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ABSTRACT

This conference focuses on how females are portrayed in a range of current media and whether these messages influence girls. The report is divided into three parts. Part 1, "Getting the Message," maintains that girls are aggressive consumers of the popular media and they understand the messages conveyed there. Although current media contain many powerful role models, they also contain stereotypical messages about appearance, relationships, and careers. Part 2, "Delivering the Message," examines the myth that there are enough positive female role models and considers the economic and creative factors driving industry decisions. Part 3, "Accepting the Challenge," presents recommendations developed at the conference. The action agenda recommendations were: (1) develop a national public health campaign; (2) mobilize a coalition of powerful advertisers and broadcasters; (3) promote success stories to dispel conventional wisdom; (4) stage a national broadcast event to focus attention; and (5) dedicate the 1998 conference to examining race. Recommendations regarding defining positive role models were to create female characters we would want our own daughters to emulate, who are similar to "real" girls, and who are leaders. Also included in the report are brief summaries of presentations by keynote speakers--psychologist Mary Pipher; Donna Shalala, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services; and actor Geena Davis--and opinions of representative teenagers attending the conference. The report concludes with the conference schedule. (KB)

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Reflections of Girls in the Media



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Fourth Annual Children & the Media Conference

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*“We need to ask ourselves —
when given the choice and the
power to influence girls’ lives,
did we choose to have a positive
effect or a negative effect or no
effect at all? When a girl is
looking in the mirror of popular
culture today, what will she see?
Will she know that her health
and future are more important
than her image? That the size of
her ambition is more important
than the size of her clothes?
That the dreams she creates for
herself are more important than
those created for her by others?”*

- Donna E. Shalala, *Secretary, Department of
Health and Human Services*
-

August 1997

Dear Friends,

Children Now is pleased to present "*Reflections of Girls in the Media*," a report on the fourth annual Children and the Media Conference. This year's conference, again co-hosted with the UCLA Center for Communication Policy and Stanford University, was held for the first time in Los Angeles, center of the nation's entertainment industry.

Two questions were at the heart of the conference: How are females portrayed in today's media? Do media messages influence our nation's girls? Although this issue has been explored before, it was addressed here in a new and comprehensive way. Our previous conferences have focused on one type of media: news, entertainment or advertising. At this year's conference, as well as in the commissioned research, we examined messages sent to girls across a *range* of media.

The Los Angeles location attracted an impressive group of participants. The focus was clearly on solutions, ranging from small steps to broad outreach. Writers, editors and producers were urged to create powerful role models for girls, one story at a time. At the other end of the spectrum, advertising and media leaders were encouraged to join with children's advocates to raise national awareness of this issue through a broad public health coalition.

The voices of young people brought special insight to the conference. Their message was simple: show us girls like us — believable in the things they do, in their body size and appearance, and in the lives they lead. And show us enough girls so that every example is not an exception. As Linda Ellerbee said, "Girls are saying, 'Let me see *me* doing things.'"

This was a conference attended by people who care about girls and who want to make good decisions on their behalf. They were challenged to explore complex issues, identify industry opportunities, and propose concrete recommendations. This report summarizes their thoughtful work. We welcome your comments.



Top: Laura Groppe, *Girl Games*; Todd Cunningham, MTV; and Roberta Caploe, *Seventeen*

Middle: Dr. Janie V. Ward, Simmons College; Tony Jonas, Warner Brothers; and commentator Arianna Huffington

Bottom: Children Now President Lois Salisbury with actor Geena Davis

Donald Kennedy
Chairman of the Board

Lois Salisbury
President

Meeghan E. V. Prunty
Director, Children &
the Media Program

Getting the Message

Girls are aggressive consumers of the popular media and they get the message.

"I think young girls need more role models on the shows they watch. Most good examples today are on adult shows, like *Law & Order*. The TV programs kids like to watch always show girls running after guys. You never see them in school because they're always just getting with a

As they move from childhood to adolescence, both girls and boys begin to redefine themselves, to determine how and where they fit in the world. Television programs, commercials, movies, popular music and magazines subtly, but persistently, shape their attitudes and expectations. These are powerful teachers. For youngsters of all ages, media offer role models, set standards for respect and recognition, define gender, and provide lessons in behavior and appearance.

Consider this classic illustration. The day after "the Fonz" took out a library card on *Happy Days*, there was a five-fold increase in the number of children applying for library cards in the United States.

Kids in the '90s may be more sophisticated, but they are no less attracted to the influence of media heroes. And they are exposed to an infinitely broader array of media, reinforcing similar messages

through outlets which are irresistibly entertaining, relentlessly distracting and indeed ubiquitous. Studies show that teen-age girls watch over twenty hours of television a week, see 20,000 television advertisements a year, listen frequently to the radio and CDs, watch hours of music videos, read fashion magazines and newspapers, and play video games. Such a persistent and powerful influence brings with it the potential to inspire, to legitimize, to confer recognition and respect in its portrayals. It often does so.

Messages that Inspire

New research, commissioned by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation for this conference, looked at six different types of media heavily used by teenage girls. This study, the first ever to examine female characters across a *range* of media, found strikingly similar messages — both positive and negative. The positive messages include many powerful role models for girls to emulate and admire. Women and girls in the media are frequently honest, intelligent and self-reliant. And in both television shows and movies, about a third of the females (as well as males) depend on themselves to solve their problems.

guy. I'm not like that. My friends aren't like that. But when girls are shown that way on TV, it has a lot of influence on *younger* girls. They watch these shows and they want to be like those girls. When I was younger, I did too. But now I'm old enough not to be so influenced anymore."

■ Alexis Greenwood, age 15



Party of Five, a teen favorite, is a good example. Both Claudia and Julia are strong and resilient in working to keep their family together after the death of their parents. And they're talented. Claudia plays the violin well; Julia is a gifted writer. These young women are smart, capable and confident.

Girls today can also watch women like Murphy Brown and *Chicago Hope's* Dr. Kathryn Austin who have good jobs, talent and the courage to deal with difficult personal problems. Articles in magazines like *Seventeen* and *YM* reinforce these messages, encouraging girls to be resourceful and to rely on themselves.

