

# An Introduction to Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods for Children

By Maryann Valiulis, Aoife O'Driscoll and Jennifer Redmond



THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY  
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

First published October 2007

The Equality Authority  
2 Clonmel Street  
Dublin 2

© 2007 The Equality Authority

ISBN-13: 978-1-905628-68-1

Design by: form

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of **The Equality Authority**.

# **An Introduction to Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods for Children**

By Maryann Valiulis, Aoife O'Driscoll and Jennifer Redmond

## **Contents**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Foreword.....   | 05 |
| Introduction.....   | 06 |
| Literature Review.....  | 10 |
| Framework for the Analysis of Gender Equality Issues<br>in the Marketing and Design of Goods to Children..... | 13 |
| Strand One: Language.....   | 18 |
| Strand Two: Symbols and Imagery.....  | 22 |
| Strand Three: Production Techniques.....  | 26 |
| Strand Four: Portrayal and Use of Space.....  | 30 |
| Conclusion.....   | 32 |
| Appendix One: Methodology.....  | 36 |
| Endnotes.....   | 39 |

## Foreword

Marketing strategies target children extensively. In such a context it is important to examine the messages, overt and covert, that are being communicated to children. The use of stereotyping in these messages has a potential to limit the perspectives, ambitions and understandings of children in a manner that diminishes any ambition for a more equal society.

This background paper highlights and analyses pervasive and thorough gender stereotyping in the marketing and design of goods for children. Gender stereotyping is identified not only in overt messages conveyed in advertisements but also in the symbols and imagery used, in the production techniques for advertisements and in the portrayal and use of space in marketing and advertising.

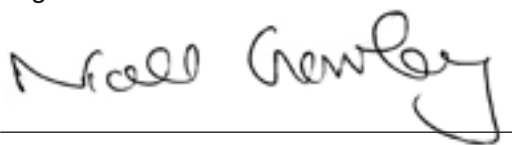
This gender stereotyping has a capacity to limit the roles played by girls and boys, to shape limiting societal expectations of boys and girls and to create a cultural context that underpins the significant and persistent gender inequalities that continue to be a feature of Irish society.

Stereotyping and the negative impact of stereotyping on the search for greater equality, for a valuing of difference and for non discrimination has emerged as a significant concern in the work of The Equality Authority. This is an issue that runs across the nine grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community covered by the equality legislation.

This publication on gender issues in the marketing and design of goods to children was preceded by a joint project with the National Youth Council of Ireland on inequality and the stereotyping of young people. Current work is exploring the use of stereotyped and degrading images of women in advertising.

The Equality Authority hopes to use this publication and its wider work on stereotyping to stimulate and support a public debate on stereotyping and its impact on inequality for a broad range of groups. It hopes to develop a range of practical initiatives in partnership with relevant organisations that could play roles in eliminating stereotyping in marketing and advertising strategies.

The Equality Authority is grateful to Aoife O'Driscoll as well as Maryann Valiulis and Jennifer Redmond of the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College Dublin for their work on this publication. They brought an expertise, thoroughness and a commitment to the project that has ensured a publication of quality that will well serve the search for change in the marketing and design of goods for children.



---

**Niall Crowley**  
CEO  
The Equality Authority

# Introduction



The extent to which gender equality issues, and in particular gender stereotyping, might permeate the marketing and design of goods to children must be a matter of concern in a globalised, media saturated Ireland in the 21st century. Every day, children<sup>1</sup> are bombarded with advertisements and images, on television, on buildings, in shops, at school, and on the internet. It is important to look at the messages that are being conveyed to children in view of the pervasiveness of these marketing strategies and to consider the implications of marketing trends for gender equality.

Gender equality should be understood as encompassing equality of access to resources, power, respect, and status and standing between women and men. A culture of gender equality requires that no limitations should be placed upon individuals by virtue of their gender identity. This is particularly pertinent in a context of significant and persistent gender inequality where gender stereotyping can diminish the status and standing of women and can sustain inequalities experienced by women in access to resources, power and respect.

Stereotyping is the simplistic characterisation of an individual or group of individuals based on pre-determined criteria. People may be stereotyped because of their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, class, or for a multitude of other arbitrary reasons. The broad generalisations involved in this stereotyping can be prejudicial and may be used to demarcate the social potential and opportunities which should be afforded to, and expected by, the stereotyped group.

Gender stereotyping is the generalisation of what it means to be male or female, what roles are appropriate to women and men based on crude or traditional generalisations regarding gender, and the characterisations that make male or female easily recognisable in the most basic terms. The nature of the roles for men and women that are portrayed in this stereotyping are particularly problematic as they reinforce ideas of dominance. Stereotyping of any nature limits choice and works on the basis of systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Gender stereotyping reinforces ideas of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is defined in the literature as a normative form of masculinity that embodies the current ideal of what it means to be a man and is noted for perpetuating gendered power divisions. Emphasised femininity is a term which often accompanies discussions of hegemonic masculinities and was coined by R.W. Connell as a representation of femininity that accommodates the supposed and often stereotyped interests and/or needs of men.<sup>2</sup> Both hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity sustain and perpetuate unequal gender divisions.

## Introduction

Stereotyping is utilised in marketing directed at both children and adults. Marketing is a field in which messages need to be quickly communicated to an audience and where visual symbolism needs to be immediately comprehended and acknowledged. Stereotyping can facilitate the process of communicating messages. However, the use of stereotypes of boys and girls can create a situation in which generalised characterisations stop being questioned or investigated and are perpetuated. Moreover, stereotypes can often reinforce conservative, traditional attitudes.

The potential damage that pervasive gender stereotypes may have on children has been researched extensively in an international context. For instance, one such study argues that:

Stereotypes in advertising on children's television programs have been a special problem because of their potential impact on gender socialization and, subsequently, children's views of themselves and other people.<sup>3</sup>

Stereotypical messages in advertising can be conveyed both subtly and overtly, through language, body movement, behaviours and gestures, and through a variety of other visual, auditory and physical interactions.

Childhood is a time of exploration – of exploring identities, interest and talents. It is a time in which multiple possibilities should be encouraged. Does a child like to play with animals or dress up in costume or read adventure stories? What is the impact on children if they are not allowed to explore such possibilities and if gender is communicated to them in a restrictive, judgmental and exclusionary manner?

