



Where ^{the} Girls Aren't:

Gender Disparity Saturates G-Rated Films

A Research Brief Commissioned by the See Jane
Program at Dads & Daughters

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See Jane



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Introduction

Where the Girls Aren't is the first of several research briefs drawn from the most in-depth content analysis of popular G-rated movies ever conducted. Led by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, researchers from the Annenberg School for Communication (ASC) at the University of Southern California (USC) studied the 101 top-grossing G-rated films released from 1990 through 2004. The research analyzed a total of 4,249 speaking characters in the movies, which included both animated and live-action films.

Where the Girls Aren't analyzes the pronounced imbalance in male and female characters which researchers documented. The researchers tracked the gender of speaking characters in three ways: characters, groups of characters, and narrators.

The research found that, overall, three out of four characters (75 percent) are male, with similar patterns holding true when the data is analyzed from multiple perspectives (major characters, characters in groups, movies released in the 1990s vs. the 2000s).

The research was commissioned by See Jane, a program founded by Academy Award winner Geena Davis at the national nonprofit Dads & Daughters®. See Jane engages professionals and parents to dramatically increase the percentages of female characters, and to reduce gender stereotyping, in media made for children ages zero to 11.

Later in 2006, See Jane will release other research briefs on what these films communicate to children about the portrayal of boys, occupational expectations for girls and boys, and body image and hyper-sexuality.

It is surprising that in 2005, we still need to be focusing on gender balance.

—Linda Simensky

Senior Director of Children's Programming

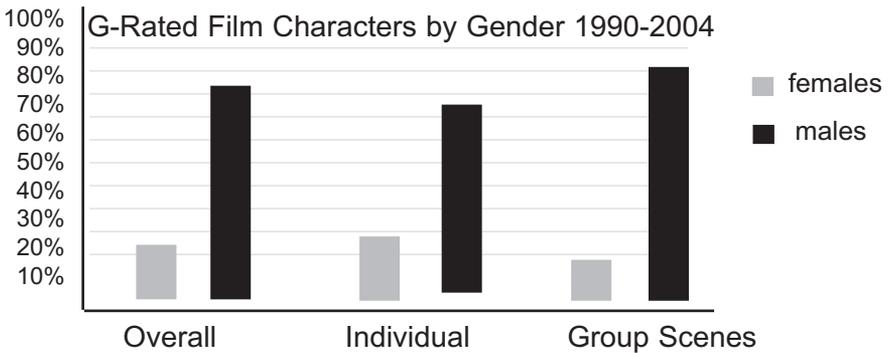
PBS Kids

What the Research Found:

Where the Girls Aren't reveals a pronounced imbalance in the representation of male and female characters in widely-viewed G-rated films.

Key findings show that:

- In the 101 studied films, there are three male characters for every one female character.
- Fewer than one out of three (28 percent) of the speaking characters (both real and animated) are female.
- Fewer than one in five (17 percent) of the characters in crowd scenes are female.
- More than four out of five (83 percent) of the films' narrators are male.



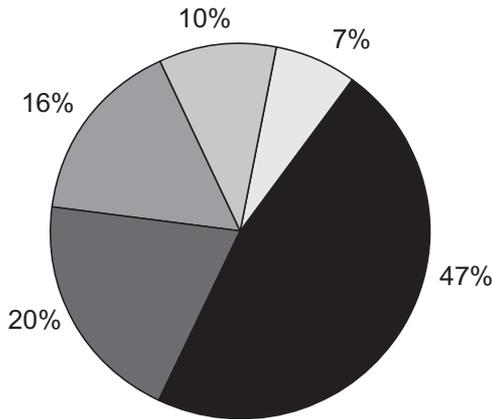
Of the 3,039 individual speaking characters found across the films 28 percent (n=851) are female, and 72 percent (n=2,188) are male. This is 257 males for every 100 females.

When looking at characters that comprise groups, an even more distorted picture emerges. Out of the 1,210 characters shown in groups, 83 percent (n=1,010) are male and only 17 percent (n=200) are female. Gender bias also is found in narration. Only 17 percent of storytellers are female.

There was little change in the percentages of male and female characters over the time period examined. For example, for films released between 1990 and 1994, 30.1 percent were female. In the period 1995-1999, 25.8 percent were female, and from 2000 to 2004, 29.4 percent were female. The imbalance does not appear to be influenced by which company released the films. The 101 movies analyzed were released by 20 different distribution companies.

Finally, Dr. Smith developed a formula for identifying which of the 101 films could be characterized as having gender balance. Any film with a gender ratio of *less than* 1.5 to 1 (regardless of which gender had more characters) was labeled as balanced. Even by this fairly liberal standard, only seven films (6.9 percent) cleared the bar.

