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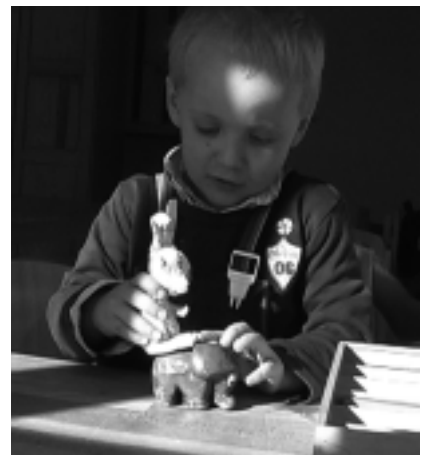
In the following, a case study of the development of a character which should be attractive for boys and girls and not too stereotypically gendered is introduced and the ways and research questions that emerged in the development are briefly described.

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

Ill. 1: **Play situation with the new bunny and the elephant**

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 children played freely with clay figures of the orange Mouse, the blue Elephant 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.
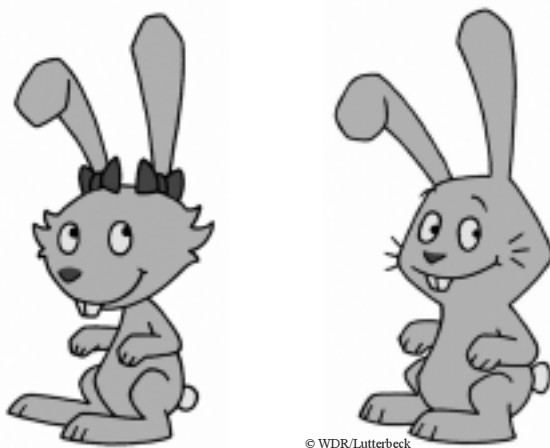
Should the bunny's name be "Pink"?

For some time it was discussed to give the new character an individualised name, for example "Pink", instead of naming it in the same way as the other 3 ones (Mouse, Elephant, 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 carry the bunny's head, and that the bunny's posture would always be a bit ducked.

The interviewed mothers also had more criticism than praise for the prototype: "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 thoroughly. The basic idea was to create a character which is not so much a gender stereotype and attracts girls as well as boys. This was the version the editorial staff chose for the new bunny character.

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Ill. 2: **Different versions of the bunny: the first layout with hair ribbons (left) and the less gendered version (right)**

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 questions 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 interviewed 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 gender 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. ■

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