

A Guide to Gender, Youth and Media

This LAMP lit is for parents, caregivers, and teachers who are working to broaden childrens' critical engagement of gender representation in media and beyond.

GENDER REPRESENTATION CRITIQUES TODAY

In the last few decades, critiques of gender representation in media have focused on problematic images of girls and women in media. These critiques have been central to combatting sexism perpetuated by media narratives, particularly as these narratives translate to real life expectations for girls and women. Some of the most visible works include Jean Kilbourne's timeless film, [Killing Us Softly](#), (first released in 1979, now four versions are available) where she

discusses sexist images of women in advertisements, Peggy Orenstein's critique of what she terms the "princessification" of girlhood in her 2012 book [Cinderella Ate My Daughter](#), and Jennifer Siebel Newsom's documentary [Miss Representation](#) (2011), which illuminates media's impact on the social oppression of girls and women in the United States. Among many others, these conversations have worked to challenge outdated gender roles within the binary context, advocating for more opportunities and support for girls and women to broaden their ways of being. But for those whose gender identities and expressions challenge the gender binary altogether, media offers little voice or visibility. While the LAMP has worked before to deconstruct

some of these issues, particularly as they intertwine with other social concepts like race, sexual identity, and class, the growing need to articulate a more complex gender representation critique has led us to this LAMP lit. We hope you find these tools useful and help us to engage youth in this important conversation so that we can re-imagine a more inclusive gender representation in media.



Why was this ad of a mother painting her son's toenails pink so controversial?

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OUR VISION

A world of critical and active media participants.

OUR MISSION

Educate and equip people to shape the media landscape through hands-on training. For a critical mass.

CORE VALUES

- Critical curiosity
- Process over product
- Media literacy as a basic need
- Freedom from censorship
- Access for all

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TALK ABOUT LABELS

Being called gender labels and pronouns you don't consent to can be really hurtful. Kids can understand this concept from pretty early on, that: **1.** each person should be able to decide what label is used to describe them, **2.** We shouldn't label other people without their permission, and **3.** The only person we have the permission to label is ourselves (and that's a pretty exciting thing!)

RE-IMAGINING GENDER

Talking gender is complicated. We constantly interact with gendered narratives through media that normalize particular gender expressions over others. Yet we experience our own struggles around these narratives that complicate the tidy pink and blue boxes into which people supposedly fit. Most Americans are not exposed to ways to talk about gender that don't help reinforce this **gender binary**. So in order to integrate gender talk into a re-imagining of gender representation through media, here we offer you a critical gender framework that can be brought into family and educational spaces.

Let's start at the beginning. As newborns, or for some of us through ultrasounds even before we're born, we are identified by what's between our legs. In an instant, the phrase, "it's a girl!" ties a person to a multitude of social expectations around girlhood. For many, gender assignment is also complicated by identities similarly constructed onto our bodies, like skin color or ability. Still, anatomy- specifically what our genitalia look like- directly determines the gender identity we're assigned at birth. From our first breath we are called by a certain name, referred to by a certain pronoun, dressed by our caregivers in certain clothes, and given certain toys, all according to what our bodies look like. And it's here where the conflation between *biological sex* and *gender identity* begins.

These two terms are commonly confused as one: **biological sex** and **gender identity**. They are

usually termed "*sex*" and "*gender*" and often used interchangeably in mainstream spaces. In fact, most people go on much of their lives reproducing this conflation, and gender boundaries in American culture are actually constructed to normalize this idea that biological sex and gender identity are not only one and the same, but are binary, innate, and unchangeable.

So what is the difference between sex and gender? **Biological sex** is defined by anatomy, physiology, and chromosomal makeup. But contrary to popular belief, there are actually more than two sexes. In fact, there are many **intersex people** who are marginalized by the sex categories M and F, whose anatomy, physiology and chromosomal makeup are not accounted for by the **sex binary**. While about 1 in 2000 individuals are born with "noticeable" intersex characteristics, many more individuals' bodies [exist on a spectrum](#). So, before we get to gender, it's important to note here that even biological sex is a socially constructed, binary category that often excludes and marginalizes individuals.

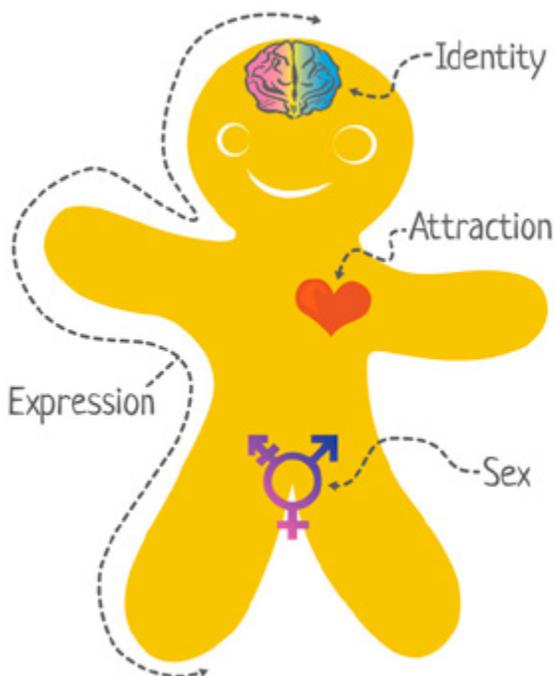
ASK, "WHO'S MISSING FROM THESE IMAGES?"

