Gender and Digital Life

What Does Gender Have to Do With Digital Citizenship and Literacy?

Imagine that you’re shopping with a little girl for a Halloween costume. You see packages filled with pink princess dresses, sparkly skirts, and even bikini tops — all geared toward girls. Now imagine that you’re shopping with a little boy, sifting through costumes of muscular superheroes and action-adventure characters. The messages about boys and girls that kids see in toy stores, TV shows, movies, games, apps, and virtual worlds play a powerful role in framing their sense of what’s “acceptable” and what isn’t. The problem is that the media often encourages narrow definitions of boys’ and girls’ roles. When kids absorb and accept these gender stereotypes, they’re more likely to be misinformed about how the world perceives them, how they perceive themselves, and, most important, what they can grow up to be.

Why Does It Matter?

Overexposure to gender stereotypes can place kids’ physical and mental health at risk. And because kids today are not only media consumers but also media creators, they may mirror these stereotypes while texting, messaging, posting comments, or developing their own digital works. When kids are exposed to rigid ideas about boys’ and girls’ roles through their peers — both online or offline — it can be hard to convince them not to adopt those ideas.

Your students need to develop media literacy skills now, not later. As elementary school educators teach kids how to read literature and informational texts, they have a unique opportunity to also equip them with media and digital literacy skills. Kids can apply questions about authorship, content, context, and validity to many different forms of digital media -- online ads, websites, and even virtual worlds.

Early discussions about gender can help diffuse digital drama in the future. Preteens aren’t immune to issues like online drama, cyberbullying, and even sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not the technology itself. When a child chooses to be a bystander, rather than an upstander, it’s often because she’s concerned about social repercussions. And boys and girls face different consequences for showing separateness from their peers. If kids can unpack “gender codes” at an early age, they may be more likely to handle any drama related to them later on.

Not Your Specialty? Not a Problem!

There are more classroom connections than you think. Talking about gender roles can create an easy segue between the subject you regularly teach — whether it’s history, English, or health and wellness — and a class discussion about digital citizenship. Refer to the following tips to help you get started.
tips for ...

ALL TEACHERS

Know the difference between gender and sex. Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Gender is about how a culture defines terms like “masculine,” “feminine,” and everything in between. Sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology. For example, when you separate a class into groups of boys and girls, you’re separating them by sex, not by gender.

Get creative with Common Core. You don’t have to stray from Common Core standards to teach media literacy. There are plenty of informational texts about media messages that elementary school students can read and interpret. Also, students can expand on concepts like “the author’s purpose” and apply them to examples of multimedia. Kids should know that videos and ads represent a point of view and that they’re meant to persuade, inform, and/or entertain their viewers.

Grab headlines, and make them teachable moments. Current events — whether in politics, sports, or popular culture — can spark meaningful conversations about gender roles. Draw connections between issues in the press and your students’ everyday lives.

Debunk stereotypes about STEM and gender. Encourage kids — especially girls — to problem-solve, design, and experiment in the areas of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Look out for any negative attitudes in your class that might encourage girls to think they’re less capable of engaging with these subjects.