

Portrayals of Females in Sports Picture Books

An Examination of Children's Picture Books with Sports Themes

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What woman must learn to assume is that she is not confined to the role of the princess; that the hero, who awakens Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, is that part of herself that awakens conventional girlhood to the possibility of life and action.

— Carolyn G. Heilbrun
Reinventing Womanhood

Introduction

For the past two years, researchers at Melpomene have been focusing on the importance of physical activity to adolescent girls. The findings of our research in this area reflect a strong link between physical activity and positive self-esteem, feelings of competence and self-confidence.

Although we are encouraged to find that physical activity and sports are a means to self-worth for girls, we are also discouraged by reports that girls are dropping out of sports at a rapid rate during the late adolescent years (see report on p. 19).

Further, girls have very few women role models who reflect the positive aspects of sports involvement. As a result, most girls do not aspire to careers in the sports arena, neither as athletes or as sportscasters, athletic directors and exercise physiologists.

Encouragement to be active in sports and exposure to role models are two of the primary factors influencing a girl to be active and to remain active into her teen years. Exposing girls, their parents and their teachers to positive role models in children's literature is a good way to encourage girls to be physically active.

The subject of the following report is sports-themed picture books for very young children (under grade two). The report examines the percentage of books devoted to males or females or both, compares portrayals of the competence of males and females and discusses the values and role models presented in the books.

Research Methodology

Sample Population

Our objective was to analyze the written and pictorial portrayals of girls' or women's activities, values and attitudes in sports-

related picture books aimed at children under the grade two reading level.

Our sample was drawn from the sports category of the latest edition of *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books*, which includes the Minneapolis Public Library's list of new books published since 1989. *A to Zoo* is the most comprehensive, up-to-date collection of its kind, and it includes out-of-print books that are largely collected by schools and public libraries.

Sampling Method

The list of picture books in *A to Zoo* is arranged by author's name in alphabetical order within sports subcategories. We used the systematic random sampling method, a standard content analysis methodology (see Budd & Thorp 1963:8; Babbie 1992:211-218). An even number starting point was randomly decided by flipping a coin, and then we selected every other book in the list. If the even-numbered book was not available, we substituted the odd-numbered book before it. If both books were not available, we excised them from the sample. In the end, out of the total 255 picture books categorized under sports, we gathered a sample of 105 books for our research.

The Sample

The 105-book sample was made up of books published from 1952 to 1992. Four books were published in the 1950s; 10 were published in the 1960s; 24 in the 1970s; 63 in the 1980s; four in the 1990s. The sample contains 23 popular sports, except hockey, roller skating and soccer (these sports appeared in only one book in the population list).

Research Measurement

For each book, we designed a coding sheet consisting of our observations regarding:

- 1) factual information;
- 2) the role of female characters;
- 3) comparisons of sports competence between female and male characters in the book;
- 4) values portrayed in the sports activities of female characters;
- 5) role models presented in the book, if any; and
- 6) a qualitative assessment of the book's overall theme or message and worth.

Research Interests

The design of our coding sheet was based on the following research interests:

First, we needed factual information about the books for recording purposes. This included: author, illustrator, title, publisher, type of sport, year of publication, illustration or photo, fiction or non-fiction (including biography), people or animals or both as characters in the book.

Second, we wanted to know:

1) What proportion of these sports picture books is devoted to females as the sole or major characters. "Females as sole characters" means that the girls or women are the only characters in the book.

"Females as the major characters" means that although both genders appear in the story, females are the most active and important. Both "females as sole characters" and "females as major characters" are referred to as "females dominant" in the tables.

2) What proportion is devoted to boys or men as major or sole characters. This is referred to as "males dominant" in the tables.

3) What proportion presents boys and girls or men and women as equally active and important. This is referred to as "gender equal" in the tables.

4) What proportion presents the genders as unidentifiable, either because they are animals or because they simply

are not indicated by text or pictures. This is identified as "gender unid." in the tables.

Third, we were interested in finding out how these books compare girls' and boys' or women's and men's competence in sports. What percentage of these books directly portray by text that females are better than males in sports; males are better than females; or that females and males are equally good in sports? (Or is there no direct comparison in the book?)