Messages that Limit

But the study found these same media also contain stereotypical messages about appearance, relationships and careers as well as more subtle signals about girls' value and importance. Sixteen-year-old panelist Nicole Riddle offered a personal observation, "I like the show *X-Files*, but I notice that it's always the guy who saves the day. Even if he's in trouble and the woman goes to help, he ends up making everything better. She's always kind of following behind."

Adolescent girls form ideas about their own lives by observing how girls and women in the media are depicted — how they look and behave. When the portrayals they see deny respect or reinforce stereotypes, they can undermine girls' self-image, erode their confidence, even limit their future potential. What's more, these messages also educate boys, telling them they should be unemotional heroes or expect girls to be passive beauties.

Here's a snapshot of real American girls today. While in elementary school, 60% agree with the statement, "I'm happy the way I am." But by the time they are in high school, just 29% feel the same way. In her national bestseller, *Reviving Ophelia*, keynote speaker Dr. Mary Pipher points out that, until they reach age 10 or 11, girls are confident, assertive, adventuresome, resilient. As teenagers, however, they become more self-critical, anxious, deferential, even depressed. She traces this change to girls coming of age "in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture where they face tremendous pressure to be sophisticated and beautiful."

Dr. Mary Pipher, psychologist and author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*

Coming of age is much harder for kids today. Five years ago, I became swamped with girls with all kinds of problems. Eating disorders. Depression. Self-mutilation. Many of the girls I was seeing had been the best and brightest in their elementary school years and in junior high, they seemed to fall apart. As teenagers, girls enter a social and developmental Bermuda triangle and their very selves go down in the storm.

Of course, all the problems teenagers have are not caused by media. But media can help solve the problems. The people in this room can refuse to work on projects that portray women as empty-headed sex objects. They can choose to work on projects that show girls in all their diversity of size, of shape, of color, of character, of talents. They can work on projects that show children in positive relationships, that give children hope.

Our daughters don't have to drown. We can build a new community where girls are valued for things other than their beauty and sexuality, where they can be women and adults, love and work.

The media has the opportunity to do great good in this area.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



► **Qualities Kids Associate with Female TV Characters**

- worrying about appearance or weight
- crying or whining
- weakness
- flirting
- relying on someone else to solve problems

► **Qualities Kids Associate with Male TV Characters**

- playing sports
- being a leader
- wanting to be kissed
- wanting to have sex
- solving own problems

Source: Children Now/Kaiser Family Foundation, National Poll of Children, April 1997

“You have to look as close as possible to white or look exotic; you can't be something in between. Some of us are really just our ethnic group, but to be authentically who we are is not acceptable to the industry.”

■ Dr. Jessica Daniel, psychologist

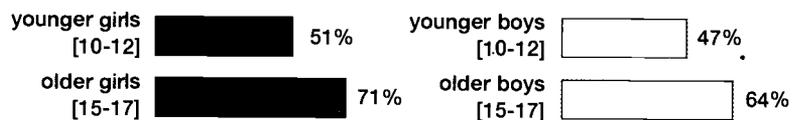
One Standard of Beauty

Indeed an extraordinary amount of media attention is centered on female appearance. The research found that women in the media are much more likely than men to make or receive comments about their appearance and to spend disproportionate time in such activities as shopping and grooming. And increasingly, desirable women are portrayed as thin, extremely thin. The average American woman is 5'4" and weighs 142 pounds; the average model is 5'9" and weighs 110 pounds. Miss America contestants have become so thin that most are now at least 15% underweight. Here is where many young women declare war – on themselves. Girls as young as five are preoccupied with dieting, 31% of nine-year-olds think they're too fat and one study estimates that 11% of high school students have eating disorders. As Dr. Pipher says, “Girls developed eating disorders when our culture developed a standard of beauty they couldn't obtain by being healthy. They have been culturally conditioned to hate their bodies which are, after all, themselves.”

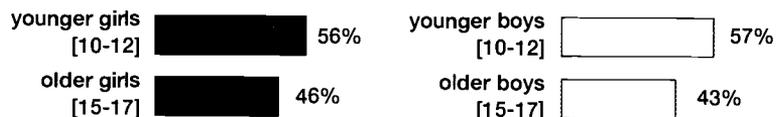
And it is not just about weight. For girls of color, the single ideal of female beauty is even more limiting, including only a narrow range of skin color, hair texture, and facial features. “You have to look as close as possible to white or look exotic; you can't be something in between,” noted psychologist Jessica Daniel. “Some of us are really just our ethnic group, but to be authentically who we are is not acceptable to the industry.”

As girls – and boys – get older, they become more aware of TV's female portrayals.

- **Women on TV are thinner than real life.**



- **There are enough role models for girls on TV.**



Media also send more subtle messages about girls' value and future potential. The conference research showed that women in the media spend much of their time dating and talking about the opposite sex while men are more often seen working and concerned about their success. Across several measures —activities, motivations, even clothing — men are seen working, motivated by their jobs, and wearing

business clothes while women are seen dating, wanting to have a boyfriend, and wearing lingerie. This sends the implicit message that relationships are more important for women than careers.

Fewer Women than Men

The analysis also demonstrated that women continue to be underrepresented in most media, with some studies showing males outnumbering females by two or three to one. These numbers alone send a signal. There are fewer opportunities for positive, active female role models and the subtle message delivered is that this gender group is less important in the world. And for girls of color, the impact contains a one-two punch. Opportunities to see themselves reflected in the media are limited not only by gender, but also by race.



A look at Saturday morning programming is especially revealing. A girl will see about 123 characters each Saturday morning, but rarely if ever a role model of her gender. The characters she does see are often highly stereotyped. As one example, actor Geena Davis pointed to the popular *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Donatello — the original turtles named for artists whose accomplishments have been admired for centuries — were recently joined by a female turtle. Her name? Venus de Milo. The new turtle, said Ms. Davis, “is named for a statue, not a person. She is famous for her looks. She never did anything. And incidentally, she has no head or arms. Can we even call the message kids get from this *subliminal*?”