Narrow gender roles restrict possibilities. When stereotypical representations of girls and boys are utilised in advertising, these can serve to create and dictate what is gender appropriate, how being a boy child or a girl child is 'done'. Such representations portray the limits of gender, conveying a narrow sense of what is appropriate for a girl or a boy to be and do. Those who do not conform to such representations are excluded from the 'norm' or 'othered.'

We learn to 'do gender' when we are young, in part through play. In learning to 'do gender' we begin to internalise what being a boy or a girl means and what is expected of us by virtue of our gender. We begin to learn how to act accordingly. Advertising shows us what toys are appropriate to play with for our gender and how we are supposed to interact with these toys. Advertising can also, to some extent, visualise and communicate the characteristics and temperaments that we should develop appropriate to our gender.



Advertising and marketing strategies, can contribute through gender stereotyping, to the exclusionary, judgmental representation of gender. These strategies can contribute to a situation in which children are pushed onto predetermined paths which leave little, if any, room for alternatives. These strategies, for example, communicate images of girls playing with dolls and of boys playing with tools. How do we teach a boy that it is acceptable to be nurturing and adventuresome? How do we teach girls that their world and their imaginations do not need to be bounded by tea trolleys and Barbie dolls? Particular attention is given in this publication to the ways in which the messages contained in these advertising and marketing strategies may work to limit the development and potential of all children, male and female. The question posed is: what are we encouraging our children to become?

This publication is an introductory study examining whether gender stereotyping is present in the marketing and design of goods for children. It considers the nature and potential impact of gender stereotyping in products and advertisements aimed at children. It offers a framework by which advertising and marketing strategies may be interpreted and viewed through the lens of gender. This publication is based on:

- a literature review, primarily of international literature as there is little research available on this subject in an Irish context;
- an examination of strategies and guidelines developed in other countries to regulate marketing and advertising for children;
- visits to Dublin toy, stationery, book, gaming and craft stores, and an examination of television advertisements aimed at children;
- an analysis of the Late Late Christmas Toy Show 2006, and an examination of catalogues of products aimed at children.

This research was commissioned as part of the Equality Authority's mandate to promote equality of opportunity and to combat discrimination in the areas covered by the equality legislation. The Employment Equality Acts prohibit discrimination in the workplace and in vocational training. The Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, education and accommodation. Both Acts prohibit discrimination on nine grounds: gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community. Further information on the equality legislation is available on the website of the Equality Authority - [www.equality.ie](http://www.equality.ie) The provisions of the EU Gender Equal Treatment Directives are also relevant as these Directives take precedence over Irish law which should be read and interpreted having regard to the provisions of these Directives.

## Literature Review



There has been no substantial research done in Ireland to date on gender equality issues in the marketing and design of goods for children in Ireland. More generally, there has also been a dearth of research on the gender implications of marketing strategies aimed at children in Ireland. In contrast, there are many international studies providing useful tools that can be applied when considering this issue in an Irish context. These studies include research on production techniques and spokes people in advertisements, on cross cultural analysis of the prevalence and varieties of stereotypical gender roles in advertisements and on the gender implications of specific children's products. These studies also note the regulations developed in different jurisdictions to deal with these issues.

As early as 1979, research was conducted by Renate L. Welch, Aletha Huston-Stein, John C. Wright, and Robert Plehal and the University of Kansas into "Subtle Sex Role Cues in Children's Commercials".<sup>4</sup> This study was the first to look beyond the visual *content* of children's advertisements and to draw attention to the gender implications of the *production techniques* used when advertising to children. This issue has been investigated more recently in the UK in a study by Merris Griffiths and Daniel Chandler on "Gendered Editing and Camerawork Techniques in Advertisements for Children's Toys on British Television".<sup>5</sup> The latter study focuses on the reinforcement of gender stereotypes through technical production rather than through manifest content.

A range of studies has been undertaken in the US on the effect of stereotyping in television advertisements on children viewing them. In general, these studies have focused on the effect that gender has upon children's perceptions of visually advertised products. The most influential and widely cited work in this area is Richard H. Kolbe and Darrell Muehling's 1995 study into "Gender Roles and Children's Television Advertising".<sup>6</sup> In this study, the authors investigated children's awareness of traditional gender roles when exposed to advertisements and questioned whether gender had any measurable effect upon the ways in which children evaluated the products being advertised. Their main findings were that, firstly, the children in their study were generally aware of the gender of individuals appearing in advertisements and could recall the gender of actors, having seen these advertisements. Secondly, they showed that the children in this study were aware of gender-role information and made judgements which showed that they had processed these gender-role portrayals. However, Kolbe and Muehling found that the gender of the actor shown on screen with a product was not as influential as expected when analysing children's preferences for particular products. They found that counter-stereotyped advertisements (those ads which showed nontraditional gender behaviours) were more likely to be perceived as being relevant for both genders. The authors suggested in this context that "This issue may be most salient

## Literature Review

for new product categories for which society (and therefore children) had not ascribed gender appropriateness characteristics”.<sup>7</sup>

The focus of this research on the gender dimension of the reaction to, and function of, spokes-people in advertisements has attracted subsequent academic attention and research. Kolbe and Meuhling’s approach was expanded to include an analysis of gender perceptions of spokes-characters in a 2001 study entitled “What if the Energiser Bunny Were Female? Importance of Gender in Perceptions of Advertising Spokes-Character Effectiveness”.<sup>8</sup> In the latter study, it was found that “a typically male or female product was perceived as less the province of that gender with a spokes-character of the opposite sex or a neutral character”<sup>9</sup>, echoing the earlier findings in Kolbe and Meuhling (although here the author suggests that when the spokes-character matches the perceived target audience, the likelihood of the product being purchased is greater). This study also found that males are not necessarily the most effective spokes-characters for all products, despite their continual predominance on screen.

Another trend in the literature has been to conduct crosscultural<sup>10</sup> analyses into the prevalence and varieties of stereotypical gender roles in children’s television advertisements. These studies have tended to focus on the presence of males and females on screen and the roles in which these characters are portrayed. They also concern themselves with locating the similarities and/or differences evident in gender portrayals in different countries. In 1997 for instance, Beverly Browne conducted a gender role analysis of children’s advertisements aired in both the US and Australia, and in 2005 Adrian Furnham and Alexandra Saar conducted a similar study comparing Great Britain and Poland.<sup>11</sup> In Beverly Browne’s research, she maintains that “comparisons across nations could contribute to a better understanding of stereotyping and its relationship with cultural factors”.<sup>12</sup> Her study found that although data from the US and Australia were similar in that they both showed substantial gender stereotyping, they differed in that Australian advertising tended to have more equal representation of males and females and less frequently portrayed girls as giggling or shy. Similarly, Furnham and Saar’s study, a cross cultural analysis, noted that levels of gender stereotyping were similar in Poland and Britain. These studies are also interesting for their methodological approaches to the issue of on-screen gender stereotyping and predominantly use the recording of children’s television programming as a means of collecting data into advertising trends to children, thus validating the approach taken in the current study.

