

Girls' Take On TV *9/20/95* Examined

Survey Aims to Promote Female Role Models

By Megan Rosenfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

Girls like what they see on TV less than boys, according to a new survey, and both sexes tend to invent television characters who are glamorous models, movie stars or professional athletes more frequently than teachers, lawyers or firefighters.

Girls Inc., a 50-year-old education and advocacy organization that serves 350,000 girls nationwide, commissioned the survey, which was conducted by the Louis Harris organization. It questioned more than 2,000 boys and girls in Grades 3 through 12 on their attitudes toward television as part of a campaign to encourage girls to ask Hollywood to produce more and better heroines.

"Role models for girls still remain misleading and meager," said actress Barbara Feldon (Agent 99 in "Get Smart") during a telephone news conference yesterday. "It's as if television were a jigsaw puzzle and we say, 'Out of these pieces build a picture of yourself.' There are very few pieces for girls."

Most girls seen on television are interested mainly in boys and clothes, according to other studies cited by Girls Inc., and the most common job held by women characters is clerical. Of 200 prime-time shows studied in another survey, not one focused a plot on a female character's "academic activities or career plans," it said.

Among the Girls Inc. findings:

- Children said they watch an average of 21 hours of television a week.
- Fifty-eight percent said they have a television in their bedroom.
- Girls who watch less television were more likely to criticize what is on TV for failing to be realistic or to portray their world. Girls in general were more critical of TV than boys, and of kids' television habits (68 percent of girls vs. 54 percent of boys said kids watch too much TV.)
- African American girls reported watching more TV—28.5 hours a week—and were also more likely to be critical of what they saw, and to create smart characters with professional careers when asked to design their own programs.

■ Most kids (71 percent) said their parents impose some rules on TV watching; nearly half of them said they don't mind the rules.

■ The most popular show among girls in Grades 3 through 6 was "Full House," a runaway favorite (since canceled) with 42 percent. For African American girls and boys, "Martin" was tops, with "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" coming in second. Overall, 20 percent of all kids picked Fox—often criticized for the quantity of violence and sex in its shows—as their favorite network, while 12 percent picked MTV and 10 percent had no favorite.

■ When brothers and sisters watch TV together, the boys were more likely to impose their viewing choice on the group.

Asked to create television characters, boys and girls tended to split along predictable divides. The 7th- to 12th-graders were asked to create 18-year-old characters, both male and female, and 26 percent of the boys said their female character would be a model. Only 5 percent said she'd be a lawyer, and no boys saw her as a political figure. While more girls designed their female character as a model than any other single career (13 percent), they also were more likely to see her as a professional or as an artist. On the other hand, more boys (7 percent) cast their female character in traditionally male careers—such as police officer, auto mechanic or firefighter—than did girls (4 percent).

The biggest pick of boys for male characters was "professional athlete," selected by 16 percent. The next highest was police officer (11 percent); lawyer and movie star tied for third place at 5 percent. Sixteen percent of girls also cast males as future athletes, but they also saw them as doctors (10 percent), police officers (8 percent) and lawyers (7 percent).

Both sexes thought being attractive was the most important attribute for either male or female characters. Forty-three percent of the girls thought physical appearance was more important for both male and female characters than being funny, smart or—in the male category—strong, athletic or a good fighter. Sixty-four percent of the boys thought appearance was most important for female characters, but only 10 percent thought it was the highest priority for males.

Except for their viewing habits, boys and girls don't seem to have changed one bit in their "favorite activities and hobbies." Girls like to shop (35 percent versus 4 percent), hang out with friends (56 percent) and listen to music (31 percent). Boys like to play sports (55 percent versus 27 percent), hang out with friends (57 percent) and listen to music (29 percent). Only 2 percent of each sex said they liked to study, although more girls (12 percent) than boys (3 percent) said they like to read. Virtually no girls, however, like to play chess (compared with 5 percent of boys), or do scientific experiments (like 4 percent of boys.)