These messages and stereotypes are reinforced across the entire range of media favored by girls. A message sent in one television show or movie, one magazine or advertisement, does not stand alone. It becomes part of a steady drumbeat in a girl's life. While the development of girls' confidence and self-reliance cannot be laid solely on the media, its role is powerful and its potential exciting. As Children Now President, Lois Salisbury said “This generation of youngsters, perhaps more than any other, needs to see and hear messages which confirm what we all want most for our girls — that they are valued for who they are, for what they do and for who they want to become.”

“When I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be a model like the typical popular girl you always see on TV. And all I saw in magazines were skinny people with small noses, big breasts,

small thighs, and no cellulite. So that's how I wanted to be. I took modeling classes and they gave me a list of foods I couldn't eat. I starved myself and I became bulimic. I went from 125 to 98 pounds – size 1 – and ended up in the hospital, fed through tubes. I was really sick. I don't think I would be here right now if I would have furthered that career.”

■ Chely Rodriguez, age 18

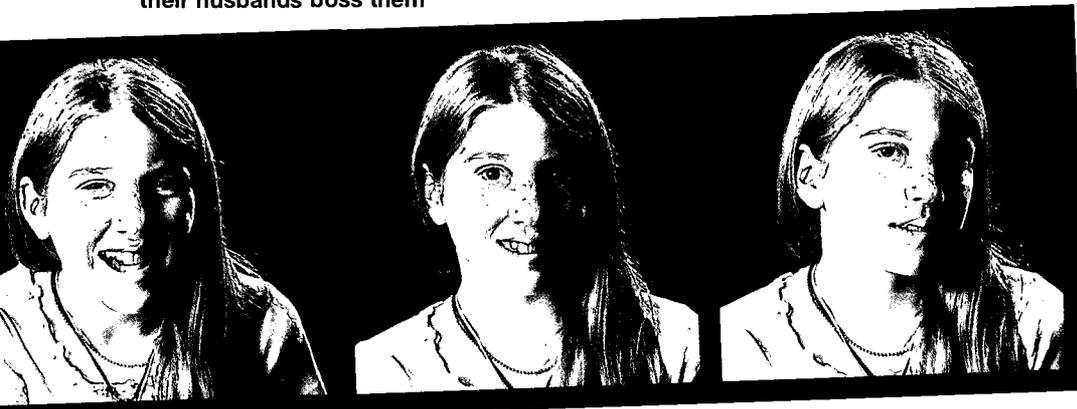
Belixering the Message

Brandy, Alex Mack, Harriet the Spy, Dominique Dawes, Matilda, Marge Simpson, Claire Danes, Pocahontas, Murphy Brown, Oprah, Rosie, Geena Davis, Sheryl Swoopes, Detective Nina Moreno, Shelby Woo, Agent Sculley, and Dorothy in Oz.

“Kids pay attention to the way people act on TV and the things they do. For example, a show can give you the idea that a girl could have a really good job, like a news reporter on *Murphy Brown*. But most of the women on TV aren't like that. Mostly they stay at home and do the housework and let their husbands boss them

When asked to name their favorite females in the media, girls offer a curious list of characterizations and cartoons, athletes and actors, and real people serving up their own lives as role models. In fact, some argue that these positive female role models might do their job too well. While they remain the exception, their success creates the impression that there are “enough” good role models for girls. In fact, research shows there are too few: too few women in starring roles; too often stereotyped.

The conference examined this issue at length, with thoughtful discussions of the economic and creative factors – and the conventional wisdom – which drive industry decisions.



The Myth

Why aren't there enough central female characters? Many point to the conventional wisdom that girls will watch shows with male leads, but boys will not watch shows with female leads. Therefore, to attract the widest audience of both boys and girls, most pro-

around and make all the decisions. Boys notice that too, and then they act all strong and macho. Then they think girls should do the housework and it's OK for them to order girls around. This stuff has an effect.”

■ Becca Johns, age 11

grams' leading characters are male. An exception is the female lead in Nickelodeon's *The Secret World of Alex Mack*. As director Tom Lynch said, “When we started the show about three and a half years ago, you couldn't even have a meeting with a network about a female lead. You'll still hear that. No one will own up to it, but you'll still hear that in various meetings with the networks.”

Conference participants explored the roots of this persistent myth, pointing to the economic imperatives of network television which reinforce the conservative tendency to stick with proven formulas. Said Carol Monroe, Senior Vice President of Fox Kids Network, “The stakes are really high on network television. For something to be successful, it has to be a no-lose situation. In syndication, most of the advertising is pre-sold and advertisers believe the myth that boys won't watch female characters. So I think the *math and the myth* are both problems in terms of syndication and network television.”

The Math Behind the Myth

Some believe the economic equation driving boy-dominated programming is nothing more complex than profits. "I think the problem comes in," said Joel Andryc, Senior Vice President of Saban Entertainment, "when we start developing shows around toys. Often it's a product specifically designed for the likes and desires of boys." Studies show that boys tend to buy toys tied to programs more often than girls and broadcasters are eager to advertise products on shows aimed at their potential buyers.

Beyond economic factors, many believe that the myth itself is self-perpetuating. Female leads have often been so bland that neither girls nor boys would watch them. Observed *Girls Town* actor Anna Grace, "People say that a girl character can't carry a show because traditionally girl characters don't have the qualities that *could* carry a show. They don't act courageous and strong and self-assured. They don't fight for what they really believe in. If they did, then both girls *and* boys would start to watch female characters."

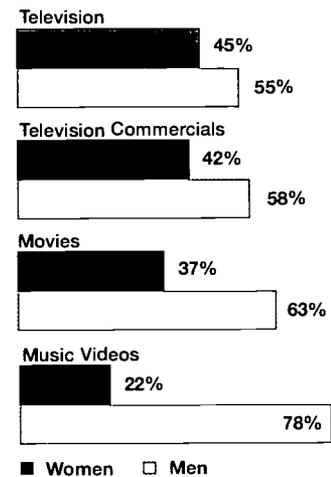
Is this true? Can female leads be compelling while also attracting the audience that the networks demand? Again, consider *The Secret World of Alex Mack*. Alex was originally conceived as a boy but, when the character was changed to a girl at Nickelodeon's request, she was given the same strength and intelligence originally conceived for the male lead. Tom Lynch believes the power of the series has been in allowing Alex "to grow, to inhabit stories which draw upon the complexities of her own life." And the audience? A consistent 51% girls and 49% boys.