Many studies are available examining the gender implications of specific children’s products. The most notable and widely discussed products

include Barbie<sup>®</sup>, Action Man<sup>®</sup> and the new range of Playboy<sup>®</sup> merchandise for children. These very specific products have been quite contentious for their portrayal of rigid gender characterisations and have thus provoked strong reactions for their overt messages regarding stereotyped gender behaviour. There was a lively debate in 2005 on the availability (and suitability) of Playboy<sup>®</sup> merchandise for children in a number of WHSmith stores in Britain. Object, the group protesting against the selling of this merchandise to children, stated that:

Playboy's logo clearly represents pornography. The magazine routinely features sexualised and full-frontal images of naked young women. Playboy is about men buying women and presents this as normal male behaviour, together with fast cars, football and male role models (not shown naked). WHSmith is therefore endorsing pornography to young, impressionable and possibly underage girls.<sup>13</sup>

WHSmith responded to these criticisms by denying any claim that Playboy<sup>®</sup> necessarily means pornography and pointed out that this particular range was one of the most popular they had ever sold. They maintained that they “offer customers choice. We're not here to act as a moral censor”.<sup>14</sup>

The literature reviewed recognises that regulations have been put in place in different international jurisdictions to deal with the issues involved in, and the implications of, advertising to children. In Ireland, the advertising industry is governed by the *Code of Standards for Advertising, Promotional and Direct Marketing in Ireland*<sup>15</sup>, which is produced and enforced by the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI). Section 2.17 of the Code states that “Marketing communications should respect the principle of equality between men and women. **They should avoid sex stereotyping** and any exploitation or demeaning of men and women”.<sup>16</sup> Although sex stereotyping is not isolated as a specific cause of concern for children in the body of this Code, the rules which apply to adults are also enforceable and applicable to advertisements directed at children. It must be noted, however, that to date the ASAI has not received any complaints with regard to negative gender stereotyping in advertisements directed at children, although it has dealt with issues arising from the positioning of Playboy<sup>®</sup> merchandise in a popular catalogue, in close proximity to products aimed at children. This particular complaint was upheld by the ASAI and was considered in breach of the Advertising Code. The item in question had to be re-situated immediately in a more suitable section of the catalogue.

The Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2007 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004 prohibit discriminatory advertising. Discriminatory advertising is defined

## Literature Review

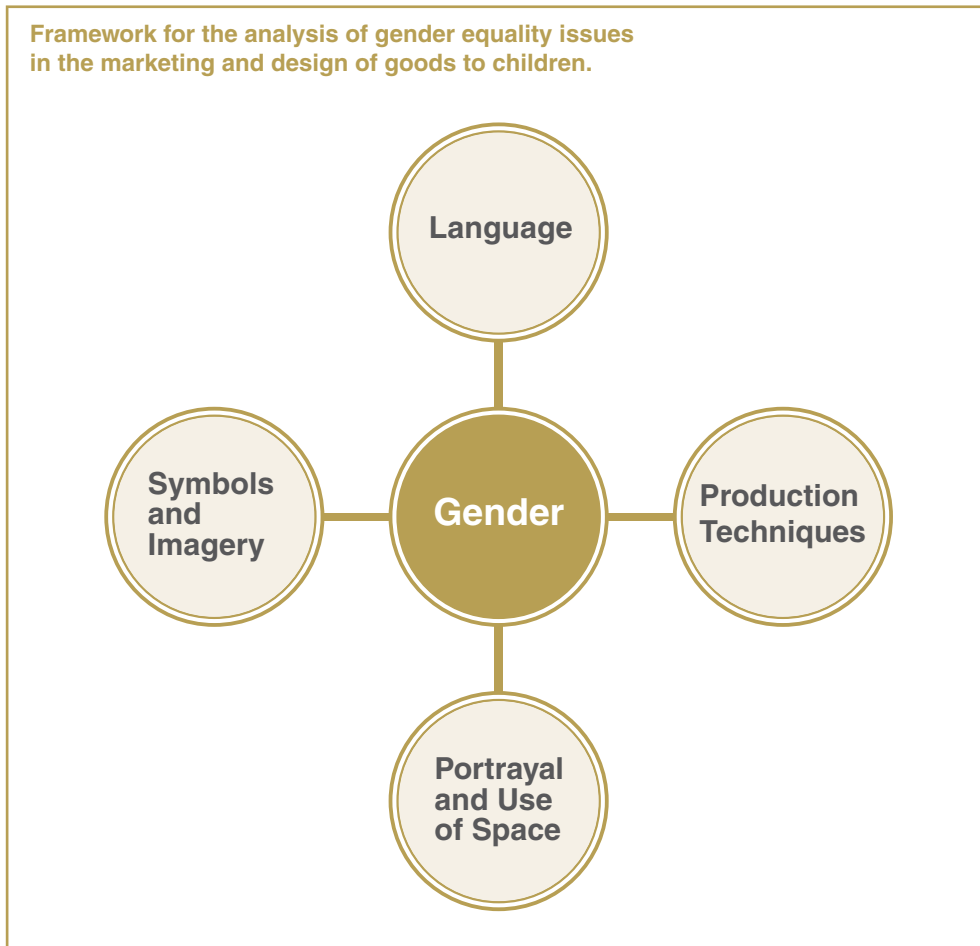
as advertising that indicates an intention to discriminate or that might be reasonably understood to indicate such an intention.

Internationally a range of approaches have been taken to the regulation of advertising practices. In Canada for example, the Advertising Standards Canada Code recognises the need for advertisements to protect the spirit of gender equality and considers advertisements that breach this spirit in any measure, in terms of content or technique for instance, to be in violation of its Code.<sup>17</sup> The Code also recognises that the ways in which space is used may reinforce gender stereotyping and insists that men and women should be portrayed equally both inside and outside the home. This particular approach succeeds in recognising the many levels at which stereotypes of men and women are reinforced. The regulations that govern advertising to children in Sweden take a different approach. In 1996 the Swedish government introduced a ban on all advertising aimed at children below the age of twelve and also banned any advertisements from being aired before or after any programmes aimed at children below this age.