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KIDS' BOOKS
Books about the circus are a fine way to introduce children to a South Florida winter tradition, 5F.

The Miami Herald
December 29, 1995
Daily 407, 254

What girls see when they watch TV

Boy-crazy, crime victims and corpses — is it any wonder girls can't relate?

■ STEREOTYPES IN THE GAMES GIRLS PLAY, 2F

Like most women, I don't need anybody to tell me that when girls watch TV, they don't recognize much of themselves on the screen. From *Baywatch* to *Friends*, *American Gothic* to *Murder One*, the picture that TV gives of females most of the time is lopsided and incomplete. Girls and women play girlfriends and secondary characters, while the storyline revolves around boys and men. This not only shows a lack of respect for girls, it gives the rest of the world false messages about how girls want to be treated.



ROBIN DOUGHERTY
TELEVISION

Maybe that's all you expect from a show like *Baywatch*. You don't watch Pamela Anderson Lee and expect to find a role model. But even some of the best and most daring of what television has had to offer this year — shows like *Murder One* and *American Gothic* — are based on a much too common

PLEASE SEE GIRLS, 2F



GIRLS INC.: Kit tells how to get in touch with TV programmers.

Roseanne, yes, *Baywatch*, no, real-life girls say

By **ROBIN DOUGHERTY**
Herald Television Critic

When real-life girls talk about what they watch on TV, they show a wide range of tastes and sensibilities.

There's one thing, though, they seem to agree on: *Baywatch* is repulsive.

"*Baywatch* — I think that is one of the worst shows on television," says Lindsay Hyde, who's 13 and goes to Glades Middle School in Kendall. "The women — though they're out doing something pretty cool — they have unimaginably large breasts and fabulous bodies. And consequently that's how the boys think every girl in the world should look."

"The guys will only like the girls

PLEASE SEE TALK, 2F



INNOVATOR: Lisa Simpson is an exception on network TV.



TV'S IMAGES: Clockwise from top: Jennifer Aniston of *Friends*; Claire Danes of *My So-Called Life*; Gillian Anderson of *The X-Files*; Pamela Anderson Lee of *Baywatch*; Britta Tushnet from *...*



LIKES ROSEANNE'S KID: 'Darlene is awesome,' says Keturah Baptiste, 15.



HATES BAYWATCH: 'One of the worst shows on television,' says Lindsay Hyde, 13.



'THAT'S ANNOYING': Elizabeth Redman, 14, says *Baywatch* is full of beauty stereotypes.



SEES A CHANGE: Jasmin Thompson, 16, says women are getting better roles on TV.

Real-life girls say: Trash TV's stereotypes

TALK, FROM 1F

with big boobs and little bathing suits," agrees Elizabeth Redman, 14, who goes to Highland Oaks Middle School in North Miami Beach. "That's annoying."

The idea that TV influences girls' body image came up almost as often as the notion that it's not fun to watch characters who aren't mentally endowed.

Positive images

Who do girls see offering positive female images on TV? Kamel Daniel, who's 8 and was visiting South Florida from Canada over the holidays, likes the girls on *Sister, Sister*, which features real-life siblings a little older than she is (and who weren't around as role models for an earlier generation of African-American girls).

Other favorites of a sampling of girls interviewed for this story:

- Dana Scully, the FBI agent on *The X-Files*
- Angela, Claire Danes' angst-ridden teen from the late *My So-Called Life*, now alive only in reruns on MTV (though one girl objected that the show "depicted teenage girls as being depressed, which isn't true")
- And, most of all, *Roseanne's* daughter-with-attitude Darlene, who gets points for being a realistic image of someone with real problems, not just another perfect person from the land of *Beverly Hills 90210*.

"Darlene is a trp," says Jasmin Thompson, 16, who goes to Turner Technical High in North Dade. "She's kinda disrespectful, but she knows what she wants. She takes herself seriously — as much as guys do. I really like her a lot."

Keturah Baptiste, 15, who goes to Braddock High in West Dade, and Elizabeth Redman both sum up the character's appeal this way: "Darlene is awesome."

