Gender-Role Stereotyping in Children’s Literature
Gender stereotyping in children’s literature is a problem that is as common today as it has been in previous decades. It has been proven time and again that these stereotypes and biases negatively affect the development of gender roles and identity in children, but the issue still plagues literature today. Stereotypes in children’s literature, especially picture books, are so influential because the young children who are reading these books are at an extremely impressionable age. Although these biased books are still being published today, public libraries and children’s librarians in particular, can serve to help reduce the influence these stereotypes have as well as minimize their negative impacts.

Children’s literature in general is an extremely influential form of learning. Children are looking at and processing the material presented in these books at an age when they are beginning to formulate ideas about their culture, society, and values (Worland, 2008, 42). The images and text presented in these books serve as models for children as to what the roles of people in their society should be. Not only do children use books to form ideas about others, but they also use them to form ideas about themselves (Tepper and Cassidy, 1999, 265).

An added fact about children’s literature is that the same story is often listened to repeatedly, which increases the probability that the message, good or bad, will be adopted into their world view. Picture books, with their vivid illustrations, glossy pages, and engaging text, are appealing and all children are fond of them. These books increase the problem of stereotypical messages being assumed because their message is heard twice, through the words and then the illustrations (Worland, 2008, 42).

Children’s literature is also influential at this point in life because children are at a developmental stage in which they are forming their gender-role identities (Tsao, 2008, 109).
Since a child uses the images viewed in these books to form ideas about the world around them, they will also use the images in these books to understand who they are. If the gender-role identities presented to children are biased, their self-concept will be inevitably skewed to model the roles they saw or heard in their favorite story.

Gender identity is defined as an individual’s self-conception as being male or female (Gender Identity, 2010). Gender roles are the set of attitudes and behaviors that are socially expected from the members of a particular gender identity (Gender Roles, 2010). A young child will identify with a gender and then learn how that gender is expected to act from different cues in their society. They will learn these actions from what they see on television, how they see adults and siblings around them act, and from the things that they read and absorb visually. The ways in which children are learning their gender roles can also be referred to as socialization. The process of socialization plays a large part in developing the roles children assume and the behaviors that go along with these roles (Tsao, 2008, 108).

Gender stereotypes are biases that are formed regarding children’s gender roles based on what they are exposed to at a young age. According to Tepper and Cassidy, by the age of three, children are able to distinguish males from females, and by the age of five, many children have already formed strong gender stereotypes (1999). Considering how often children are read to at this age, it is easy to see how influential a story and its characters can be on a child’s perception of gender roles and stereotypes. Gender stereotypes that are repeated constantly in literature will undoubtedly have a negative effect on the way children perceive themselves and the people around them. Continually being exposed to gender stereotypes can have a long term, negative impact on a child and their development of self-esteem.
In the case of gender stereotyping and children’s literature, the effects on young impressionable minds can be lifelong and devastating, especially to their self-esteem and self-perception. Not only do gender stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves, they can also limit a child’s growth and potential development (Tsao, 2008, 112).

Gender stereotyping in children’s literature will provide inaccurate role models for children and it can shape their behaviors throughout their lives. The exposure to gender stereotyping at an early age can be so influential it can affect the jobs and occupations children choose later in life (Worland, 2008, 43). Studies have found that children’s books with a gender bias can give boys a sense of entitlement and it can lower girls’ occupational aspirations. Additionally, gender stereotyping can frame a child's idea of what their future roles as parents will be, as well as influence their personality characteristics (Hamilton et al., 2006, 758).

In a society where men are being paid more for doing the same jobs as women as well as climbing the corporate ladder at a significantly quicker pace, everything in our power needs to be done to ensure young girls are able to reach their full potential. Literature with gender stereotypes will most definitely prevent this from happening.

Males and females alike are portrayed as stereotyped in children’s literature, but unfortunately females bear the brunt of the negative stereotypes. Although females are stereotyped more often than men, both genders do experience negative effects based on these portrayals. Generally speaking, in most children’s picture books, males dominate the titles, pictures, and texts. Female characters are under-represented in titles and when they do appear, they are perceived as unimportant. Male characters are usually described as powerful, active and
creative, whereas female characters are described as dependent, emotional, and unintelligent (Tsao, 2008, 109-111).