# Framework for the Analysis of Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods to Children



## Framework for the Analysis of Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods to Children



The examination of gender equality issues in the marketing and advertising of products for children needs to encompass a series of related dimensions if it is to assess adequately the extent to which gender stereotyping is present in these strategies. The Framework for Analysing Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods for Children should include the following elements:

**Language:** Is the language exclusive or inclusive? Is it a language of domination or equality? Is it speaking to or for the intended audience? What messages do slogans carry with them? Who is speaking?

**Symbols and Imagery:** What meaning does the product symbol carry with it? What are the implications of using the symbol to associate certain ideas/ characteristics/meanings with the product? Is the symbol/imagery inclusive or exclusive?

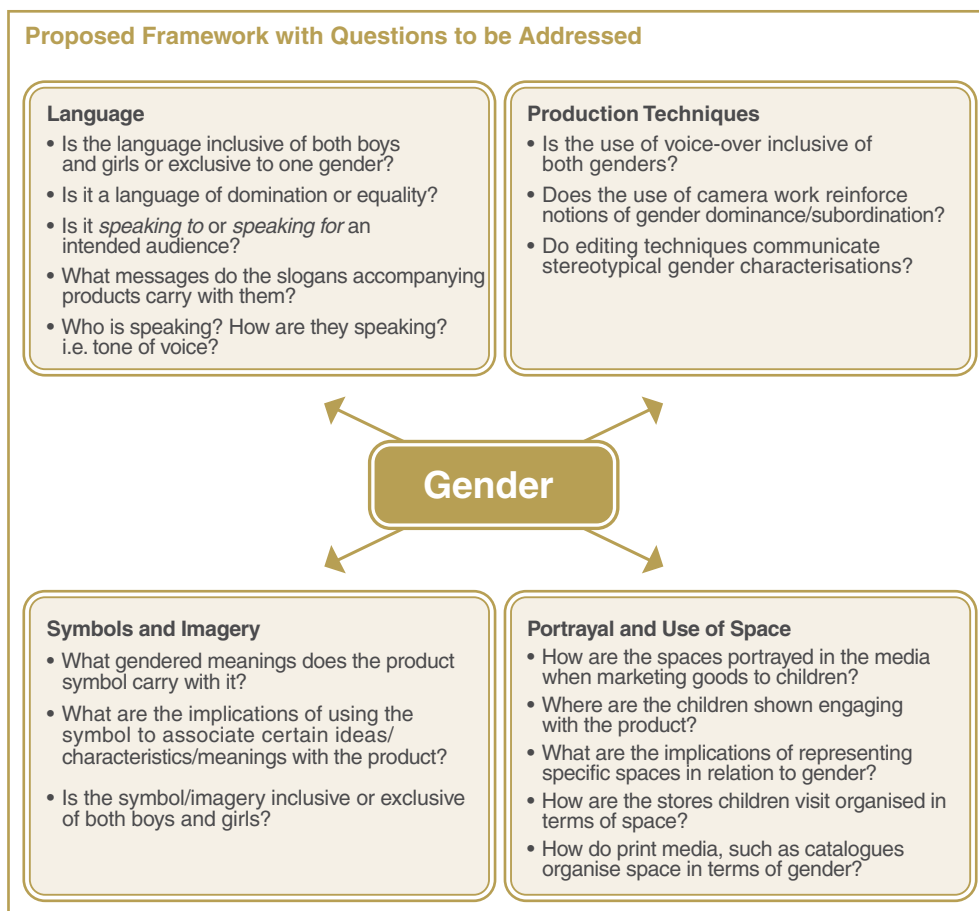


## Framework for the Analysis of Gender Equality Issues in the Marketing and Design of Goods to Children

**Production Techniques:** Is the use of voice-overs inclusive of both genders? Does the use of camera work reinforce notions of gender dominance/subordination? Do editing techniques communicate stereotypical gender characterisations? What about music, editing practices, camera angles, and number and length of shots?

**Portrayal and Use of Space:** How are spaces portrayed? Where are children shown engaging with the product? What are the implications of representing specific spaces in relation to gender? How are stores organised in terms of space? How do print media, such as catalogues organise space in terms of gender?

This framework will be used to examine advertising and marketing strategies for evidence of gender stereotyping. This framework offers the possibility of identifying overt evidence of stereotyping and more subtle stereotypical portrayals and of illuminating the processes by which gendered messages might be communicated in the marketing of products at children.



## Strand One: Language



A recent report produced by the Equality Authority on Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People<sup>18</sup>, cites Stuart Hall's quotation highlighting the significance of language for the production of meaning in society:

Language... operates as a representational system. In language we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or to represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced.<sup>19</sup>

The theory that meaning is produced through language is critical to developing an understanding of how language can be used to reinforce gender stereotypes. This is a theory that emphasises the ways in which we represent through language ideas about what it means to be a boy or a girl.

There are a number of things to be considered when looking at the use of language in the marketing and production of goods for children:

- Is the language inclusive of both boys and girls or exclusive to one gender?
- Is it a language of domination or equality?
- Is it speaking to or speaking for an intended audience?
- What messages do the slogans accompanying products carry with them?
- Who is speaking? How are they speaking? (i.e. tone of voice).

The recent use of "Not For Girls" as a marketing slogan to accompany a widely sold confectionary product offers an example of the way in which the language used in marketing can suggest and reinforce stereotypical notions of gender. If the slogan is analysed using the above questions, it is clear that this slogan is overtly exclusionary. The slogan uses as its gimmick the exclusion of 'girls', or to offer another related reading, it excludes the perceived negative traits that the term 'girls' is deemed to represent (which both devalues girls, but also devalues males and females who exhibit feminine characteristics). This product, which is marketed as chunkier and sturdier than other similar confectionary products, draws upon stereotypical distinctions of gender as a way of separating its product from softer, 'girly' products. This is marketed as a product for men (interestingly defined as meaning 'not girls' rather than 'not women'). The stereotypical definition of male is suggested as being tough and chunky, sturdy perhaps, which in turn implies that women are weaker and less solid. This exclusive language establishes a division between the genders and reinforces stereotypical understandings of what it means to be male or female. As such, it underpins gender inequality.