TV changing

Jasmin, an avid *Oprah Winfrey* fan, thinks things are changing on TV — slowly, but definitely for the better. She thought, for example, it was pretty cool to see Robin Givens play a lawyer on this fall's drama *Courthouse*. "I never would have seen that when

I was small," she says.

Regardless of race, "women in television now are more dominating," she says. "On *Melrose Place*, Amanda is still basically the one in charge. Another example is *New York Undercover*. They have a female cop, and the head lieutenant is a woman. It is a lot different. It used to be that the cops were all men, and the women were all home fixing dinner."

Girls — like boys — like to see characters on TV they can identify with.

Lindsay says one of her favorites is Agent Scully on *The X-Files*: "She can stand on her own two feet. She's firm in her beliefs. She's a woman in what's traditionally a boys' club."

Keturah also claims Scully as one of her TV heroines, mostly because she's the opposite of what drives Keturah nuts. Her message to TV producers: "Stop showing women running around in high heels, saying, 'Help Me!'"

Bad role models

Lindsay's idea of a bad role model — "and I think there's a lot" — is any characterization "where you only get by when you have a great body or you have to comply with your husband, you can't really think for yourself."

Jasmin rails against ditzy characterizations of girls she sees on *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *Married... With Children*. She thinks Hillary on *Fresh Prince*, for example, reinforces stereotypes about girls being shallow, and Kelly on *Married* is so foolish it's maddening. "She makes me feel angry because it's like the way she acts is supposed to make people laugh. It bothers me because, nowadays, women are taking charge, but she still doesn't get it."

This may shock some TV executives, but these girls say they see what's on TV, they recognize how bad much of it is — and they recognize the effect it can have.

"TV really influences the way we look at a lot of things," says Lindsay. "If we have female role models on TV, it will really help girls have a positive image of themselves."

Girls get to choose major TV role models: victimized, or silly

GIRLS, FROM 1F

assumption, that the highest calling for teenage girls in TV-land is as victims.

American Gothic, which returns to the air next week after being on hiatus, opened with a scene showing a small-town sheriff killing a teenage girl by breaking her neck with his bare hands.

On *Murder One*, the homicide trial that the whole first season revolves around involves the rape and murder of a 15-year-old girl. And to make sure you don't forget that, her body becomes a recurring visual motif for the show.

Girls as the victims of violence. Girls as corpses.

TV's other favorite way to portray girls — and the women whom girls look to, to emulate — is hardly any better. They're made to seem shallow and giddy and concerned with little more than their appearance.

Troubling messages

Even some of the good shows send out troubling messages — shows like *Friends*.

"They're a group of friends, and they're supposed to be typical," says Lindsay Hyde, a 13-year-old from Glades Middle School in Kendall. She's one of several teenage girls I talked with recently about the images of girls and women they see on TV. "But if you see them as these super-thin beautiful women, it makes girls think, 'That's how I have to look to lead that kind of life.' And that's not a realistic goal."

But in the current TV season, which show did all the networks scramble to copy? *Friends*, of course, because it's a hit.

The show they should have tried to clone was *My So-Called Life*, the much-lamented goner from ABC that chronicled the life of a realistically portrayed 15-year-old girl. But this show didn't get much of a chance to catch on and survives only in reruns on MTV.

What the TV network executives don't get — and you'd think they would by now, with their ratings sinking lower with each succeeding season — is just how shortsighted this is.

One of the pleasures good art affords us is the ability to see ourselves in it and identify with the people it portrays. When we rarely see creatures that bear any resemblance to ourselves, it's less fun to watch — and we don't feel compelled to do so.

A survey done this fall by Girls Inc., a 50-year-old education and advocacy group, backs that up. The organization asked more than 2,000 boys and girls in grades 3 through 12 how well they felt TV represented their reality, as part of a campaign to encourage Hollywood to give us better heroines — and more of them.