Since gender stereotypes usually portray men as strong and powerful, it can be questioned why this can be seen as negative. These sorts of stereotypes can put undue pressure on boys to be strong, brave and emotionally unexpressive. They can also be affected by the portrayal of women in these stories by giving them limited ideas about females’ potential (Worland, 2008, 43). Effects such as these can lead to boys that grow into men who bottle their emotions, which can potentially have damaging psychological effects.

An astounding amount of research has been done over the past decades that have been devoted to determining if gender stereotypes in children’s literature exist. Research has established that indeed these stereotypes do exist and they are found everywhere. Some specific examples that have been studied for gender stereotypes include Caldecott medal winners, non-award winning books, and fairy tales.

The Caldecott medal is awarded annually by the Caldecott Committee of the Association for Library Services to Children. It is given to the artist of the most distinguished picture book of that year. There are fifteen members on the committee and they are recognized for having excellent skills at evaluating children’s books (Clark et al., 2003, 441).

Caldecott winners and nominees have been the source of heavy focus for research studies because these books are considered highly influential in children’s literature. The Caldecott award is very prestigious and winning it pretty much guarantees that book stores and libraries will carry the title.
The first study in the category of Caldecott winners was considered groundbreaking in this field because it was the first of its kind. It was conducted by Weitzman et al. in 1972 and it examined the winners and runners-up of the Caldecott medal from 1967 to 1971 (1972). They found that female characters were under-represented in every sample of books. Male characters were often found outdoors, playing and being adventurous. Female characters were found indoors, being portrayed as passive (Weitzman et al., 1972, 1131-1132).

After the Weitzman study, the occurrence of gender stereotyping in children’s literature seemed to decrease slightly, but not in any significant manner. Williams et al. did a study in 1987 on Caldecott winners and found that female characters had steadily gained greater visibility from 1974 to 1985 (1987). Males were more visible than females, but the male-to-female ratios had begun to inch closer to equality. However, just because females were pictured more, doesn’t mean that the roles they were pictured in weren’t stereotypical of traditional women’s roles. Females did move away from domestication, but the occupational differences were still quite evident (Williams et. al, 1987, 155)

Non-award winning books have been studied in addition to Caldecott books, but not quite as frequently. Non-award winning books have been considered important to study because they make up a huge portion of the materials in public libraries. In mostly all cases, children will be reading more non-award winning books than they will be reading Caldecott winners since there is only one Caldecott winner per year.

Regarding non-award winning books it has been found that male characters are represented significantly more often than female characters in titles, central roles, and in pictures.
However, the findings of gender stereotyping in these books are not quite as drastic as the findings in Caldecott winning books (Hamilton et al., 2006, 759).

A study conducted by Poarch and Monk-Turner found that in non-award winning books, female characters were depicted with household items far more often than male characters (2001). Males were rarely shown engaging in household activities. They did find however, that the occurrence of females engaging in activities outside of the home was increasing (Poarch and Monk-Turner, 2001, 75). This could be evidence that non-award winning books, the books that children are more likely to read, depict less stereotypes than the award winning books.

Fairy tales are a genre of storytelling that is considered interesting to study for gender stereotypes because they have been around for centuries. Fairy tales can be seen everywhere even today, where preschools are including fairytales in their curriculum, public libraries are using fairy tales for preschool programming, and major movies are telling and retelling fairytales almost every year.

Fairy tales contain shared beliefs about gender roles held by a child’s society and they can be extremely influential in the development of gender identity (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, 38-39). These stories show women as beautiful objects who have no power to alter the events in their lives. Men are seen as powerful people who are in control of their own destiny. Women are weak, submissive, and dependent, whereas men are powerful, active, and dominant. The women who are powerful in these tales are seen as ugly and evil (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, 39).