## Strand One: Language

The above questions may also be used when considering the implications of language used in a variety of other marketing media. They are designed to draw attention to the ways in which gender stereotypes are reinforced through language. The questions provide a means of identifying stereotyping in the language used to accompany the depictions of products in children's toy catalogues. One such example, taken from an internationally distributed catalogue, shows four images on a single page. In these images there are two products shown with a girl accompanying them, and two shown with a boy accompanying them. If we overlook the fact that the two girls are shown with a tea trolley and a kitchen set respectively, and the boys are shown with two construction benches, and focus only on the language used to characterise the products, the presence of gender stereotyping again becomes apparent.

The full text shown in the products aimed at girls reads:

- Kitchen and tea trolley twin pack
- Pop! Beep!

The full text from the products aimed at boys reads:

- Build your own toy vehicle
- What are you going to build today?
- Wow... are you trying to build a space ship?
- Thanks for putting the drill away
- Hello, I've got a job for you.
- Is it time to use the hammer now?

Different linguistic approaches are taken in the text directed at boys and that aimed at girls. The text accompanying the girls' products describes the product and does not engage directly with the individual children shown. The girls are not addressed directly through the language used here. The text directed at the boys is completely different in tone and intent. First it actively engages and speaks to the boys (What are **You** going to build today?). Secondly the text reaffirms the active and constructive ability and potential of these boys. Look at the words **job** and **build** for example. This sense of ability is completely absent in the language directed at the girls.

The language used in this example creates a clear distinction between the boys and girls based solely on gender rather than on interest or ability. The language reinforces the stereotypical notion of girls as passive and boys as active, which is antithetical to gender equality. The language emphasises supposed differences between male and female children and presents stereotypical characteristics

and abilities towards which children are being directed. The language conveys a stereotypical and gendered representation of what it means to be a boy or girl.

This feature of linguistic differentiation was evident across the media analysed for this publication. Language consistently reinforced rather than questioned gender stereotypes. In very subtle ways, language reinforced active, aggressive and independent notions of what it means to be a boy and passive, nurturing and dependent notions of what it means to be a girl. The related issue of the predominance of the male voice in the voice-overs used for television advertisements is discussed in Strand Three: Production Techniques.

The use of language to reinforce stereotypical ideas of gender also appeared extensively in the television advertisements analysed for this publication. For boys there was the cry of “Who will win the Battle” in advertisements for Lego Exoforce<sup>®</sup>, the most often aired advertisement for boys during the television analysis. For girls, the voices exclaim “She’s so soft and pretty” for Barbie First Best Friend<sup>®</sup>. During the analysis of the Late Late Toy Show, the main presenter persistently reinforced stereotypes of gender in his short introductions and comments on the products shown. For instance, when looking at a particular children’s product, in which a human skull is shown to ‘ooze’ slime, the presenter exclaimed “made for boys, I think”. This contrasted with his assertion that a dancing ballerina was “going to be a big hit for girls”.

This widespread stereotypical and limiting use of language, which creates clear distinctions between the genders, limits the potential and possibilities of girls and boys. It serves to undermine the objective of promoting gender equality.

## Strand Two: Symbols and Imagery



---

**Symbol:** noun a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract. **2** a mark or character used as a conventional representation of something, e.g. a letter standing for a chemical element. (OED)

**Imagery:** noun figurative language, especially in a literary work. **2** visual symbolism. **3** visual images collectively. (OED)

---

The use of easily identifiable symbols and imagery within the field of marketing is an effective means to convey visual messages quickly. To recognise a brand logo for example is to call immediately to mind the meanings associated with that logo. This familiarity with visual iconography and formulations allows the consumer to locate a product instantly within a specific field of understanding and to assign value to the product accordingly. Symbols and imagery allow ideas to be perpetuated and created in the same way that language is used to create meaning.

This background paper draws on the definitions given above to define symbols as characters/images/things that represent some other ideas and associations while imagery is defined as a collective form of visual symbolism.

A number of questions should be considered when looking at the use of symbols and imagery in the marketing of products specifically at children:

- What gendered meanings does the product symbol carry with it?
- What are the implications of using the symbol to associate certain ideas/characteristics/meanings with the product?
- Is the symbol/imagery inclusive or exclusive of both boys and girls?

A trend has emerged in the field of marketing towards children whereby controversial images have been attached to children's products. The two primary examples here would be the use of "Boys are stupid, throw rocks at them" imagery from David & Goliath, Inc. and the use of the Playboy® symbol on children's merchandise, although the trend is by no means limited to these product lines. For instance, there is an increased sexualisation of children's products evident in the Bratz® line, manufactured by MGA Entertainment Inc., and characterised by dolls with oversized heads with big full lips and revealing clothing. Merchandise such as stationery and products for school were also seen to utilise sexual and age-inappropriate imagery in the stores visited in Dublin city for this research.

In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Jeffrey Zaslow considered the use of the "Boys are Stupid" imagery and its relation to what he considered the

## Strand Two: Symbols and Imagery

“War of the Sexes”<sup>20</sup>. Zaslow’s article draws attention to two interesting ideas. The first is that those in the media see boy/girl conflict as a source of huge profit for the industry. Secondly, he suggests that this is accompanied by a culture in which girl power is defined as “boy-bashing”<sup>21</sup>.

The imagery used for this merchandise, in which cartoon girls can be seen throwing rocks at fleeing cartoon boys draws upon the idea of a battle between the sexes, and both feeds into and sustains a sense of conflict between boys and girls. It also demeans and insults boys. The imagery can be seen to differentiate children by gender and to promote ideas of dominance and violence with regard to the relationship between the genders. This imagery is exclusionary in a negative sense. The use of incitement to gender violence as a marketing ploy is antithetical to the promotion of equality and respect among children. The images used here, symbolising as they do a sense of gender war, both perpetuate and create the conflict that they represent. In doing so, they perpetuate division and hierarchy between children based upon their gender. There is also another level at which this imagery operates to the detriment of gender equality. This imagery may well be read as a form of fake empowerment for girls. The imagery is premised on the idea that boys are in fact the dominant gender, with the incitement to attack shown as some form of affront to this domination.

