

# 10 Quick Ways to Check for Racism and Sexism in the Media

Both in and out of school, young people are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes, expressed repeatedly in the media, gradually distort perceptions until stereotypes and myths about people of color and women are accepted as reality.

The following guidelines can be used to evaluate movies and books and help students, parents and teachers detect racism and sexism.

## 1. Look for Stereotypes

Stereotyping denies students knowledge of the diversity, complexity and variation of any group of individuals. Children who see themselves portrayed in stereotypical ways may internalize these stereotypes and fail to develop their own unique abilities, interests and full potential.

Look for stereotypes, oversimplified generalizations about a particular group, race or sex, which usually have derogatory implications.

## 2. Look for Tokenism

If people of color characters appear in illustrations, do they look like white people except for being tinted or colored? Do all people of color look stereotypically alike or are they depicted as individuals with distinctive features?

Look for active doers. Are the people of color and women in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers?

## 3. Check the Story Line

Racist and sexist portrayals of people of color can find expression in subtle forms of bias such as:

- Standard for Success: Are “white” behavior standards required for people of color to get ahead? Is “making it” in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal?
- Resolution of Problems: How are problems presented, conceived and resolved? Are people of color considered to be “the problem”? Are poverty and oppression presented as inevitable? Are problems faced by racial minorities or females resolved through the benevolence of a white person or male?
- Role of Women: Are the achievements of women and girls based on initiative and intelligence or good looks? Could the same story be told if gender roles were reversed?

## 4. Look at the Life-Styles

Are other cultures oversimplified or do they offer genuine insights into other life-styles? Look for inaccuracies and inappropriateness in the depictions of other cultures. Watch for “quaint-natives-in-costumes” syndrome, which is noticeable in clothing, customs, behaviors and personality traits.

## **5. Weigh the Relationships Among People**

Do whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership and make the important decisions? Do people of color and females of all races primarily function in supporting roles?

In black families is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families are there always many children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions such as unemployment and poverty cited as the reasons for the separation? Are both sexes portrayed in nurturing roles with their families?

## **6. Consider the Effects on Self-Image**

Are norms established which limit any child's aspirations and self-concept? What effect can it have on African American children to be continually bombarded with the images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, and virtue and the color black as evil, dirty, and menacing? Is the positive association with the color white and negative association with the color black reinforced or counteracted?

In a particular story, are there one or more persons with whom a minority child can readily and positively identify?

## **7. Watch for Loaded Words and Sexist Language**

Loaded words have insulting, often racist overtones such as savage, primitive, conniving, lazy, superstitious, crafty, inscrutable, wily, docile and backward.

Generic use of the word man while accepted in the past, is outmoded today.

Sexist language can be avoided for example: substitute ancestors for forefathers, chairperson for chairman, community for brotherhood, manufactured for manmade, firefighter for fireman and the human family for the family of man.

## **8. Check Out the Author's Perspective**

Authors cannot be entirely objective. Writing reflects cultural and personal experiences. But an author's perspective should be considered. Is it patriarchal or feminist? Eurocentric or more inclusive?

## **9. Look for Distorted History**

Is active resistance to invaders portrayed or missing? Are places and events in history mentioned, such as the Japanese internment camps, that were previously glossed over?

## **10. Consider Different Perspectives: Literary, Historical and Cultural**

It may not be appropriate to apply these guidelines to classical or contemporary literature including folktales and stories having a particular historical or cultural perspective. When analyzing such works remember to indicate that many of the social attitudes portrayed may have been prevalent at one time, but are now changing.

Adapted from brochures from the following sources: Council on Interracial books for Children, California State Department of Education, Minneapolis Public Schools, Sex Equity Handbook for Schools (D. Greyson, D. Sadker and M. Sadker.)