Are less gendered characters a way to reach boys and girls?

Results of qualitative and quantitative IZI studies with 3- to 8-year-old children

In the process of creating a new character for a children’s programme the question of gender plays an important role, for boy characters and even more so for the development of a girl character. For example, whether she is going to be a “real” (i.e. girlish) girl or a “tomboy” (i.e. not a “real” girl) – and according to the developers’ imagination of what that specifically means we often find well-known gender stereotypes and ideas on what might be attractive for girls or boys.

A new trend: characters are purposefully less gendered

In quality programmes for preschool-age children in the last few years a different interesting trend can be observed: gender stereotypes are not only broken deliberately or replaced by counter-stereotypes, but the characters are purposefully less gendered. Well-known examples are (the female dog) Blue from Blue’s Clues or the 3 Wonder Pets (2 of whom are girls and one is a boy).

In their cases, the personal attributes as well as their shapes are not referring to gender stereotypes, but leave the gender question more open towards the viewer’s decision.

In the following, a case study of the development of a character which should be attractive for boys and girls and not too stereotypically gendered is introduced and the ways and research questions that emerged in the development are briefly described.

Qualitative tests of the new bunny

The German public broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) planned to introduce a new character in their preschool programme Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten (Engl. The programme with the elephant), the younger spin-off of the famous German quality children’s programme Die Sendung mit der Maus (Engl. The programme with the mouse).

A pink bunny for boys and girls?

The new character should be a bunny, which should be emotionally expressive, full of energy, creative and a kind of big sister of the main character, the little blue elephant. In order to fit in the already existing cast the character had to be pink for certain production reasons. Because of the colour, girls would have a potentially higher affinity to the new character, and in the beginning the character was created accordingly: The designers drew a figure with an oversized head, a thin throat, a mischievous, flirtatious smile, and ribbons tied to its ears.

With or without hair ribbons?

Of the 35 children of kindergarten age who could choose between the versions of the pink bunny with or without the bow, 13 girls and 1 boy chose the picture with the ribbons, 17 boys and 4 girls picked the version without it. As was expected, the ribbons tied to the ear made the character more fetching for girls. Although that might be attractive for licensed products it is rather restrictive for a quality programme to which girls and boys should equally respond.
Is the colour pink a problem?
The way boys and girls played with
the new character was monitored in
explorative groups. Preschool chil-
dren played freely with clay figures
of the orange Mouse, the blue Ele-
phant and the pink Bunny (see ill. 1).
We observed that:
1 the children accepted right away
that there was a new character,
2 girls and boys played with the pink
bunny figure in a similar way.
The colour pink did not make the
character less attractive for boys.

Should the bunny’s name be “Pink”?
For some time it was
discussed to give the
new character an in-
dividualised name,
for example “Pink”, in-
stead of naming it in
the same way as the
other 3 ones (Mouse, Ele-
phant, Duck), in
accordance with the
kind of animal they
are. Especially the
boys did not like that.
When Manuel (3
years old) was asked
while playing with the clay figures:
“Can you imagine that the bunny has
got a name, Pink for instance? Should
that be its name?” he shook his head
disgustedly: “Nooo, its name isn’t
Pink! It’s name is, um, Bunny!” Like
the ribbon tied to the ears, the name
“Pink” defines the bunny too much
and restricts its meaning for the boy.

Is the physical appearance
of the bunny the right one?
What’s more, the physical appearance
of the character was challenged more
categorically. It became clear quite
soon — when we made the clay figure
of the character — that the proportions
did not really fit together, that for
example the thin throat could not car-
ry the bunny’s head, and that the bun-
y’s posture would always be a bit
ducked.

The interviewed mothers also had
more criticism than praise for the pro-
totype: “This is an inappropriate role
model for my daughters” one of the
mothers said for example. Therefore,
the creative department revised the
character again and more thorough-
ly. The basic idea was to create a char-
acter which is not so much a gender
stereotype and attracts girls as well
as boys. This was the version the edi-
torial staff chose for the new bunny
character.

Is the less gendered
character the favourite one?
In a representative quantitative study
we tested the 2 layouts of the bunny:
the first draft and the less gendered
version (see ill. 2). The research ques-
tions were:
• Do boys and girls think the bunny
  is a boy or a girl and what reasons
do they give?
• Which of the two versions is more
  likely to be chosen as a toy pet?
651 representatively selected children
between 3 und 8 years where inter-
viewed face-to-face.¹
The results: the version of the bunny
with ribbons was identified as a girl
by 85 % of the children. There were
no significant gender differences,
only that the younger boys identified
the bunny more often as a boy. The
main reason (answered freely) were
the ribbons tied to the ears (68 %),
the colour pink (50 %) and by far the
fact that it is so sweet and cute (18 %).
70 % of the girls and 39 % of the boys
would like to have the bunny as a toy.
The end version of the bunny was
identified as a girl by 48 % of the boys
and 62 % of the girls. With age the
percentage of the boys decreases and
the girls’ percentage increases. The
main reason given was the colour
pink (77 %) and that the bunny is so
sweet and cute (38 %). 73 % of the
girls and 47 % of the boys would like
to have the bunny as a toy.
The results give a positive feedback
towards the development. The gen-
der of the end version is more open
to the children’s own perspective and
the changes towards a less gendered
character made it more attractive for
preschool-age boys and girls.

¹ Carried out by iconkids & youth, Munich, Ger-
many, March to April 2008.

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