The use of the Playboy® logo on products marketed towards children also raises serious questions with regard to the messages being communicated to children. The Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland had received a complaint regarding the positioning of Playboy® merchandise in close proximity to children’s products in a widely distributed catalogue. The Advertising Standards Authority upheld this complaint. However during the research visits to a variety of stores in Dublin city, Playboy® merchandise was widely presented alongside products marketed at children. In most cases, this merchandise was positioned as part of displays specifically aimed at children. The Playboy® image was visually presented as appropriate and relevant to the children’s market. The symbolism of the Playboy® logo carries with it connotations of female sexualisation and sexual availability. It reinforces the idea of woman as object, achieved through the commodification of the female body for male pleasure.

The two examples highlighted show how visual symbolism can quite overtly and confrontationally communicate messages to children regarding the relationship between the genders and their respective situation.

However, the communication of gender stereotypes through visual iconography is not always done in such an overtly controversial way. The imagery by which the genders are isolated and differentiated in print media also evidences the



delineation and separation of the genders. Looking through any toy catalogue, it is quite easy to locate products aimed at boys and those aimed at girls. The familiar use of blue and pink to communicate gender appropriateness is instantly recognisable. Considering how 'normal' and pervasive this approach has become, it is important to question the messages that it communicates in terms of gender. What are the implications of differentiating the genders by colour? This formula again works on the basis of inclusion or exclusion. By clearly designating those products suitable for girls and those suitable for boys in such a visually recognisable manner, the interests of the individual child are subsumed by the constraints of gender. The use of gendered colour schemes to indicate what children are *expected* to be interested in, limits the possibilities of what children *could* be interested in.

## Strand Three: Production Techniques



The advertising industry makes the argument that stereotyping is used by the industry simply to convey easily readable messages in a short time frame and that the visually represented gender stereotyping in children's advertisements is just an effective way of reaching a market audience quickly. However if this argument were valid the evidence of gender stereotyping would be found only in the images being conveyed and not in the production techniques used. However the production techniques used when creating advertisements to be directed towards children also reflect gender differentiation and stereotyping. This represents a further level at which stereotypical notions of gender are being reinforced.

The aspects of the production techniques that are particularly useful to consider here are:

- 1) **Camerawork;** and
- 2) **Editing features**

This analysis has been used in research conducted in the UK by Merris Griffiths and Daniel Chandler<sup>22</sup>, and first became an area of interest as early as the 1970s in the study of gender stereotyping of children in an American context<sup>23</sup>.

Griffiths & Chandler's (1998) study is an important analysis of the extent to which gender differentiation and stereotyping pervades the production of advertisements directed at children. A focus on production techniques, looking beyond the content of advertisements where boys and girls can more obviously be seen to be differentiated, offers important insights into the means by which ideas about gender are reinforced even in the methods by which advertisements are produced. Their study showed that advertisements are produced in different ways and using different techniques when aimed at boys to those aimed at girls and furthermore, that these differences can be seen to feed into generalised and stereotypical characterisations of what is deemed appropriate and 'normal' for boys and girls.

Griffiths & Chandler found far more variety in the angle of shots and in the special editing features used for advertisements aimed at boys than in those aimed at girls. There was far more activity present in advertisements directed at boys, reflecting the stereotypical characterisation of boys as active. They found that the tilt up angle of the camera was used *exclusively* in advertisements directed at boys and the tilt down angle appeared more often in the advertisements aimed at girls. In their analysis of this phenomenon, the authors suggested that the tilt up angle "seems to mimic the action of looking up from a subservient position towards someone or something in a superior position", whereas the tilt down angle "seems to mimic the action of looking down upon someone or something lowly from a position of superiority"<sup>24</sup>. This has implications for

### Strand Three: Production Techniques

gender representation as it reinforces the idea of women as subservient and of men as superior. They also found that fast paced editing was more commonly used when directing advertisements at boys, versus softer techniques used in advertisements directed at girls. This has further implications in terms of the way in which it feeds into the stereotypical active/passive division between the gender in which boys are seen as active and girls as passive.

The Griffiths & Chandler study also identified a huge gender discrepancy in the use of voice-overs heard in television advertisements directed at children. It found not only that male voice-overs were predominantly heard in children's advertising - and were used in advertisements directed at both boys and girls - but that absolutely no female voice-overs were used in the advertisements directed at boys. This predominance of the male voice gives it a sense of authority and allows it to speak for both genders. It reaffirms the sense of the male as authoritative and omniscient.

The analysis of the Irish television advertisements for this publication paid particular attention to the production features used in such advertisements, in as much as a small scale study allowed. A striking correlation was found to the findings of the Griffiths & Chandler study in the prevalence of male voice-overs in the advertisements analysed. Like Griffiths & Chandler, male voice-overs were found to be predominant not only in advertisements directed at boys but also in those advertisements directed at both boys and girls. Interestingly, in advertisements for board games for example, where both male and female children were depicted, all of the voice-overs used were by men. The authority of the male voice was reaffirmed, as was the ability of the male voice to speak *to* and *for* both boys and girls.

It was beyond the scope of this research to carry out a frame by frame analysis to examine the technical editing features of these advertisements in detail. However a trend was evident in the sample of advertisements analysed in which advertisements directed towards boys were repeatedly faster paced and edgier than those directed at girls, which for the most part were softer and smoother in pace (for example, the advertisements for Lego Exoforce® were far quicker in pace and than those for Baby Born®). This again echoes the Griffiths & Chandler study and confirms that stereotypical gender characterisations of girls and boys are evident in the production methods used for advertisements.

The presence of gender stereotyping in the methods used to produce advertisements highlights the ingrained nature of stereotypical attitudes about boys and girls in the marketing strategies developed and used for products directed at children. It suggests that the prevalence of stereotyping is more than simply a reflection of the need to convey messages quickly but rather

a problem that is deeply embedded at all levels of the marketing process, being present both in the production as well as the content of advertisements. It points to the scale of the problem and the multifaceted manner in which stereotyping operates and is reinforced.

## Strand Four: Portrayal and Use of Space



A focus on the portrayal and use of space provides another means of uncovering the pervasiveness of gender stereotyping and the manner in which it is repeated and consolidated in the marketing and design of goods for children. Space too is constructed in highly gendered terms. Both the physical and visual spaces presented to children influence and construct the manner in which children understand what it means to be a boy or a girl.

In her study on the politics of gender, identity and place, Linda McDowell has suggested that “space is not inert, not merely a container for social action, but is a significant element in the construction of identity.”<sup>25</sup> What she suggests is that identity, including gender identities, is highly influenced by the spaces we encounter. Space has the ability to repeat the gendered divisions which socially construct our understanding of our identity. The possibility that socially divisive and prescribed notions of gender are reflected in the spaces that children encounter must be explored when looking at the issue of gender equality in the marketing and design of goods for children.