Fourth, our concern about the values portrayed in the sports activities of females led to the following questions:

Are the values portrayed in books with females as major or sole characters different from those portrayed in books with males as the major or sole characters? We compiled a broad range of value categories based on:

1) a widely accepted list of American core values (Shiffman & Kanuk, 1991: 410-424),

2) a list of traditional stereotyped gender values (Rudman 1984: 102), and

3) a list of sports values suggested by our pilot study.

The values we chose to examine were:

"competence," "success/achievement," "progress," "social acceptance," "confidence," "courage," "tenacity/hardworking," "ambition," "independence," "individualism," "wisdom," "honesty," "self-control," "assertiveness," "active," "strong," "fit/healthy," "friendship," "family affiliation," "respect for role model(s)," "sports are fun," "enjoy nature/animals."

Fifth, we were interested in the gender distribution of role models.

Finally, we examined each book by impressionistic and intuitive means. This was to supplement the above quantitative methods, which were conducted in order to produce scientifically reliable results and to allow other researchers to repeat our study at a future time or replicate it on a different sample of texts. Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that quantitative content analysis cannot fully measure many abstract — yet inestimably important — aspects of human life, arts and literature. In our case, the strong advocacy of certain values, the literary uniqueness of the book, the vividness of the imagery, the intricate subtleties of its attitudes and symbolic environment and its overall worth to young readers were considered in the qualitative section of our research.

Results

The Gender of Dominant Characters

Distribution of Genders

Almost three times as many picture books have males as the only or major characters (58%) as have females as the only or major characters (20%) (see Table 1).

More than three times as many books are devoted to males as the only or major characters (58%) than have males and females as equal characters (gender equal, 16%).

Males as the only characters appear four times as often (24%) as females as the only characters (6%).

Books with males as the major characters are more than twice as numerous (34%) as those with females as the major characters (14%).

Distribution of Portrayals of Females and Males

Gender Portrayed	# of Books	%
Males dominant	61	58
Males only	25	24
males major	36	34
Females dominant	21	20
Females only	6	6
Females major	15	14
Males & females equal	17	16
Gender unidentified	6	6

Table 1

Changes in Distribution over Time

Females began to appear in our sample of children's picture books in those books published in the 1970s (see Table 2). With the exception of a book with an animal character whose gender was not made explicit, the books published in the 1950s and 1960s contained boys or men as the only characters.

The absolute number of books with females as the dominant characters increased from the 1970s to the 1980s, but by only 4.6%.

The percentage of books that portrayed the genders equally barely increased (.7%), a statistically insignificant change.

The proportion of books with males as the dominant characters dropped from 100% in the 1960s to 54.2% in the 1970s and 52.4% in the 1980s. Note that the figure stabilized over the last two decades, as did the proportion of books that portray the genders equally.

Slightly more than one-half (52.4%) of the books published in the 1980s had males as the dominant characters; about a quarter (25.4%) of the books published in that decade had females as the dominant characters, and about one-sixth (17.4%) of them depicted the genders equally.

Summary

In picture books for young readers, girls and women are much less frequently portrayed participating in sports activities than males. Young girls have had at least two-thirds fewer same-sex literary role models for their participation in sports than young boys.

Over time, the percentage of sports-themed books devoted to girls or women did increase from the baseline of zero in the 1950s and 1960s; however, compared with books devoted to boys or men, girls and women are still largely under-represented. In the 1980s, twice as many books with boys or men as the only or major characters were published than with girls or women as the only or major characters.

Male and Female Characters by Decade

Decade	# of Books	% Males Dom.	% Females Dom.	% Genders Equal	% Gender Unid.
1950-'59	4	75	0	0	25
1960-'69	10	100	0	0	0
1970-'79	24	54.2	20.8	16.7	8.3
1980-'89	63	52.4	25.4	17.4	4.8

Table 2

Note: The number of samples published in the 1990s is so small (only 4 books) that statistical comparisons are not meaningful and won't be made. Few books were published in the 1950s and the sample size is too small for statistical significance. Data about books published in the 1950s is included, however, because it may be suggestive.

