrive.

An obvious gender stereotype in children’s literature is the misrepresentation of women and overall inequality of the sexes. Davis and McDaniel (1999) along with Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) found that: studies showed that children’s literature did not always portray the women characters as being equal to men (as cited in Morgan, 2009, p. 187). The story of Cinderella is a straightforward example. Many modern renditions of the Cinderella story portray a young girl who desperately needs someone to rescue/ liberate her. In Cinderella and many other stories we see the princess’s deliverer or “knight in shining armor” as a confident, composed, and heroic male. The message seeping its way into the minds of children is that the “inferior” female needs the salvation of the “superior” male. Young girls may start to believe they are inferior based on biological differences. Perhaps they revere the male character and he becomes a hero to them that they will never share attributes with. A young girl may carry the feeling of inferiority into a place of feeling that her own pursuits are inferior as well to those of a male. A young girl growing up reading books that feature the stereotypical “inferior” woman may have some negative repercussions as Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young (2006) stated: “the stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and under-representation of female characters contribute negatively to children’s development, limit their career aspiration, frame their attitudes about their future roles as parents, and even influence their personality characteristics” (p. 757). Everyone is formed and shaped in some way by their childhood. It’s devastating that learning materials can overtime have the power to denounce you to a lesser role in society. Some negative impacts of gender stereotypes portrayed in children’s books are also experienced by male children.

Gender stereotypes that are detrimental to boys are potentially more subtle. The reason they may be easy to overlook is the nature of the stereotype. Many books have the potential to desensitize or dehumanize young men. For example, this is true of any children’s story in which young boys are ridiculed for displaying human emotions supposedly reserved for girls. Or perhaps the emotions of boy characters are just not well-represented. Going back to the idea of a hero, when a boy reads a story in which their hero is a callous and rugged male, they may begin to think they are weak if they have a softer or more sensitive side. A more exhaustive look would take into consideration the father figures in these stories and the emotional spectrum they display. Most young boys look to their fathers as role models and are impacted by their father in their journey towards self-discovery. And yet in many stories we see “fathers were under-represented and portrayed as relatively stoic actors who took little part in the lives of their children” (Hamilton et al., 2006, p. 758). This can have the potential to kill the curiosity and compassion of a young boy interested in certain aspects of life he’s brought up to believe belong primarily to females, like raising children. This may cause a young boy to perceive a restrictive line between the genders and deny certain feelings in order to fit in. It is not difficult to see how these stereotypes affect the perception of young boys and girls as individuals but looking at the larger impact of these restrictions on children’s overall behavior can be beneficial.

Within modern literature children will find lessons on what to do and how to act. What are their books telling them? In general, male and female roles in books are rigid. Men and women may also be subtly discouraged from breaking the “norms”, in other words, “Men fix things; women are care takers or homemakers; boys don’t cry and need to be tough, whereas girls need boys to rescue them” (Becker, 2011, p. 102). Consistently avoiding being too emotional or having to wait on someone to improve your life for you because of your gender is not a model which promotes growth. The effects of “overexposure to these messages gradually distorts their perceptions until stereotypes are accepted as reality” (Madsen, 2012, p. 4). Once these stereotypes become a reality for a child it can drastically impact their view of themselves; Fox (1993) and Phipher (1994) found in their research that many studies show that that these stereotypes can result in a lack of ambition, a damaged self-image, and a distorted view of genders (as cited in Becker, 2011, p. 102). Unfortunately this damage and distortion is difficult to undo. The negative effects of gender stereotypes in children’s books on children can be devastating. It is helpful to look at the positive result of removing the stereotypes from books in order to prevent this from happening and help children who are already victims.

Male and Female roles in children’s books should be exemplified by well-rounded role-models that every child, boy or girl, can see part of themselves in. A child should not feel restricted based on their gender or discouraged when they are unable to identify with a character of their own gender. Steiner, Nash, and Chase explain That: Well formatted multicultural children’s literature, gives children the ability to view themselves in the story this will help, create self-esteem, keep the child from being isolated, cultivate empathy, produce respect and acceptance of people (as cited in Madsen, 2012, p. 3). Stories that do not feature stereotypes have the potential to be a strong foundation for a child to grow into a strong, independent individual with an eagerness to pursue any visions they may have for themselves. On a larger spectrum, this allows a strong and confident child to be brought up in any given culture, with benefits stretching beyond any specific culture. Tunnel and Jacobs (2008) found “the benefits of quality children’s books that also encapsulated many different kinds of cultures helped the future generation view people all over the world as equal members of society” (as cited in Morgan, 2013, p. 187). The ability of people to work together despite superficial differences is an ideal concept that may perhaps be the final frontier of creating a better world.

Gender stereotypes may affect the self-image of young people, their ability to pursue their dreams, as well as their views of other cultures and people. This can be traced as the source of many modern day problems. In order to make the world a better place and ameliorate some of the more “adult” world issues, children’s literature is a great place to start, keeping in mind, “one of the main purposes of children’s literature is to be inclusive of and provide validation for all children’s experiences” (Gopalakrishnan, 2011, p. 5).

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