"I'd like to challenge the media community to develop a new qualitative standard of measurement to go with the Nielsen's. Of course, we want to know *how many* people we are affecting with our product but we also want to know *how* we are affecting people with our product."

■ Alice Cahn, Director of Children's Programming, PBS

Yet participants had to admit that some shows with strong female leads also fail. "In a lot of cases, there were terrific shows with terrific female characters on Saturday morning that were taken off because nobody watched them," said Fox's Monroe. "*Madeline* is a perfect example." A perfect prime-time example is *My So Called Life*. Angela, the series' lead character, navigated her way through teenage experiences which girls found believable, yet the show was canceled after a single season. "There are great shows that everyone loves but no one watches," said Jessica Klein, Executive Producer of *Beverly Hills, 90210*. "They need publicity, resources and

► With fewer girls and women in the media to choose from...



... many girls choose male characters as their favorites.

1. Will Smith
2. Martin Lawrence
3. Jonathan Taylor Thomas
4. Tim Allen
5. Tom Cruise
6. Brandy
7. Jerry Seinfeld
8. Jim Carey
9. Oprah Winfrey
10. Rosie O'Donnell

Source: Children Now /Kaiser Family Foundation, Content Analysis Across Six Media and National Poll of Children, April 1997

promotional dollars to show the public that they're there." Added Eleo Hensleigh, Senior Vice President of Marketing for the Disney Channel, "It's a marketplace issue. Networks need to see this incredible performance that doesn't always allow for the nurturing of a show. So things get pulled off before kids can ever find them."

But participants were reminded that even *Cheers*, one of the most successful programs of all time, failed to attract a large audience in its first year.

Industry leaders were also encouraged to redefine what constitutes "failure." As Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television, said, "It's not fair to say no one is watching. Everything can't be number one. Even number three means millions of people are watching."

"When CBS turned Maurice Sendak's *Really Rosie* into a musical, the network called it an abject failure because only 20 million people, including 12 million children, watched it. Whoever thought everyone in the country would see *Really Rosie*? That's a ridiculous expectation. Sendak said, "If that many people read the book, it would be the miracle of the publishing age." ■ Peggy Charren

Appearance: The Same Formula

When examining media's stereotypes about appearance and gender roles, the same forces — the math and the myth — come into play. Warner Brothers Television President Tony Jonas was asked why female TV characters always look like models. He said, "It's a very odd line to walk. We try to show empowered women but we also take advantage of the fact that they're beautiful, because that attracts men to watch as well. There *are* economics that drive some of these decisions."

Dynamics of the advertising industry produce similar results for different reasons. As Don Pettit, President of Sassaby Cosmetics, pointed out, "You have to remember that we're delivering a product about aspirations and looking better.

Doing research in the makeup industry, I remember listening to girls say, 'I don't want to see Christy Brinkley. I want to see somebody like me.' But then we'd make an ad with somebody like them and they'd say, 'She's not pretty enough.'"

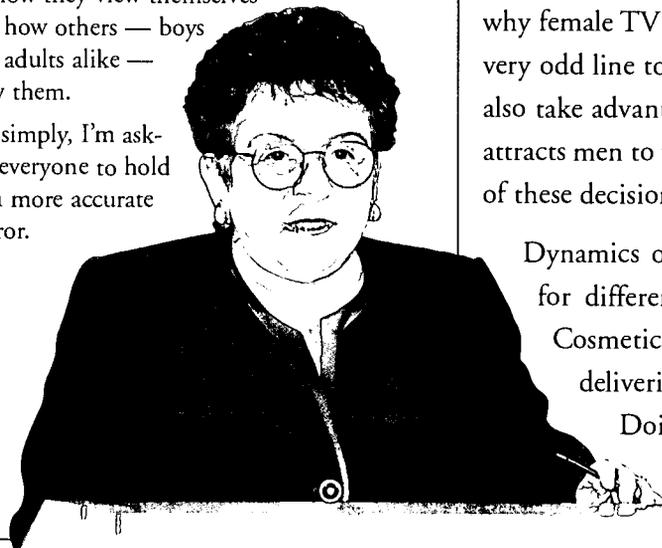
KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Donna E. Shalala, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services

The media increasingly fill the vacuum which was once occupied by traditional institutions like family and religion and schools and communities. Girls today look to the most powerful mirror we have, the mirror of popular culture. They say, tell us who we are and who we should be. But too often they are seeing that they don't measure up to the images that have been created for them. Too often they see that they are not good enough or thin enough or pretty enough.

I know that you need to be ever-mindful of the bottom line of ratings and profits, but there's another bottom line that we all need to pay attention to. It's our role as citizens and guardians of the public trust. It's our role as parents, and it's the bottom line of young girls. You alone will probably never save or ruin a young girl's life, but what you show girls can have a tremendous impact on how they view themselves and how others — boys and adults alike — view them.

Put simply, I'm asking everyone to hold up a more accurate mirror.



But why don't girls think they're pretty enough? Advertising expert Dr. Jean Kilbourne said, "Some say advertisers simply give consumers what they want. But, in fact, advertisers have had a tremendous amount to do with *constructing* the standard of beauty. The clearest example is how much thinner the ideal has become while, at the same time, we've seen the creation of a \$36 billion diet industry."

Executives point to the bottom line. "These people are dealing with multi-million dollar decisions," said Pettit. "A lot of them have sophisticated research that confirms what builds their businesses. They have statistics that say, 'When I put Cindy Crawford in a TV commercial, I sell a lot of lipstick. If I put someone else in there, I might not.' There is a real issue here and so you can't ignore that and blame the 'evil advertisers.'"

A Middle Ground

But participants pointed to a middle ground where highly successful companies, like Levi's and Timberland, wrap their products in positive messages for girls. For example, the effective Reebok and Nike ads use

unconventional models — women athletes — making powerful statements. And Jane Cosmetics, Pettit's main line, advertises to a teen audience using the slogan, "Real beauty comes from within. The outside is for you to make-up."