The following questions provide a means of examining the gendered nature of the portrayal and use of space:

- How are the spaces portrayed in the media when marketing goods to children?
- Where are the children shown engaging with the product?
- What are the implications of representing specific spaces in relation to gender?
- How are the stores children visit organised in terms of space?
- How do print media, such as catalogues, organise space in terms of gender?

As a simple, introductory example of the gendering of space, it is useful to analyse the way children’s toy stores are organised in terms of gender and the messages thereby communicated.

A well known toy store in Dublin city visited for this introductory study was organised in accordance with the gender appropriateness of the toys being sold. The first three aisles, which shelved the so-called ‘Boys’ Toys’, had as their label “Action and Adventure”. The aisles shelving the products marketed towards girls were labelled “Fashion and Dolls”. The labels defining these spaces, suggest that boys should be active and exploratory and should develop and associate with these traits whereas girls should concern themselves with their appearance and develop their nurturing traits. These aisles, separated into boy appropriate and girl appropriate spaces, create the spaces in which it is suitable for boys and girls to be. During the visit to this store, when there

## Strand Four: Portrayal and Use of Space

was a significant number of children in the store, no child moved beyond the spaces deemed acceptable for her/his gender. This is not an absolute example. Nonetheless however it seems to suggest that the children at the store that day were aware of the spaces that were suitable for them based on gender. These spaces very clearly defined in gendered terms who should have access to various areas of the store. The differentiated spaces physically symbolised the separation of genders based on supposed interests and characteristics. Applying Linda McDowell's argument that space can influence the construction of identity, it is possible to see how the gendering of the space in this manner encourages children to develop their identities in line with the messages they are receiving about how to be a boy or girl. Moreover, the children are also learning that being a boy or girl has an impact on the places where they can and should be.

Another way to analyse the gendered dynamics of space would be to consider the spaces in which children are portrayed in both visual and print advertising. Here there seems to be a sharp division between public spheres and domestic spheres. For instance, during the research, there was an interesting spatial trend evident in the children's advertisements aired on television. There was a tendency in the advertisements reviewed to depict boys using the product outdoors, or in a simulated outdoor environment, whereas girls were predominantly shown playing indoors or using products which represented an indoor environment. For instance, in one advertisement that was shown frequently to boys during the research, two boys were shown simulating a battle in an outdoor, rugged and dangerous terrain. In contrast, in another advertisement, which appeared frequently directed at girls, the young girl was shown dancing inside a simulated castle. There is an association in these advertisements between gender and the spaces appropriate for or connected to that gender. Boys are shown in the natural - albeit dangerous - world outside the home, whereas girls are shown to be safely indoors. In delimiting space appropriateness in accordance with gender, subtle messages are conveyed regarding the spaces appropriate for boys and girls. The gendered use of space and the association of boys with public space and girls with private space undermine the promotion of gender equality.



## Conclusion



## Conclusion

This publication offers a framework for interpreting the multi-faceted levels at which gender stereotypes are communicated to children through the marketing and design of goods. It has identified how the manner in which goods are designed for and marketed at children can impact negatively on gender equality in the following areas:

- The sexualisation of girls;
- Incitement of gender rivalry (extending in some cases to incitement to violence);
- Practices of exclusion;
- Casting of judgements;
- Limiting of possibilities.

This publication has sought to provide an overview of the issues arising in relation to gender stereotyping in the marketing and design of goods for children. It has illustrated the diverse means by which stereotypical characterisations of gender are being communicated to children. It was notable that gender was consistently the definitive determinant for marketing practices and design in the range of media examined. Gender stereotyping permeated content, language, symbols and imagery and production techniques. In using gender in such a manner, a whole system of inclusion and exclusion was evident and, in the process, definitions of what it means to be a boy or a girl were forcefully communicated.

The predominant message being repeated in marketing strategies aimed at children was that there were limited options available to the individual child, beyond what was deemed appropriate to their gender. Marketing strategies were diminishing and limiting the range of possibilities available to children on the basis of their gender, and, overall, presenting children with a very narrow set of possibilities.

It is clear that thorough analyses of the areas that make up the framework put forward in this publication are lacking in the Irish context. For example, the method of analysis used in research conducted in the UK by Merris Griffiths and Daniel Chandler<sup>26</sup>, which has been an area of interest for US researchers since the 1970s<sup>27</sup> and which has been shown to produce rich and nuanced data, has yet to be applied to the Irish context. This is something that we would suggest needs to be addressed in order to understand fully the extent to which stereotypical notions of gender are being communicated to Irish children. Moreover, studies that have been done internationally on related areas of gender stereotyping in the marketing and design of goods to children tend to be limited in their approaches to individual factors. A study has yet to be undertaken which would illustrate the overarching system by which gender is consistently communicated when marketing goods to children.

The Equality Authority should develop further initiatives in this area, given the conclusions of this report and the evidence of gender stereotyping in the marketing and design of goods for children. This gender stereotyping can only have a negative impact on the promotion of gender equality. It is necessary to promote a wider understanding of the elements of the framework for analysing advertising that has been developed in this report. It would be useful to build a shared commitment from key relevant stakeholders to addressing the issues identified in each area of the framework.

## Appendix One: Methodology



This publication is an introductory exercise to identify the range of gender equality/inequality issues in goods designed for and marketed towards children.

This research involved four separate exercises. First a literature review of the area was undertaken. This involved collecting and analysing research which has already been completed on the issues of marketing to children, television advertising trends directed at children, and gender stereotyping in advertising directed at children. There was a wealth of research available in these areas, although this research has been carried out in an international rather than in an Irish context. Literature on the strategies and guidelines developed in other countries to regulate marketing and advertising to children was also reviewed and a meeting was held with a representative of the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland to discuss the newly revised code of practice for the advertising industry in Ireland.

Secondly, a variety of stores in Dublin city, including toy stores, stationery stores, book stores, gaming stores and craft stores, were visited in order to examine strategies of product placement, design and presentation of goods aimed at the children's market. These visits made clear the extensive range and variety of products specifically directed at children. Catalogues from a number of these stores were also analysed which added a further dimension to our research. These catalogues were examined to identify the strategies employed when using print media to market goods towards children and the techniques by which messages of gender are communicated. The layout of these stores was examined in relation to gender and product type, which added the issue of gendered space to the scope of our analysis.