Gender Balance in G-Rated Films 1990-2004



-  7% **Balanced** films include characters of one gender no more than 1.49 times more frequently than characters of the other gender.
-  47% **Imbalanced** films include characters of one gender 1.5 to 2.99 times more frequently than characters of the other gender.
-  20% **Significantly Imbalanced** films include characters of one gender 3.0 to 4.49 times more frequently than characters of the other gender.
-  16% **Substantially Imbalanced** films include characters of one gender 4.5 to 6.99 times more frequently than characters of the other gender.
-  10% **Grossly Imbalanced** films include characters of one gender 7 or more times more frequently than characters of the other gender.

Does the Imbalance Matter?

The gender imbalance seen on the silver screen can have a strong impact on children ages zero-11 because they are so impressionable. For children, images and stories help influence the important developmental task of understanding what it means to be male or female

We know that a majority of children in this country have access to a variety of videos and/or DVDs in their homes, many of which may be G-rated. In a 2003 nationwide survey, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that over half (53 percent) of parents say that their zero to six-year olds have at least 20 videos or DVDs in the home. Further, almost half (46 percent) of the caregivers surveyed reported the children they care for watched at least one video or DVD per day. Content in G-rated movie videos and DVDs may have a particularly strong influence on children's social learning about gender because children tend to watch the same movies over and over.

More research has been conducted on how children's gender attitudes are influenced by television viewing than has been done on how children's gender attitudes are influenced by movies. However, since children are likely to repeatedly view popular G-rated films on their TV screens, via DVD and VCR, results of TV research may be relevant.

The TV research suggests that television viewing can have an impact on developing or possibly reinforcing children's stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about gender. In fact, a meta-analysis of 30 surveys and experiments reveals that exposure to television is a significant and positive predictor of sex role acceptance and attitudes among children and adults (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996, p. 174-176). With repeated television viewing of characters engaging in traditional sex roles, a child's gender expectations for his/her own sex or the opposite can become simplified, skewed, and stereotypical in nature. These effects are particularly problematic when we consider that females are seen less frequently than males on television (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974).

What Can Be Done?

Families, entertainment industry professionals, educators and communities all have roles and opportunities in changing the imbalance of females and males seen in children's movies.

Among the recommendations from See Jane are:

- Families can choose to support films that feature balanced and diverse female and male characters;
- Families can purchase a selection of movies which, in the aggregate, show a balance and diversity of female and male characters;
- Parents can watch films with their children and discuss similarities and differences between males and females. In doing so, parents can take a step toward protecting their children from the potentially negative effects of imbalanced gender portrayals;

Use See Jane's Tips for viewing films with children by Erin Trahan

1. Count the number of characters. How many are female? How many are male?

2. For the female characters, what behaviors are most common?

3. Are any female characters leading the action in the story? Or are they supporting the story?

4. What kind of work do the female characters do?

5. What do the female characters look like? Do they look like most of the girls and women you know? What do you think of how they're dressed?

6. Is there a female character that you would like to be? Why or why not? Would you rather do what one of the male characters does?

7. Does one gender have more close-ups, or more close-ups of particular body parts?

8. How do the kids in the story relate to their parents? What do you like or dislike about that?

9. Who created the story? Was the writer female? How about the director? If you don't know, what would you guess?

10. What would you do differently if you were making the movie?

- Industry professionals—including producers, distributors, writers, animators, directors, casting directors, and others—can embrace the widened creative and commercial possibilities opened up by greater balance and diversity among female and male characters;
- Industry professionals can support stories and roles that:
 - More accurately reflect the gender ratio of the real world children inhabit.
 - Emulate the diversity of real-world girls and women; and
- Educators, nonprofit organizations, and communities can provide information to offset the gender imbalance depicted in most G-rated films.

When entertainers, parents, educators and communities support films that more accurately reflect the real world our kids live in—a world shared by boys and girls, men and women—all of our children are better off.

Principal Investigator and Research Methodology

The Principal Investigator for *Where the Girls Aren't* is University of Southern California Associate Professor Stacy L. Smith, PhD of USC's Annenberg School for Communication. Dr. Smith's ongoing research focuses on developmental differences in children's reactions to mass media, including children's responses to violence in the news and portrayals of gender in children's entertainment. She has written more than 30 journal articles and book chapters on content patterns and effects of the media on youth. Dr. Smith received two "top paper awards" from the International Communication Association's Instructional-Developmental Division for her news-based research, as well as the "Outstanding Dissertation Award" in 2002 from the same division of ICA. She has served as a co-principal investigator on a content analysis of pro-social portrayals on television funded by the Fetzer Institute.

