



CANADA'S CENTRE  
FOR DIGITAL AND  
MEDIA LITERACY

## Talking to Kids about Racial Stereotypes

Racial stereotypes abound on television, and children's programming is no exception. The turban-wearing bad guy, the brainy Asian, and the Black basketball whiz are just a few of the stereotypes reinforced in children's cartoons, films and TV shows. Spotting these stereotypes is often difficult for children; to them, the tomahawk-wielding Indian or the Asian karate expert is a familiar, easily-understood and often funny character. So how do you help children understand these images for what they are – oversimplified, generalizations?

Here are some tips:

- Look closely at the characters children see. What messages do they send concerning race, gender, and roles? Voice your disapproval of stereotyped characters, and explain why you disapprove. Ask children to compare the images of race they see on television, with the people they know in real life. How are they different?
- When you see stereotypes in your children's media, explain that when one member of a group is portrayed in a particular way it isn't a problem, but when most or all members of that group are shown that way it can limit how we see other that – and can limit how we see ourselves. In some cases, stereotypes can make us see members of a group just as cartoons and not real people.
- Listen closely, with children, to the voices of the bad characters in cartoons. Do they have an accent? What about the good, kind, sweet characters? Among good characters, which are presented as "normal", and easy to identify with, and which are presented as being different?
- Deconstruct the "media reality." Talk with kids about the people behind the programs they watch. It can be an eye-opener for children to realize that TV shows, like books, are written and created by people with their own biases and experiences. When you watch a program with children, ask them to think about who created the show and whether they think the writers and producers really understood the types of people they are portraying or whether they're basing characters on preconceived notions about groups of people.
- Critique other media. Look at the ads for cars, clothing and sports equipment in newspapers, magazines and billboards. Talk to your child about how the product is glamorized and which audiences are targeted. Who is represented in these ads as the consumer? Why are certain ethnic groups linked to certain products? Take a look at running shoe ads, for example. Why are Black athletes often portrayed "shooting hoops" and goofing around the gym, while white athletes are shown doing serious training?



- Use history as a tool. Help your child understand the real-life history behind many fictionalized stories. When you watch something that's drawn from history and has a depiction of diversity, find a non-fiction kids' book on the subject and look at how the story was changed. Use that as a way to help your child understand how the medium (TV, movies, etc.) and genre (animation, historical drama, etc.) affect how the story is told.
- Find programs that counter stereotypes. As much as television can stereotype people, it can also help to break down barriers. Look for shows where the cultures and talents of individuals from different races are emphasized in a positive fashion.