There are lots of different ways to be, and people look and express themselves very differently from one another. If a piece of media shows only one way of being, then there are a lot of people missing in this image who may not feel like this image represents them.

Gender Identity, on the other hand, is the way one thinks and feels about their gender in their own psyche. It is based on the socially constructed notion of gender, a tool used to categorize human experience and behavior. Gender identity is connected to the *experience* aspect of gender. In US society people often define gender according to the same binary as sex because most of us aren't taught that they're actually different concepts. So, the normative view of gender is, similar to biological sex, that it's either *female or male, woman or man, girl or boy*. Like sex, gender is often viewed as pre-determined and innate and individuals whose gender doesn't fit perfectly within this binary are

oppressively deemed unnatural. Yet there are so many people who are oppressed by these categories, and this assertion that the rigid gender binary is natural has led to profound discrimination and violence against trans* and gender-queer people.

A healthier way of thinking about gender identity is to respect each person's unique experience of self and their agency to define themselves in a way that makes them happy. For instance, people might *feel* female although their assigned gender at birth (based on their assigned sex) was male. In this case, they might come to identify as a **transgender woman** (also termed, *transwoman*). Another person might feel that their gender identity is consistent with the male gender they were assigned at birth, and they might identify as **cisgender man** (popularly termed "man"; for important info on this, refer to **cisprivilege** in glossary). For another individual, though, their gender identity might not be defined by any particular label, category, or binary, so they might identify as **genderqueer**. There are so many different ways to identify because gender is such a complex experience. And even within particular categories of gender identity, individuals might experience gender quite differently based on specific expectations driven by their social



Genderbread Person by itspronouncedmetrosexual.com

CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES TOGETHER

Identify and talk about stereotypes, which are "overly simple picture[s] or opinion[s] of a person, group, or things."

- For instance, try looking at only the girls in the shows your children watch and the books they read. What do these girls enjoy doing? What do they look like? How are they similar?
- Point out the stereotype (we'll use "girls like pink" as an example): "See, look how in all these stories only the girl characters like pink. That's a stereotype."
- Delegitimize the stereotype: "Mommy identifies as a woman and she doesn't like pink. Grandpa identifies as a man and he loves pink."
- Challenge the representation: "Can you think of any boy characters in our books that love pink?"
- For older children, this could lead to a conversation around what it means for a boy to like pink and why this identity isn't often represented in media.

context. For instance, cisgender women's experiences will vary greatly because of the ways other aspects of social identity (i.e. race, ethnicity, class, sexual identity, ability, etc.) drive their individual experiences of gender. In this sense, while some experiences of gender identity might overlap, each is unique and rooted in an individual's particular history.

Connected to a person's gender identity is how an individual performs or expresses gender in their daily life. This is called **gender expression**. All people perform gender with their bodies and behaviors (this is connected to the *behavior* aspect of gender) – through clothing, movements, language, speech, and so on. There are so many different ways that people express their gender and for each person, gender expression is connected to identity differently. For instance, a person might express themselves quite femininely but identify as genderqueer. Or, another person might express themselves in a particularly masculine way but identify as a cisgender woman. When talking with kids, it is important to emphasize that making assumptions about people's gender identity without their permission is unfair. Everybody should have the power

ENGAGE IN SHAME-FREE DIALOGUE

Challenging gender stereotypes can feel complicated, especially when you might identify with the same gender scripts you're learning to look at critically. When you're watching a TV show and you really want to be like this person who you know represents a really problematic stereotype, things can feel really messy. Instead of making young people feel bad for wanting to enact these scripts, make a safe space to talk through these desires with them. So much can come out of open dialogue.

to identify (or not!) with labels as they choose. A person might express these labels very differently than others with the same gender identification and it is important for children to learn how to become comfortable not labeling a person's gender identity by assessing their outward expression. Creating an understanding for children that gender does not need to be a person's most salient identifying characteristic is a vital part of fostering inclusivity, self-empowerment, and safety in peer conversations about any aspect of identity.

For a more explicit explanation of some of these labels, please refer to the glossary below.