I advocate for high-quality children's content across technologies, and it's impossible to achieve true excellence if half the audience lacks its fair share of strong role models.

—David W. Kleeman, President
American Center for Children
and Media

I know from working with millions of girls that they eagerly look for their faces in the books they read, the movies they watch, and the ads they absorb.

—Kathy Cloninger

Chief Executive Officer, Girl

Scouts of the USA

The study examined the top box-office grossing 110 G-rated films released between January 1, 1990 and January 31, 2005, as measured by Nielsen Inc. Film Source data. (Note: according to Nielsen data, no G-rated films were theatrically released during January, 2005.) A total of 20 distributors are accounted for in the sample. Prior to conducting the analyses, all the documentaries in the sample were

removed (n=8). One film, *Across the Sea of Time*, was not available for rent or purchase on VHS or DVD. The final number of top-grossing G-rated films in the sample was 101. Of these films, 86.1 percent featured fantastic content and 71.3 percent presented action fully or partly animated content. The complete list of films included in the study is at Seeane.org.

Only speaking characters were coded. A speaking character is defined as a living being (or group of beings) that speaks one or more words discernibly, overtly, or is referred to by name anywhere in the context of the plot.

Words can be spoken in English, a foreign language, or even an alien language. Nonverbal utterances (e.g., “oh,” “ah,” booing, hissing) are not considered words in this study. All characters must have a visual referent on screen, so off-screen voices are not coded. The unit of analysis begins any time an entity (single or group) speaks a discernable word in the context of the plot (or is referred to by name). For coding purposes, all information about that character is observed and taken into account until his/her/its last screen shot. In addition to analyzing speaking characters, a second unit of analysis is the entire film.

The development and testing of a code book began with a small group of undergraduates at USC. This process lasted approximately three months. After refining the conceptualizations of the variables, a smaller group of coders met twice per week for five weeks to learn how to unitize characters and assign values to the variables in the study. At the end of training, reliability assessments began. Across multiple tests, the Potter and Levine-

Donnerstein (1999) formula generated coder agreement after correcting for chance. The coders achieved a high level of consistency (.70 or above, which is the standard in content analytic research; Sparks, 2004) on many of the variables in the study. After the reliability tests, coding commenced for 12 weeks. The coders watched each film twice. Films were assigned to coders in a random order.

See Jane and Dads & Daughters

See Jane is a major program of the nonprofit Dads & Daughters (DADs). See Jane was founded in 2004 by Geena Davis, the mother of a daughter and twin sons. Davis, an actor and producer, has won the Oscar and Golden Globe awards and is a long-time advocate of equal access to sports opportunities for girls and women.

DADs is the national nonprofit advocacy organization for fathers and daughters. Founded in 1999, DADs helps fathers and stepfathers to make the world safer, fairer, and better for girls. The only national organization dedicated to the power and potential of father-daughter relationships, DADs is the major media source on this important and influential relationship—and the role of healthy, involved fathering. DADs provides tools to help fathers be better advocates and fathers for their daughters through its website www.dadsanddaughters.org, publications, presentations, and research. The organization also publishes the award-winning periodical *Daughters®: For Parents of Girls* (www.daughters.com).

The See Jane program seeks to engage professionals and parents to dramatically increase the percentages of female characters—and to reduce gender stereotyping—in media made for children zero to 11. See Jane founder Geena Davis says, “By making it common for our

I want to live in a world where girls and boys, and women and men, are treated with equal dignity and have equal opportunities. See Jane examines the current representations of girls and boys in media for children, and imagines a more inclusive, equal and exciting world.

—Barbara J. Nelson, Dean
UCLA School of Public Affairs

youngest children to see everywhere a balance of active and complex male and female characters, girls and boys will grow up to empathize with and care more about each others' stories.”

Gender equity has progressed in many ways. But male characters still dominate television, movies, and other media for young children. Since women and girls make up half of the human race, See Jane believes the presence of a wide variety of female characters in our children's earliest media is essential for both girls' and boys' development.

With an Advisory Board of media professionals and educators, chaired by Ms. Davis, the See Jane program is administered by DADs, whose advocacy has changed public policy and corporate marketing. Research, education, activism and collaboration are the project's hallmarks as See Jane works hand-in-hand with entertainment industry professionals and parents to improve our children's earliest media exposure from the inside out.

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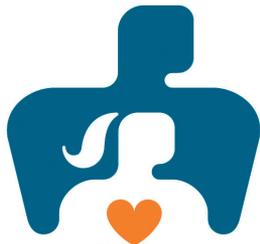
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