

What might books be teaching young children about gender?

XXX¹, XX², XXX², XXX², & XXX²

¹ XXX

² XXX

Abstract

We investigated how gender is represented in children's books using a 200,000 word corpus comprising 247 popular, contemporary books for young children (0-5 years). Using human judgments and word co-occurrence data, we quantified the gender biases of words within the corpus and within individual books. We find that children's books contain large numbers of words that adults judge as gendered. Semantic analyses based on co-occurrence data yielded word clusters related to gender stereotypes (e.g., feminine: emotions; masculine: tools). Co-occurrence data also indicate that books instantiate gender stereotypes found in other research (e.g., girls are better at reading and boys at math). Finally, we used large-scale data to estimate the gender distribution of the audience for individual books, and find that children tend to be exposed to gender stereotypes for their own gender. Together the data suggest that children's books may be an early source of gender stereotypes.

STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE: Gender stereotypes such as that girls are better at reading and boys are better at math have origins in early childhood. We examined the extent to which popular children's books may expose young 0-5 year old children to information about gender stereotypes. Our data suggest that children's books have rich information about gender stereotypes, and that some of these stereotypes are more strongly represented in children's books than in adult fiction. These findings suggest that popular children's books may be unintentionally teaching young children about gender stereotypes.

Keywords: reading, gender, language development

Word count: 2051 (excluding methods and results)

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Table 1

Representative female-biased, neutral and male-biased books

	female-biased	neutral	male-biased
Title	<i>Chrysanthemum</i>	<i>The Polar Express</i>	<i>Curious George</i>
Main character gender	female	indeterminate	male
Plot summary	Chrysanthemum is ridiculed at school for her unusual name, despite liking it herself. She shares her feelings with her parents who console her. After a teacher reveals that she has a similar name, the ridicule stops.	A child travels by train to the North Pole and is gifted a bell from Santa. The bell falls out of the child's pocket on the return home, but is returned as a wrapped present on Christmas morning.	George, a monkey, is taken from his home to the city and repeatedly gets into mischief while exploring his new world. Happily, he eventually is taken to live at the zoo.
Most freq. nouns/verbs	chrysanthemum (f), said, name, twinkle (f), father (m), mother (f), flower (f), named (f), thought, way (f), loved (f), school, day, looked, students (f), think (f), chosen, did, tag, would, could (f), grew, morning (f), sounded (f), baby (f)	bell (f), christmas, said, train (m), could (f), elves, express (m), sound, asked, children (f), hear, would, gift (f), lights (f), looked, north (m), pocket, pole (m), silver, stood, bells (f), found, heard, let (f), ringing (f)	man (m), hat (m), hurry, looked, balloon, caught, fire (m), monkey (m), telephone (f), head (m), put, said, saw (f), went (f), bed, catch, ship (m), thought, walked, zoo, do, fireman (m), bag, call, came

Note:

Last row gives 25 most frequent nouns and verbs in each book text. Parentheses denote word gender bias based on human judgments in Study 1a (f = female; m = male).