RE-IMAGINING GENDER REPRESENTATION

Media offer youth so many messages about social boundaries and expectations through the ways gender is represented. Common representations largely normalize stereotypical gender scripts, fostering certain ideals toward which children and adults alike are pressured to live up to. These ideals are problematic in so many ways. As this Dove ad shows, [they sometimes don't even exist in real life](#). Still, there are so many gender expressions that are simply not represented in media. Their absence promotes miseducation around gender issues and enforces the idea that people must fit into particular gender categories (typically, either male or female). By broadening our critical understanding

of gender, we can then expand our expectations around what gender representation should look like in media and beyond, and challenge media to offer more diverse and, for lack of a better word, representative, representations. That doesn't just mean adding more diverse people to the pictures we already see. That means engaging young people in critical dialogue that can challenge existing representations, supporting youth of underrepresented identities to be media-makers themselves, and fostering the engagement of these voices through media. This is not just about changing representation, it's about challenging who is allowed to engage with media and how. So to get this dialogue started in your own homes, classrooms, and communities, here are some key ideas to remember when talking to children about gender representation.

1. **Offer tools.** Talking gender isn't something that comes naturally, particularly when media so adamantly reinforce gender stereotypes that adhere to the binary. In order to re-imagine, use the tools we've given in this LAMPLit to foster inquiry and critical think-



Sometimes gender ideals don't even exist in real life

GLOSSARY

cisgender

Because we live in a society that deems cisgender identity normative, cisgender people are usually called “men” or “women”. While the term is far more complicated than we can cover here, popularizing it and working it into colloquial language is a way to acknowledge the unfair privileges cisgender people have in everyday life by simply identifying as cisgender. For more on these privileges, check out Sam Killerman’s [“30+ Examples of Cisgender Privilege”](#).

genderqueer is a term used to describe people who identify with gender more fluidly than represented by the gender binary and who do not identify with “he” or “she” pronouns.

gender binary

The misconception that a person’s gender can be explained by one of two categories—girl/boy or man/woman—and that these categories are opposite from one another.

gender essentialism

People often mix up the concepts of gender identity and biological sex. Gender essentialism happens through the problematic notion that one’s gender identity is innately determined by one’s biological sex.

gender expression is the way a person behaves, enacts, or performs their gender identity through gesture, movement, dress, body shape, talk, etc.

gender identity is the way one thinks and feels about their gender in their own psyche. (There are various ways to identify, including transgender, genderqueer, bigender, agender, genderless, cisgender, etc.)

gender policing happens when an individual uses language, gesture, or other signals to enforce a gender boundary on another individual. For instance, “you can’t wear that, you’re a girl”.

intersectionality

The understanding that discrimination and oppression happens through many intersecting lenses – race, class, gender, gender identity, ability, sexuality, etc.- and that a person’s experience around gender cannot be disconnected from their experiences around race, class, and sexuality, for instance. They’re all intertwined and affect a person’s experiences of privilege and discrimination.

intersex people

Often marginalized by the sex categories M and F, intersex people are those whose anatomy, physiology and chromosomal makeup are not accounted for by the sex binary (m or f).

sex binary

The misconception that biological sex can be accounted for by only two distinct categories, male and female.

sexual identity

Often defined by one’s own gender identity in relation to the gender(s) of people they are attracted to, this is how a person defines their own romantic, physical and sexual desires toward another individual. For a rundown of the difference between gender and sexual identity, check out [Sam Killerman’s awesome TED talk](#). He’s a great resource



AUTHOR BIO

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Emily Breitkopf is a graduate student in clinical psychology at The New School for Social Research. She worked for many years as a caregiver for children and, through them, became interested in how kids interact with gender and media. She has a background in women’s studies and is on a lifelong pursuit to make people more comfortable talking about messy gender issues. You can find some of her work on the LAMP’s blog and can follow her on Twitter [@emilybreitkopf](#).

to further investigate how to talk about issues of gender & sexuality.

transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses many people who do not identify as cisgender

transphobia

The discrimination of people who identify and express themselves differently than through the lens of the gender binary. An example of transphobia is laughing at a little boy for wearing a dress.

RESOURCES

- *Killing Us Softly* by Jean Kilbourne
jeankilbourne.com/videos
- Gender Expression overview from Teaching Tolerance
tolerance.org/lesson/gender-expression
- Activities for K–2 students on media literacy & gender
tolerance.org/supplement/watch-it-grades-k-2
- *Gender Representation in the Media, and Sexualization* by the Representation Project
missrepresentation.org/about-us/resources/gender-resources
- *Are Parents Responsible for Black Friday Madness?* by Emily Breitkopf
thelampnyc.org/2011/11/30/are-parents-responsible-for-black-friday-madness
- Dove: Evolution video
youtube.com/watch?v=hibyAJOSW8U
- The Genderbread Person v2.0
itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2-0
- *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, book by Peggy Orenstein
peggyorenstein.com/books/cinderella.html
- Miss Representation film website
missrepresentation.org/the-film
- *How common is intersex?* by the Intersex Society of North America
isna.org/faq/frequency
- *Understanding the Complexities of Gender*, TED talk by Sam Killerman
itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/05/my-ted-talk-understanding-the-complexities-of-gender
- *30+ Examples of Cisgender Privilege* by Sam Killerman
itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/list-of-cisgender-privileges