Among the survey's findings: TV has helped convince kids that physical attractiveness is an extremely important quality in men and women, and, thanks in large part to television, girls and boys tend to favor models, movie stars and pro athletes over teachers, lawyers and others you're a lot more likely to encounter in real life.

Few role models

Maybe the most disturbing finding was that girls like what they see on TV less than boys do. That should come as no surprise, though. Girls have a hard time finding role models among the Pamela Anderson Lees and the Jennifer Anistons of the TV universe.

"Role models for girls still



'Role models for girls still remain misleading and meager.'

BARBARA FELDON

remain misleading and meager," says actress Barbara Feldon, who played Agent 99 on *Get Smart* and helped push Girls Inc.'s message. "It's as if television were a jigsaw puzzle and we saw most of these pieces, but not a picture of yourself." There are very few pieces for girls.

And girls aren't the only ones affected by the abysmal images of females on TV. When too many of the girls and women on television act like they have nothing on their mind but attracting men, it's tougher to teach real-life boys — and men — to know how to deal with women who are more complex. It can't help but have an effect on real-life boys when they see adolescent girls and women being beaten, raped and just plain disrespected on a daily basis on TV.

I started my own TV watching years with *The Patty Duke Show* — a cautionary tale for spirited girls and their impossible-to-emulate identical cousins — and have lived to witness the honest-to-real-life angst of Angela on *My So-Called Life*.

I like to think things are moving ahead, that, for every *Baywatch* bimbo, there can be a Dana Scully, the tough, in-control FBI agent on *The X-Files*. That, for every 15-year-old murdered on a crime show, there can be a survivor like the title character on Nickelodeon's *Clarissa Explains It All* or an innovator like *The Simpsons'* Lisa Simpson.

But even in the '60s, for every ditzy Jeannie on *I Dream of Jeannie*, we had an Agent 99 or an Emma Peel (*The Avengers*).

What to do

So what are we supposed to do? Maybe — and, with TV, nothing's ever certain — we can help make sure the status quo doesn't remain so. Maybe we can improve the images girls see of their current and future selves on TV.

Girls Inc. has a good idea: The more girls complain about what they don't like, the better things will get.

It's trying to get young female viewers to think more about what they see on TV and decide how well it represents them. Then, through its Girls Re-Cast TV project, it wants them — and, sure, their parents, too — to send a message to the TV industry and help influence what gets on the air.

Here's what you do. Write to: Girls Inc., 30 E. 33rd St., New York, N.Y. 10016-5394, and ask for a Girls Re-Cast TV Fact Kit. It details how you can get in touch with industry programming honchos.

I like to think girls can make a difference. Here's your chance.

Essence

New York, NY
Monthly 900,000
January 1996



SEEING IS BELIEVING

According to Girls Re-Cast TV, a project based on a nationwide poll of youngsters in grades three through 12, girls more than boys would like to see less sex and violence and more educational programs on TV. The study, conducted by Girls, Inc., also notes that girls want strong female characters that represent their ethnic and racial backgrounds, with less emphasis on looks and more on intelligence. With this research in mind, Girls, Inc., is encouraging women and girls to write letters to stations and send their own reviews of shows. Write to Girls, Inc. National Resource Center (441 W. Michigan St., Indianapolis IN 46202-3233) for an Action Kit. It includes addresses and phone numbers of some Hollywood power people and gives tips on how to communicate with them. Girls, Inc. (30 E. 33 St., New York NY 10016-5394, [212] 689-3700), also wants to hear who you think is the strongest, smartest, boldest female character on TV.

McCall's

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February to-do list

● **Add more love to your life.** Take an extra minute the next time you kiss your partner goodbye.

● **Give your home a midwinter lift.** Toss a cozy, brightly hued throw on your couch or an armchair.

● **Encourage (little) women to vote. GIRLS**
RE-CAST TV wants to hear which female TV character your daughter thinks is the strongest, smartest and boldest. Write to 30 East 33rd St., New York, NY 10016-5394, or call 212-689-3700.

● **Don't slip up.** Invest in shoes or boots that have good treads or ribbed soles.