Some also suggested that new partnerships between the advertising and entertainment industries are the key to improving messages to girls. Foote, Cone and Belding's Jill Hazel, who manages the advertising for Levi's *Jeans for Women*, said, "I have clients who are ready and willing to advertise in media where the message is much more aspirational for women than what's out there now. I have clients who are looking for more shows like *Party of Five* rather than *Melrose Place*. We won't advertise in certain beauty magazines even though they're the most efficient in terms of reaching our audience."

Participants agreed that the math can be used to dispel the myth. This was summarized by Nancy Zwiers, Senior Vice President at Mattel, "Without commercial success, it's hard to have the broad impact. That intersection of commercial success and constructive action for girls is where the win-win situation is going to happen."

"By looking at girls in the media, you would think that all girls do is think about how they look and who's popular and who's not. The media portrays girls as ditsy, easy, and



not too intelligent. It's not true. Some boys take that TV world and put it into reality — hurting some girls' feelings. From talking with a lot of girls, I know some think that they are never going to be good enough for today's society. If the media showed more realistic images of girls, girls might feel better about themselves. I would like to see girls in the media like you see in real life — smart, outgoing, strong, the winner of the day."

■ Todd Orduno, age 16

One Powerful Reflection: Relationships and Sex

From an early age, girls receive two powerful, interrelated media messages:

Message One: Relationships with males are of central importance to their lives.

This is reinforced by depicting female characters as:

- important only in relation to the males in their lives
- focused on being attractive in order to get and keep a boyfriend
- often in the supporting role of girlfriend or buddy

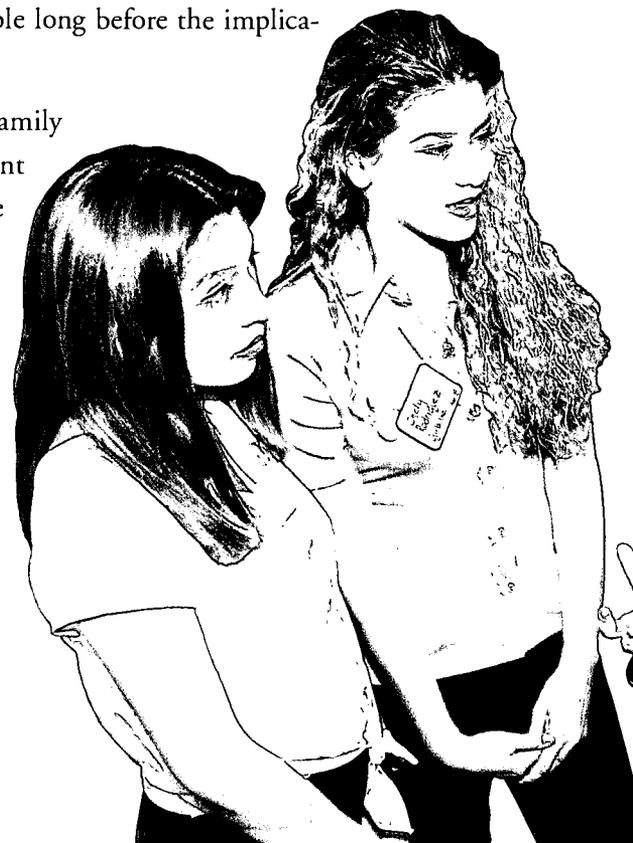
Message Two: Sex is the key to success in relationships.

In the focus on relationships, media portray sex as an inevitable tool.

These roles are often communicated in subtle ways. What characters are shown doing, for example, sends a powerful message. As we've seen, women are more likely than men to be seen in activities related to romance, and even women playing non-stereotypical roles, like police officers, are more likely to use sex appeal and flirtation to achieve professional goals. This behavior is even depicted in portrayals aimed at the youngest children. "Look at Bo Peep in *Toy Story*," noted host of CNN's *Showbiz Today* Jim Moret. "She was the only female in the film and her sole purpose appeared to be bringing Woody over 'a couple of blocks' to smooch."

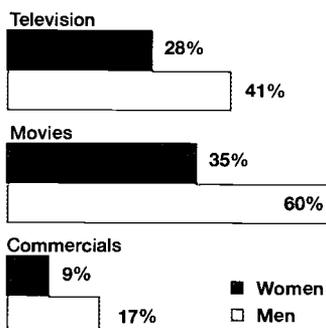
The lesson for girls is clear. But an equally potent message is sent to boys, notes Dr. Elizabeth Ozer, UC San Francisco psychologist. "When a female character says, 'If I tell a guy I don't want to sleep with him, he's just gonna drop me,' it also says a lot about how males should act in relationships." And these sexual messages are introduced for young people long before the implications are understood.

A recent Children Now/Kaiser Family Foundation study of sexual content during television's 8 - 9 o'clock time period revealed *three times* as many sexual interactions per hour than there were twenty years ago. And the most surprising finding was that less than 10% of these sexual messages were presented in the context of sexual risks and responsibilities.



► Across Media, Women Are Seen Working Less Frequently Than Men

Character Shown "On the Job"



Teen Magazines
12% of articles have a focus on careers

"I don't think girls — or boys — should ever be defined by their romantic entanglements. It's unfair to people to do that. Characters on TV should always reach beyond that."

■ Brown Johnson, Senior VP, Nick Jr.

"In my opinion, we tackle issues on Beverly Hills, 90210, but we tackle them while everyone's dressed up." ■ Jessica Klein

In fact, many advocates identify this as the fundamental problem with TV's sexual portrayals. North Carolina Professor Jane Brown criticizes the three C's of sexual content in the media: "No commitment. No contraceptives. No consequences."

"And it's not just television," continued Dr. Brown. "Characters *do* in the movies what they *talk about* on TV. In fact, two-thirds of movies today are rated 'R' primarily because of sexual content. And kids see these early." Later on, they'll read teen magazines which emphasize dating in 35% of their articles and sex in 9%, while devoting only 12% to school or careers.