Take for example the tale of Sleeping Beauty. A beautiful princess is cursed by an evil witch into an endless sleep that will last until she is kissed by a handsome prince who is her true
love. This story has all of the elements of gender stereotyping in fairy tales. The witch is obviously very powerful, but she is seen as ugly and evil. The princess is beautiful and since she is cursed to sleep forever, she is seen as helpless and basically pathetic. The person who saves the day is a handsome, powerful prince; a man with status, money, and admiration.

Even though there have been many studies into gender stereotyping in children’s literature that could have brought significant change to this issue, the present state is almost the same as it was forty years ago. Males are still being pictured more often than females. Additionally, recent studies have found that female characters are portrayed more often than not as the person dedicated to domestic chores and leisure activities (Tsao, 2008, 112). These biases have also been shown to exist today in picture books that depict the role of the parent. Fathers are grossly under-represented and are shown as stoic figures who take little part in their children’s lives (Anderson and Hamilton, 2005, 149-150).

Interestingly, there does seem to be a disparity in notable books chosen by the ALA from 1995 to 1999 and the books that are considered to be best sellers from the beginning of the 21st century. Gooden and Gooden conducted a study on ALA notable children’s books and found that the prevalence of gender stereotypes had decreased slightly and females were depicted as main characters about the same amount of times as males were (2001). Females were listed as main characters in 40% of the books and males in 39% of the books.

On the contrary, Hamilton et al. looked at 200 of the best-selling books from the beginning of the 21st century and found that males were depicted 95 times compared to females only being depicted 52 times (2006). This discrepancy in books chosen by the ALA and best-selling books is interesting to note because it shows that the ALA is choosing more well rounded
books for their most notable book lists. This could potentially be something that libraries should consider and choose more books that are based off of the ALA’s most notable books rather than just choosing the best-selling books of the year.

One form of gender stereotyping, occupational stereotyping is still quite prevalent in the literature today. Men are seen more often in non-traditional jobs and women are seen more in traditional jobs. Females are seen more as teachers, stewardesses, librarians, and maids, which are roles that are traditionally seen as female dominated (Hamilton et al., 2006, 764).

Although children’s literature is still depicting gender stereotypes, there are efforts that have started to steer children away from these types of books. In 2002, the Feminist Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association began the Amelia Bloomer Project. This project publishes a list of books each year, divided by age groups, which are appealing and essentially free of gender stereotypes. Another organization, founded in 1993, is called Barefoot Books. This company produces book lists that are focused on multicultural material that is free of gender biases (Worland, 2008, 45).

Although it may seem futile, public librarians can play a role in decreasing the exposure children have to gender stereotyped materials, thereby reducing the negative effects these books have. The first thing children’s librarians need to consider is collection development. Librarians need to uncompromisingly collect fiction that portrays females in non-stereotypical roles (Abilock, 1997, 17). Librarians should become familiar with the resources for non-gendered book lists discussed above and be sure to select appealing titles from these lists.

Characters in the books that are chosen for the collection should have distinct personalities that don’t fall into the traps of gender stereotyping. These characters, both male and
female, should be well rounded and seen engaging in a multitude of activities. Since the libraries current collection will undoubtedly contain materials that have some degree of gender stereotyping, these books should be used as examples in discussions with children to show how genders should and should not be portrayed (Tsao, 2008, 113).

Programming at the public library can also be used as a tool to reduce the effects of gender stereotypes. New books that are introduced into the collection that are non-gendered can be the basis of story times and book discussions with children. These books should be selected to be read aloud instead of the traditional stereotyped books. In addition, guest storytellers and hosts for special events at the library should be equally balanced among men and women (Abilock, 1997, 17). This will show children that roles in and around the library aren’t always limited to one gender, females in particular.

Although many gender biased books are still being published today, public libraries and children’s librarians in particular, can serve to help reduce the influence the stereotypes portrayed in these books have as well as minimize their negative impacts. Gender stereotyping is something that should never be tolerated, especially considering the detrimentally negative effects these stereotypes can have on the psychological development of children.


