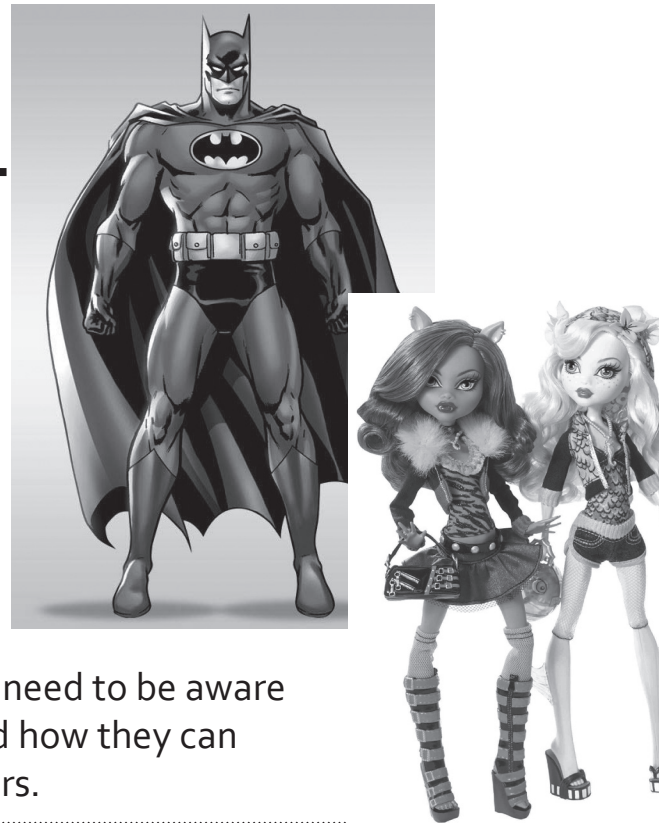# fact sheet 3

media and children - what is appropriate for my child?

This fact sheet aims to help you critically analyse the variety of media your child may be exposed to, and guide you in choosing age-appropriate media for your child.

Young children are exposed to various forms of media that convey a range of messages; some of which reinforce the desirability of unrealistic and unachievable ideals about appearance, body size, and shape. As a parent, you can play an important role in helping to ensure that your child is exposed to age-appropriate media and helping your child engage with media in a positive way by building their resilience to negative messages about appearance. To do this, you need to be aware of the messages your child is exposed to, and how they can influence your child's attitudes and behaviours.

what are the media messages my child might be exposed to?

Children's media often present characters in stereotypical roles. For example, lead female characters are often thin and/or pretty and lead male characters are often muscular. Appearance can also be associated with personal attributes, such as the "attractive" person is the hero, and the "unattractive" character is the villain. Certainly this is not the case with every story, nor the only message, but research tells us that stories depicting obvious gender stereotypes can strongly influence the way young children perceive their own roles and appearance.

Media for older audiences may be viewed by children and can be particularly harmful if they do not have the ability to critique or reject the messages being presented. TV shows for older audiences (e.g. weight-loss reality shows, soap operas, health talk shows, top 40 music videos) can convey powerful messages that suggest that those who are overweight are bad people, or failures, and that to be considered successful and attractive one must be muscular or thin.

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how are children influenced by what they see in media?

Research suggests that media messages can influence children's perceptions of, and attitudes towards themselves, others, and the world. The more children are exposed to messages that focus on the importance of appearance, the more likely they are to take on board these ideals as their own ideals, and use them to define what happy, successful, or popular men and women, boys and girls, "should" look like. This can lead children to believe that the only way to feel better about themselves is to change their size, shape, weight or appearance.

what can I do if my child is exposed to negative messages in age-appropriate media?

Some children's stories contain messages that may not be helpful for positive body image.

- In these stories, help your child focus on values that are not linked to a character 's shape, size, weight, or appearance.
- Be actively critical of messages about appearance in front of your child. This can improve your child's resilience to the negative media messages.
- Limit exposure to messages that promote unrealistic body ideals, but also encourage your child to experience messages that can boost their self-esteem and body confidence (e.g. stories that emphasise the importance of friendship)
- As a parent, you can play an important role in helping your child develop body confidence and resilience to negative media messages.

how do I decide what are appropriate messages for my child to be exposed to?

Exposure to media is almost unavoidable for children. So, try to ensure that what they are exposed to is age-appropriate by thinking about the messages being conveyed. Consider the following:

- Is there a good balance of messages in the story? (e.g. as well as being pretty, the lead female may also be assertive, kind, and independent, or as well as being muscular, the lead male may also be caring, considerate, and humorous)
- Are there messages directly connecting physical appearance with desirable or less desirable traits? (e.g. having more or less friends)
- Are there messages suggesting that if the character changed their body or appearance, their life would be better? (e.g. bigger, taller, less freckles)
- Are there messages about traits unrelated to appearance? (e.g. kindness, acceptance of others, helping and sharing)