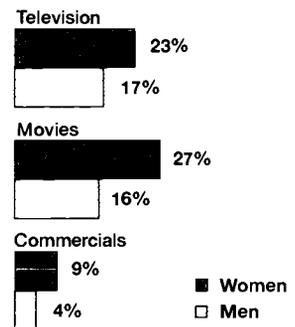
Media producers pointed out that they have to walk a careful line. Many said that they face more serious consequences when attempting to depict the complexities of sexual behavior than they do just showing superficial sexual activity — even a lot of it. Producers point to pressure that right-wing groups and nervous advertisers put on their network Broadcast & Standards departments. For example, Jessica Klein, Executive Producer of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, said, "I wasn't allowed to include a scene in which a character going out on a date put condoms in her purse. They said that would make her seem like a 'slut.' My response was, 'No. That makes her a smart woman.'"

Magazines face the same pressures in trying to convey responsible messages to girls. "We get letters from teens saying we want more information about sex," says Lori Berger, Editor-in-Chief of *Jump* magazine. "But we run into huge problems with parents and right-wing groups who say 'How dare you talk to my children this way?' And you face advertisers who are offended and threaten to pull out of the magazine." Commented Sassaby Cosmetics' Pettit, "It's the *fear of* market place impact."

"What we need," concluded Children Now's Salisbury, "is a fuller representation of what these issues mean for *both* boys and girls, and men and women." Dr. Ozer added that media leaders must send girls the same messages "about relationships and sexuality as about gender roles and career paths: They have options. They have choices. They have control."

► Across Media, Women Are Seen in Context of Romantic Relationships More Frequently Than Men

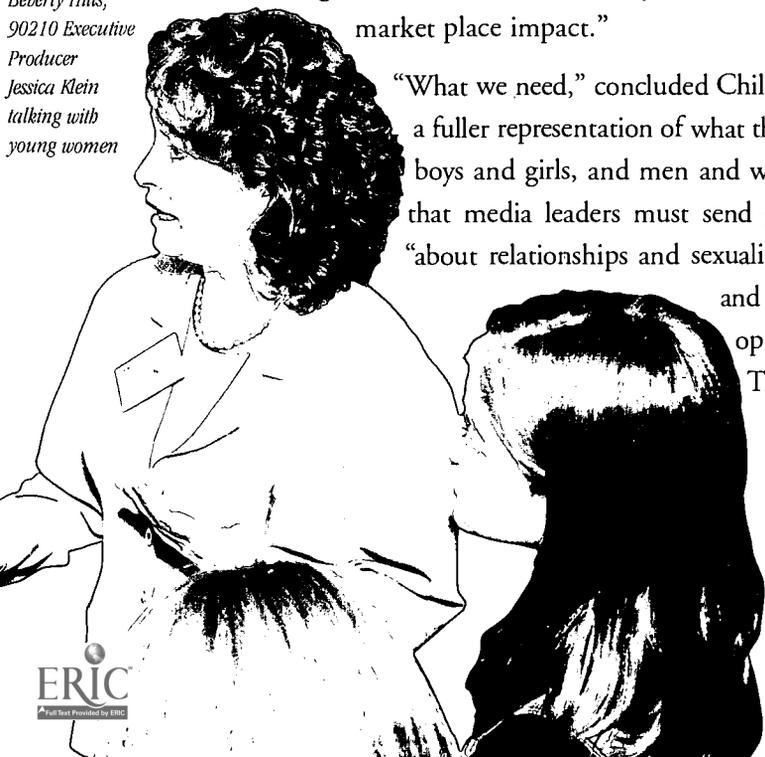
Character Shown "Dating"



Teen Magazines
35% of articles have a focus on dating

► Teen magazines feature three articles about successful or famous men for every two articles about successful or famous women [20% vs. 14%]

Beverly Hills, 90210 Executive Producer Jessica Klein talking with young women



Accepting the Challenge

"I challenge all of you as professionals, as parents, as citizens, and as patriots to use the incredible power you have to help transform the lives of young girls from a potential tragedy into a national triumph."

■ Donna Shalala, *Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services*

"I like seeing people in the media that I can relate to. *Seventeen* magazine has a really good section called *School Zone* and it has people who are all different body types. I don't look at that and say, 'I'm not going to buy this magazine because they have someone who looks like me.' I look at it and go 'Hey, I have that shirt, and she looks the way I look in

An Action Agenda

Academics, advocates, media leaders and young people attending this conference were challenged to take action. Panel discussions, keynote speeches, question and answer sessions, and informal conversations among participants generated provocative recommendations. A formal industry/advocacy working group synthesized many of these and developed the following proposals.

• **Develop a National Public Health Campaign**

This would be a coordinated effort to bring together a broad range of constituencies — industry, advocacy, academics — to frame this important issue in terms of

public health, possibly in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' national *Girl Power* campaign. Campaigns against drunk driving and smoking would serve as models. "This is not just a consumer issue or an issue for individual girls. This is a public health issue that should be on the American

agenda," said Amy Plotch, Communications Director at Girls Inc. "Young women and young men at this conference told us eloquently that the media has an impact on their health."

• **Mobilize a Coalition of Powerful Advertisers and Broadcasters**

A group of broadcasters who depend upon an audience of girls and advertisers who market heavily to girls would join forces to use their access and influence to promote improved images of girls and women in the media. "People in business are used to taking action," said Nancy Zwiers, Senior Vice President at Mattel, Inc. "We can partner with the researchers who are uncovering and framing these issues and be an action arm. We have the impact and the clout to be able to do that."

it.' I also really like the black doctor on *ER*. I admire her because she's overcome a lot — now her character has AIDS, I think — and because she represents me. I'm black and I want to be a doctor."

■ Nicole Riddle, age 16



• Promote Success Stories to Dispel the Conventional Wisdom

Examples of diverse, creative and *profitable* portrayals of women in the media would be compiled and widely disseminated. These examples would demonstrate that such efforts need not be perceived as high-risk, and would include business-oriented statistics to reinforce a positive bottom line. “There is a tremendous amount of conventional wisdom built up that is based on business results,” said Don Pettit, President of Sassaby Cosmetics. “We need to counter that conventional wisdom with data about successes. When someone does take a risk and succeeds, that needs to be shared broadly. It becomes a reason for *me* to take the risk and do the right thing.”