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Comparisons of Portrayals of Male and Female Sports Competence

In many books with males as the major characters, girls and women are presented as subordinate characters (e.g., mom cooking at home, young sisters staying at home, aunt or grandma watching the boys, girls outside the play yard, girls watching boys play football or baseball or racing cars, fishing or hunting). These books accord a cheerleading or support function to females and suggest that females are less active and competent in sports than males.

In examining the books for portrayals of sports competence, we looked for and then compared the capabilities of males and females engaging in sports, playing well and/or succeeding.

Comparisons of Sports Competence

The majority of the books with characters of both genders (75%) have no direct comparative message (see Table 3). However, 44% of the books have males as the major characters, which renders females absent from sports activities. This constitutes an indirect comparative message.

When direct comparisons are made between males and females, a higher percentage of books portray females as better than males (13%) than the opposite (2%).

Summary

Even though a higher *percentage* of those books that directly compare the sports competence of males and females portray females as better than males, the force and influence of that comparison is weakened by the fact that a much smaller *number* of books contain female characters who are even capable of such comparison.

Even without direct comparison, the portrayal of female characters in support positions or as absent from sports activities reinforces traditional gender role divisions that tend to discourage girls from sports activities.

Sports Competence over Time

The message that females are better than males did not appear until the late 1960s (see Table 4). This message hit its highest proportion (23%) in the 1970s. The absolute number of books with the

Portrayals of Female and Male Sports Competence

Comparison of Competence	#	%
No Direct Comparison	51	75
Males major	30	44
Females major	9	13
Gender equal	12	18
Direct Comparison*	17	25
Females are better	9	13
Both equally good	7	10
Males are better	1	2

*Direct comparisons are possible only when both males and females are in the story. Our sample contained 68 books with both males and females in them.

Table 3

message that females are better increased over time. The portion in the 1980s (12%) dropped back to the 1960's level (14%).

The message that females and males are equally good also began to appear in the late 1960s. Unlike the message that females are better, the message of equality dropped to its lowest level (8%) in the 1970s. The number of books saying that males and females are equally good in sports competence increased significantly in the 1980s but their percentage in every decade did not change significantly.

Over time, the proportions of the messages that females are as good as or better than males combined together are relatively stable ('60s: 28%; '70s: 31%; '80s: 24%), with the 1970s slightly higher, and the 1980s slightly lower than that of the 1960s.

Portrayals of Female and Male Sports Competence over Time

Decade	# of Books	% of Males Better	% of Females Better	% of Equally Good	% of No Comparison
1950s	1	0	0	0	100
1960s	7	0	14	14	71
1970s	13	0	23	8	69
1980s	43	2	12	12	74

The sample size for those books published in the 1990s is too small for statistical significance.

Table 4

Over time, with the exception of one case that appeared in a book published in the 1980s, none of the books contained a *direct* message saying that males are better than females.

Direct comparisons between the genders increased from 0% in the 1950s to around 70% during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Summary

The books contained virtually no direct messages stating that males are better than females in sports competence.

Indirect messages indicating males are more competent than females were predominant in the 1960s. This message was much weaker in the 1970s than in the 1960s, but it still remained very strong in the 1980s. For example, boys are shown going camping while girls stay at home; in an Alaska village, men go fishing while mother and sisters cook at home.

In the 1980s, more stories portrayed girls and boys playing together, with some being competent at one thing and some at another (For example, in *Louanne Pig in Making the Team*, Louanne is good at catching the ball; Arnie is good at cheerleading). Some portray girls and boys enjoying sports together without any comparison (For example, one book shows boys and girls, men and women, skating together).

The highest proportion of books containing the message that females are better than males was published in the 1970s, which coincided with the resurgence of the feminist movement, but the strongest comparative message appeared in books published in the 1980s.

Most of the books with females as the dominant characters (16 out of 21 books) contain direct messages that females are better than males or that females and males are equally good at sports. It seems that stories dedicated to girls or women as the dominant characters are the stories advocating that girls and women can or should be active and competent in sports.

Values Portrayed in Relation to the Gender of Characters

In addition to noting the percentage of books that contain females as dominant

characters and the portrayals of female and male sports competence, we examined the values that were advocated in the literature.

Findings about Values

The values of "success/achievement," "competence," "family affiliation," "sports are fun," "being active" and "tenacity/hardworking" are the top six values in books in which females are the dominant characters (see Table 5).

