Diversity in Media and Why Visibility Matters

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

America’s Got Talent Makes History

In a poignant and historical finale, Kodi Lee won the 14th season of America’s Got Talent in September 2019. The win was groundbreaking because Lee, an Asian-American man, is a person who has autism and is blind. With his victory, Lee provides inspiration and affirmation for those who share these identity traits, which are rarely seen in mainstream media. For others, Lee’s visibility on stage offers the chance to see and learn about someone whose identity characteristics may be unfamiliar or seldom seen.

Other recent examples of diverse representation in media include:
Lack of Diversity in Movies

Our nation’s demographics are increasingly diverse. This has engendered significant progress in media representation, reflecting more diversity including race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other marginalized groups. However, there is still much room for improvement.

The 2019 Hollywood Diversity Report reveals that women made up 32.9%, and people of color made up 19.8% of lead film roles. Across the 100 top-grossing movies of 2018, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that only 1.6% of characters were depicted with a disability, and only two portrayed a gay protagonist.

Mirrors and Windows

- In 2014, Ms. Marvel, AKA Kamala Khan, was introduced as the first Muslim-American superhero.
- In 2017, a remake of the famous One Day at a Time TV show featured a Latinx family living in L.A.
- In 2018, the film Black Panther, made by a Black director and starring a mostly African-American cast, was the second highest-grossing film that year.
- In 2019, Halle Bailey, an African-American actress, was selected for the role of Ariel in the upcoming remake of The Little Mermaid.
- In 2019, Ali Stoker, an actress who uses a wheelchair, won a Tony Award and performed at the ceremony as the character Ado Annie from the musical Oklahoma!
- Over the past several years, there have been several popular TV shows featuring transgender characters and story lines including, Orange Is the New Black, Pose, I am Jazz, Shameless, and more.
“Windows” and “mirrors” are often used to describe the diversity, or lack of, found in children’s books. Mirror books, or any other type of media from movies to TV shows, reflect to people who they are, so they can see themselves. Mirror books provide reflections of social group identity characteristics like culture, race, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Mirror books help validate one’s identity and experience when the portrayals reflect the complexity of people’s identities rather than perpetuate stereotypes.

Window books (or movies, television shows, etc.) provide a view into other people’s lives and experiences for which people may be unfamiliar. Window books provide information about and insight into identity groups they may not know much about. Ideally, they provide complex portrayals of different people and complicate our thinking about these identity groups. Window books can help create meaningful connections between the reader and people from other identity groups.

Representation of certain identity groups in the media and elsewhere is often minimal or non-existent, particularly for those in marginalized groups. Even when there is visibility, sometimes those portrayals are one-dimensional, stereotypical or negative. This deficiency contributes to a lack of understanding of and empathy for different people. It can contribute to our biases, both implicit and explicit. That makes it even more important to represent those groups.

**Age**
8 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- Why was it a big deal that Kodi Lee won *America's Got Talent*?
- What do you think his win means to those who identify as Lee does (i.e., Asian-American, autistic, blind)?
Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What movies and televisions show do you (or we, as a family) tend to watch? How diverse are they and why do you think that is?
- What do you think the impact is of the media we consume, both positive and negative?
- Are there other things in your life that you feel lack diversity (e.g., media, technology, books, school, toys, games, etc.)? Please explain.

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Conduct your own study about the television shows or movies you watch most frequently. Examine the extent to which they include diverse characters and whether stereotypes or one-dimensional characters are portrayed.
- Talk with others at school, including staff and administrators, about analyzing the diversity in the school's curriculum, imagery, literature, and technology. Then discuss how to enhance the diversity throughout different aspects of the school.
- Write to a television network, movie producer, advertising company or book publisher. Tell them your thoughts about the lack of diversity in their work.
Or, if one of those companies is doing well on diversity, send them a letter commending their efforts.

**Additional Resources**

- On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Representing the People: Diversity and Elections (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Diverse Books Matter (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Why Is It Important to Teach Young Children to Appreciate Diversity?
- Safe and Inclusive Schools for All