• Stage a National Broadcast Event to Focus Attention

An event to recognize positive representations of girls and women in the media would be created. Some possibilities include an awards event, a network televised *Image Test* modeled on the national *Drivers’ Test*, or a full week of wraparound messages or theme day on all networks. “We want to take a pro-active posture and make a strong, symbolic gesture with high visibility to draw the nation’s attention to this important issue,” said Karen Jaffe, Executive Director of KIDSNET.

• Dedicate 1998 Conference to Examination of Race

The annual Children and the Media conference would again examine one specific issue across a broad range of media. Themes proposed included race, class and gender – particularly the intersection of the three. “These issues are so powerful yet often hard to talk about. It’s best to consider them together so they are not pitted against each other,” noted Marie Wilson, President of the Ms. Foundation for Women.

“If you think of the power of the designated driver campaign that changed our image of drunk driving from being cool to anti-social, we realize the power that the media have to change the way we see our culture.”

■ Commentator Arianna Huffington,
Center for Effective Compassion

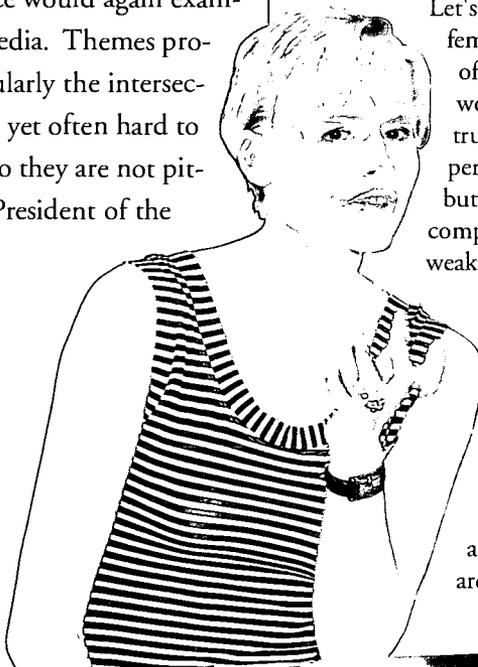
Geena Davis,
Academy award winning actor

When a movie with strong female characters comes out, we need to go. We need to bring our sons. We’ve got to tell our children — girls and boys — why we admire that character. Because boys need to appreciate and value girls every bit as much as girls need to appreciate and value themselves.

We need to become aware and stop settling. We need to start noticing, all of us — parents, teachers, creators of media images — that the absence of girls in our childhood entertainments made us feel just that much less valuable as a female or just that much less valuing of women as a male.

Let’s get rid of the token female. Let’s create a wealth of characters, girls and women, that cover the spectrum. Not just heroes. Not perfect virtuous role models, but real people, dimensional, complicated, flawed, strong and weak, good and bad. Let them try and succeed. Let them try and fail. But let them try. Let them make mistakes, get dirty. Let them go to the mat for what they believe in and slay a dragon or two. Those are characters I want to see. Those are characters I want to play.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



“When boys see the way girls act on TV, they get the idea that all girls are like that — that they’re gonna like you right away, that they’ll be really affectionate in public. Most of the girls I know are not like that. They’re more like the kids on *Saved by the Bell*, dealing with things kids face every day — problems with school and with relationships. Shows

The Character Challenge

One panel discussion focused explicitly on defining the positive characteristics which create strong female role models. Participants urged writers and producers to create storylines and characters, fashion layouts and commercials that challenge and motivate girls to be the best they can be. Who should these characters be?

• Break the Mold

Create female characters you would want your own daughters to emulate.

• They should be dynamic

- showing leadership
- facing challenges
- involved in interesting activities

• They should be real people

- interesting and complex, not one-dimensional
- not perfect, capable of making mistakes and learning from them
- engaged in real-life situations
- exhibiting a range of human emotions and reactions
- representing diverse cultural backgrounds



like *Beverly Hills, 90210* just aren’t real. Even when the girls are supposed to look bad, they still have on makeup and they still look good. If it can’t be real, I’d rather watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that doesn’t even pretend to be real.”

■ Manuel Rodriguez, age 16

• They should have an identity beyond gender and romance

- more than girlfriend, wife or sympathetic friend
- relating to other girls as friends, not competitors
- interested in friendships with boys, not in simply attracting them

• They should be outdoors

- active and athletic
- willing to be adventuresome, “get dirty”
- interested in activities beyond the telephone, grooming and dolls

• They should look like the girls who watch

- healthy girls with normal bodies
- diverse in color, weight, race, appearance, height
- confirming that normal appearance is acceptable

“Think of all the adjectives that describe all of your friends. That is pretty much where we’re headed, because that’s where we have to be,” said Caryn Mandabach, President of Carsey-Werner Productions.

Create these characters and boys will admire and respect them as much as girls today admire and respect many of the male characters they see.

• **Make it Real**

“Who would I like to see on TV?” said 17-year-old Gabriela Perez. “I’d like to see a Latina girl — not rich, not poor. I’d like to see *me*.” Amy Plotch, of Girls, Inc. noted, “The girls who see their lives reflected on TV are more likely to watch than the ones who don’t.” The industry is listening. Roberta Caploe, Executive Editor of *Seventeen* magazine said, “One of the things girls tell us all the time is that they want to see girls who look real, who aren’t just a cookie cutter image.” Todd Cunningham, Senior Vice President at MTV Networks, agreed, “The biggest compliment in television today is that a program is *real*.” Eighteen-year-old Marisela Marchan issued her own challenge: “If you’re trying to motivate a girl to be strong, to be independent, motivate her to be strong like a girl — emotionally strong and physically strong. Not like a boy, but like herself. *A girl*.”

• **Follow the Leaders**

It should be no surprise that characters who are strong, self-assured, adventurous, and independent will attract an audience. Such characters are interesting. When they’re created for females, the shows they inhabit not only entertain, but validate that these are qualities of girls as well as boys. It’s already begun with characters like Moesha, Shelby Woo, Lisa Simpson, Matilda, and Dr. Susan Lewis.