The values of "fit/healthy," "strong" and "respect for role model" are largely overlooked in books in which females are the dominant characters.

Books in which males are the dominant characters placed higher value on "friendship," "courage" and "social acceptance" than did books in which females are the dominant characters.

Books in which females are the dominant characters more often depict the values of "family affiliation," "independence" and "tenacity/hardworking" than do books in which males are the dominant characters.

Changes in Values over Time

In books published in the 1970s and 1980s in which females are the dominant characters, the values of being "successful" and being "competent" appear very often.

However, in books published in the 1980s, the values of "family affiliation," "sports are fun" and "loving nature and animals" appear more often, and the values of "progress" and "courage" appear somewhat more often than they do in books published in the 1970s.

Summary

As a whole, books in which females are the dominant characters are more likely to strongly advocate values (except for "courage" and "friendship") than books in which males are the dominant characters. But the number of books in which females are the dominant characters (21) is just one-third of those in which males are the dominant characters (61).

Distribution of Values by Gender

Values	Males Dominant	Females Dominant	Genders Equal
Success /achievement	61%	81%	65%
Competence	39%	57%	71%
Progress	21%	19%	18%
Social acceptance	30%	24%	35%
Wisdom	15%	29%	18%
Courage	36%	19%	29%
Confidence	26%	29%	35%
Independence	16%	29%	6%
Individualism	11%	14%	18%
Tenacity /hardworking	34%	43%	29%
Ambition	11%	14%	18%
Self-control	5%	14%	18%
Being active	26%	48%	35%
Being strong	8%	10%	12%
Being fit/healthy	2%	5%	12%
Sports are fun	30%	48%	53%
Friendship	48%	29%	35%
Family affiliation	39%	76%	53%
Respect for role model	13%	10%	29%
Love nature /animals	11%	24%	18%

Table 5

The Gender of Role Models

Findings Regarding the Gender of Role Models

Three times as many of the 105 books contain only male role models as contain only female role models and role models of both genders (see Table 6).

Even in books in which females are the dominant characters, male role models occur more often than female models do, in a ratio of three to two. In books in which males are the dominant characters, the ratio is approximately 13:2.

Books in which females are the dominant characters have more role models (62%) than books in which males are the dominant characters (49%). Books in which females are the dominant characters have more female role models than do books in which males are the dominant characters.

Almost half (49%) of the total books (105) portray no sports role models at all.

The Distribution of Role Models

Role Model	% of Males Dominant	% of Females Dominant	% of Genders Equal
Male	38	29	18
Female	3	19	23.5
Both	8	14	23.5
None	51	38	35

Table 6

Changes in the Gender of Role Models over Time

Female role models only and female and male role models together increased significantly, from none in the 1950s to 11% and 14%, respectively, in the 1980s (see Table 7).

Male role models only increased from the 1950s to the 1970s (25% to 38%) but dropped back in the 1980s (29%).

The number of role models increased steadily over time from 25% in the 1950s to 54% in the 1980s.

Genders of Role Models by Decade

Decade	# of Books	% of Female Models	% of Male Models	% of Both	% of No Models
1950s	4	0	25	0	75
1960s	10	0	30	10	60
1970s	24	4	38	4	54
1980s	63	11	28	14	44

Table 7

Summary

While role models of either gender appear infrequently in young children's sports picture books, male role models do predominate. Images of female role models have increased since the 1950s, but female role models were still largely under-represented in the 1980s (11%).

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Conclusions

Out of the sample of 105 books, only 20% feature girls or women as the dominant characters. Fifty-eight percent contain males as the dominant characters.

Books with girls or women as the dominant characters did not appear until the 1970s. From 1970 to 1980, the percentage of this type of book increased from 20.8% to 25.4%, but girls and women are still underrepresented in these books. During the same time period, the values of "sports are fun," "family affiliation," "courage" and "progress" increased significantly. Books with female role models increased from 4% to 11%, while those with females and males as role models increased from 4% to 14% during the last two decades.

Direct statements that males are better than females are not common in young children's sports picture books, but that message is conveyed indirectly by the large number of stories in which males are the only characters or women are passive characters. This situation has improved since the 1950s. However, more improvement is necessary before encouragement to participate in sports will be equitable.