Thirdly, television advertisements aired during one Saturday morning between the hours of 8-12am were analysed<sup>28</sup>. This time and day was chosen as Saturday morning television is predominantly directed at children, and ordinarily airs cartoons, preteen, and teen drama. It was therefore the time at which it would be possible to get the highest volume of advertisements directed solely at children. The decision to analyse the advertisements aired during this time was not intended as an authoritative quantitative/empirical study. Rather it was envisioned as a means by which further dimensions of the communication of gendered messages could be explored. This phase was influenced by the large number of international studies that have previously been done in the area of television advertising to children.

The 'Late Late Toy Show', which aired on the 1st of December 2006 on RTÉ 1, was also analysed. It was important to look at this broadcast through a gendered lens to appreciate more fully the ways in which toys, and specific categories of toys, are presented to boys and girls in Ireland and the messages inherent in

## Appendix One: Methodology

these choices. This particular broadcast was viewed by 1,345,000 people and according to sources in RTÉ was the “most watched programme in Ireland in the last five years”<sup>29</sup>. This aspect of the work was not intended to stand as an authoritative or isolated study but was rather viewed as complementing the work undertaken on advertisements, catalogues and toy stores.

Fourthly, a framework was developed and applied to cover this extensive array of media and marketing techniques used to appeal to a children’s audience. A framework was required which could be used to analyse the gender messages being communicated in marketing strategies targeting children. The framework had to cover advertisements in catalogues, on television, on radio, on billboards, and the products themselves in relation to their presentation, direction, and placement in stores. The framework had to be sufficiently developed to encompass language, symbols and imagery, portrayal and use of space and production techniques.

## Endnotes



## Endnotes

### Section 01

- <sup>1</sup> The term 'child' refers to any person under the age of 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Connell, R.W. & Messerschmidt, James W. (2005), "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19 (6) December, pp 829-859.
- <sup>3</sup> Browne, Beverly A. (1998), "Gender Stereotypes in Advertising on Children's Television in the 1990s: A Cross-National Analysis", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 27 (1) Spring, page 83.

### Section 02

- <sup>4</sup> Welch, Renate, Huston-Stein, Aletha, Wright, John C., & Plehal, Robert (1979), "Subtle Sex-Role Cues in Children's Commercials", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 29 (3), pp. 202-9.
- <sup>5</sup> Griffiths, Merris & Chandler, Daniel (1998), "Gendered Editing and Camerawork Techniques in Advertisements for Children's Toys on British Television". <http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/toyads.html> [1/16/2007]
- <sup>6</sup> Kolbe, Richard H., and Muehling, Darrell (1995), "Gender Roles and Children's Television Advertising", *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, Vol. 17 (1) Spring, pp 49-64.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Peirce, Kate (2001), "What if the Energiser Bunny Were Female? Importance of Gender in Perceptions of Advertising Spokes-Character Effectiveness", *Sex Roles*, Vol.45 (11/12) December, pp 845-858. Spokes-characters are defined as the animated creatures portrayed in television advertising.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 855.
- <sup>10</sup> Cross-cultural should be understood as "pertaining to or involving different cultures or comparisons between them" (Oxford English Dictionary).
- <sup>11</sup> Browne, Beverly A., "Gender Stereotypes in Advertising on Children's Television in the 1990s: A Cross-National Analysis" & Furnham, Adrian, and Saar, Alexandra (2005), "Gender Role Stereotyping in Adult and Children's Television Advertisements: A Two-Study Comparison Between Great Britain and Poland", *Communications*, 30, pp 73-90.
- <sup>12</sup> Browne, Beverly A., "Gender Stereotypes in Advertising on Children's Television in the 1990s: A Cross-National Analysis", page 83.
- <sup>13</sup> Bell, Rachel, "It's porn, innit?", *The Guardian*, Monday August 15th, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gender/story/0,11812,1549273,00.html>
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> ASAI (2007), *Manual of Advertising Self-Regulation with the Code of Standards for Advertising, Promotional and Direct Marketing in Ireland* (6th Edition) Dublin.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, Section 2.17. Emphasis added.
- <sup>17</sup> Advertising Standards Canada, *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*, December 2005.



### **Section 03**

<sup>18</sup> Devlin, Maurice (2006), *Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People* Dublin: The Equality Authority, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 14.

### **Section 04**

<sup>20</sup> Zaslow, Jeffrey, "Moving On: Girl Power as Boy Bashing: Evaluating the Latest Twist in the War of the Sexes", *Wall Street Journal*, (New York, Apr 21, 2005), page D1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### **Section 05**

<sup>22</sup> Griffiths, Merris & Chandler, Daniel (1998), "Gendered Editing and Camerawork Techniques in Advertisements for Children's Toys on British Television". <http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/toyads.html> [1/16/2007]

<sup>23</sup> Welch, Renate, Huston-Stein, Aletha, Wright, John C., & Plehal, Robert, "Subtle Sex-Role Cues in Children's Commercials", pp. 202-9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, page 17.

### **Section 06**

<sup>25</sup> McDowell, Linda (1999), *Gender, Identity and Place* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 68.

### **Section 07**

<sup>26</sup> Griffiths, Merris & Chandler, Daniel , "Gendered Editing and Camerawork Techniques in Advertisements for Children's Toys on British Television". <http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/toyads.html> [1/16/2007]

<sup>27</sup> Welch, Renate, Huston-Stein, Aletha, Wright, John C., & Plehal, Robert, "Subtle Sex-Role Cues in Children's Commercials", pp. 202-9.

### **Section 08**

<sup>28</sup> This sample was recorded on Saturday 25th November 2006, from Irish television station Network 2.

<sup>29</sup> RTÉ Press Centre, "Late Late Toy Show Most Watched Television Programme in the Last Five Years", Issued Monday 4th December 2006. <http://www.rte.ie/about/pressreleases/2006/1204/toyshowdec2006.html>







**THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY**  
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

ISBN 5391515440784



5 391515 440784 >

**The Equality Authority**

2 Clonmel Street  
Dublin 2.

**Public Information Centre:**

Lo call 1890 245 545

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Telephone         | 01 417 3333  |
| Business Enquires | 01 417 3336  |
| Text Phone        | 01 417 3385  |
| Fax               | 01 417 3331  |
| Email             | <a href="mailto:info@equality.ie">info@equality.ie</a> |
| Web               | <a href="http://www.equality.ie">www.equality.ie</a>   |