Yet, ironically, one of the most compelling and successful characterizations was created decades ago. Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* attracts new audiences of girls *and* boys in every generation. University of Michigan’s Professor Susan Douglas reminds us that, “Dorothy is smart. She’s brave. She’s defiant. She’s compassionate. And she doesn’t marry some prince that she just met at the end of the movie.” *Girls need more Dorothys.*



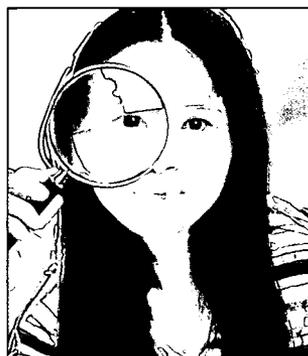
Brandy Norwood, who plays the brainy, confident television character, Moesha, is consistently named the female most admired by girls.



Matilda, the title character in Roald Dahl’s book and major motion picture, uses her brilliance and adventurous spirit to bravely lead her peers out of trouble.



Lisa on The Simpsons possesses an intelligence and musical skill admired by most of the boys in her world.



On the Mystery Files of Shelby Woo, Shelby is a bright and active young investigator who takes charge as she searches for clues, solves mysteries and apprehends criminals.



Dr. Susan Lewis on ER is resourceful and dedicated as she juggles the responsibilities of single motherhood while completing her medical residency.

1997 Conference Schedule

Wednesday, April 30

Keynote: *Reviving Ophelia* Author Dr. Mary Pipher

A Vision for Our Daughters: Panel of Parents

Arianna Huffington, Director, Center for Effective Compassion

Dr. Jan Davidson, President, Davidson & Associates

Tony Jonas, President, Warner Brothers Television

Regina Montoya, President, Girls Inc.

Jim Steyer, President, JP Kids

Dr. Janie V. Ward, Professor, Simmons College

Welcoming Dinner: Paula Poundstone, Comedian

Thursday, May 1

Designing Girls: Workshop on Positive Portrayals of Girls

Alice Cahn, Director of Children's Programming, PBS

Thora Birch, Actor, *Now and Then, Patriot Games*

Susan Douglas, Professor, University of Michigan

Anna Grace, Actor, *Girls Town*

Tom Lynch, Creator/Director, *The Secret World of Alex Mack*

Caryn Mandabach, President, Carsey-Werner Productions

Amy Plotch, Director of Communications, Girls, Inc.

Power Rangers to Pochahontas: A Look at Media for the Youngest Girls

Karen Jaffe, Executive Director, KIDSNET

Joel Andryc, Senior Vice President, Creative, Saban Entertainment

Susan Douglas, Professor, University of Michigan

Eleo Hensleigh, Senior Vice President, Marketing, The Disney Channel

Brown Johnson, Senior Vice President, Nick Jr.

Carol Monroe, Senior Vice President, Program Services, Fox Kids Network

Dolores Morris, Vice President, Program Development, Children's Television Workshop

Nancy Zwiers, Senior Vice President, Mattel, Marketing for Barbie

Keynote: Secretary Donna E. Shalala

Roles and Models: Messages to Teens About Appearances and Aspirations

Lois Salisbury, President, Children Now

Roberta Caploe, Executive Editor, *Seventeen*

Todd Cunningham, Senior Vice President, Research, MTV

Laura Groppe, President and CEO, Girl Games

Dr. Jean Kilbourne, Author/Lecturer

Don Pettit, President, Sassaby Cosmetics

Dava Savel, Executive Producer, *Ellen*

Friday, May 2

Is That What Girls Are For? Media Messages about Relationships and Sex

Jim Moret, Host of *Showbiz Today*, CNN

Lori Berger, Editor-in-Chief, *Jump*

Dr. Jane Brown, University of North Carolina

Jessica Klein, Executive Producer, *Beverly Hills, 90210*

Jim McKay, Director, *Girls Town*

Dr. Elizabeth Ozer, Psychologist, U.C. San Francisco

Lois Salisbury, President, Children Now

Barbara Stoll, Producer, *Roseanne*

Asking the Experts: Kids Reflect on the Media

Linda Ellerbee, President, Lucky Duck Productions

Special Guest: Lisa Fernandez, Olympic Gold Medalist, Softball

Future Steps: Realizing Media's Potential to Inspire Girls

Keynote: Actor Geena Davis



Comedian Paula Poundstone welcomed conference attendees



Lisa Fernandez, Olympic Gold Medalist in Softball, with student panelist, Gabriela Perez

"If we could show girls the Lisa Fernandez story — stories of real women in the real world, doing real things and succeeding, then we can also live with the Barbie dolls, and we can enjoy *Beverly Hills, 90210*. We don't all have to be one thing at any one time, but I think we're all saying to the broadcasting community, recognize that we are more that we are seeing reflected on the air."

■ Linda Ellerbee,
Nick News



Eleo Hensleigh, *The Disney Channel*;
Brown Johnson, *Nick Jr.*; and Carol
Monroe, *Fox Kids Network*

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Note on Research

The two-part research project cited throughout this report was jointly commissioned by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation for the 1997 Children & Media Conference. The content analysis of six types of media — television programs, movies, music videos, teen magazines, television commercials and magazine advertisements — was conducted by Dr. Nancy Signorielli of the University of Delaware. To the extent possible, all media overlapped in November 1996. The national poll of 1,200 children ages 10 to 17 was conducted in April 1997 by Lake Sosin Snell & Associates. The complete findings from the content analysis and survey are available by calling 1-800-656-4533 and asking for publication #1260.

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Main office:

Oakland

1212 Broadway, 5th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612
tel (510) 763-2444
fax (510) 763-1974
children@dnai.com

Los Angeles

2001 South Barrington Avenue, Suite 100
Los Angeles, CA 90025
tel (310) 268-2444
fax (310) 268-1994
cnla@earthlink.net

Sacramento

926 "J" Street, Suite 1400
Sacramento, CA 95814
tel (916) 441-2444
fax (916) 441-2463
cnow@sna.com

New York

355 Lexington Avenue, 11th Floor
New York, N Y 10017
tel (212) 682-1896
fax (212) 682-3222
children@inch.com

1-800-CHILD-44

www.childrennow.org



Writer: Joan Lapp; *Editor:* Meeghan Prunty; *Editorial Assistance:* Amy Dominquez-Arms, Becky Perrine, Lois Salisbury, Adam Tucker, Amy West, Lisa White; *Design:* Dennis Johnson; *Photography:* Steve Fisch.

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