The six values most often portrayed in books with females as dominant characters are "success/achievement," "family affiliation," "competence," "being active," "enjoying sports" and "tenacity/hard-working." The values least often portrayed are "assertiveness," "fit/healthy," "respect for role models," "being (physically) strong," "courage," "progress" and "self-control." Other values commonly associated with males, such as "confidence," "independence" and "wisdom" are also highly regarded in books in which girls are the dominant characters. But there are far fewer of these books than there are of books featuring predominantly male characters.

Only 10% of the picture books have females as the role models, and 11% have females and males as the role models. We categorized 28 of the books as books that encourage girls to participate in physical activities.

Although the number of female role models in the books has increased over time, role models of either gender are

largely absent from books in which girls are the only or the major characters. Girls need more role models, especially of the same gender, to provide more encouragement to overcome difficulties and more instruction to learn things faster and better, to provide examples for their pursuits and to build up their confidence and self-esteem. Exposing girls, their parents and their teachers to positive role models in children's literature is a good way to encourage girls to be physically active.

Recommended Books

Out of our sample of 105 books, we found 28 that we believe encourage girls to participate in sports. They show girls or women actively participating in sports, boys and girls as equally active and sometimes competent in sports, or kids enjoying their parents, friends or teachers' care and support for their sports activities.

Books That Show Girls Being Active

- Parish, Peggy. 1972. *Play Ball, Amelia Bedelia*. Harper Trophy.
- Schulman, Janet. 1978. *Jenny and the Tennis Nut*. Greenwillow Books.
- Schulman, Janet. 1979. *Camp KeeWee's Secret Weapon*. Greenwillow Books.
- Carrick, Carol. 1980. *The Climb*. Houghton Mifflin/Clarion Books.
- Sachs, Marilyn. 1981. *Fleet-Footed Florence*. Doubleday & Co., Inc.
- Andersen, Karen Born. 1981. *What's the Matter, Sylvie, Can't You Ride?* Dial Press.
- Stren, Patti. 1982. *Mountain Rose*. E. P. Dutton.
- Peterson, Esther Allen. 1982. *Penelope Gets Wheels*. Crown Publishers, Inc.
- Kellogg, Steven. 1982. *Tallyho, Pinkerton*. Dial Press.
- Tinkelman, Murray. 1984. *Cowgirl*. Greenwillow Books.
- Bruna, Dick. 1984. *Miffy's Bicycle*. Dick Bruna Books, Inc.
- Parish, Peggy. 1985. *Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping*. Greenwillow Books.
- Bang, Molly. 1988. *Delphine*. Morrow, Junior Books.
- Schwartz, Henry. 1989. *How I Captured a Dinosaur*. Orchard Books.

Books That Show Women Being Active

- Goffstein, M.B. 1976. *Fish for Supper*. Dial Press.
- Reimold, Gallapher 1981. *My Mom Is a Runner*. Abingdom Press.
- Lasky, Kathryn. 1988. *Sea Swan*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Curtis, Garin. 1990. *Grandma's Baseball*. Crown Publishers, Inc.

Books with Encouraging Role Models

- Griffith, Helen V. 1987. *Granddaddy's Place*. Greenwillow Books.
- Martin, Bill and Archambault, John. 1986. *White Dynamite and Curly Kedd*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Brown, Marc. 1988. *D. W. All Wet*. Joy Street Books.

Books That Show Girls and Boys Being Equally Active and Competent

- Kessler, Leonard. 1969. *Last One in Is a Rotten Egg*. Harper & Row.
- Lexau, Joan. 1976. *I'll Tell on You*. E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- Adams, Adrienne. 1980. *The Great Valentine's Day Balloon Race*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Carlson, Nancy. 1985. *Louanne Pig in Making the Team*. Carolrhoda Books.

Books That Show People Enjoying Sports

- Say, Allen. 1982. *The Bicycle Man*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Carlson, Nancy. 1987. *Bunnies and Their Sports*. Viking Penguin, Inc.
- Gould, Deborah. 1992. *Camping in the Temple of the Sun*. Bradbury Press.

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