

Seeing is believing

Children learn how to grow up from their own direct experience of life - what they are allowed to do, and what not, and how they get spanked for behaving one way and praised for being 'good'. And they model themselves on their own fathers and mothers - none of us can help doing that. But they also build up their world from what they see about them, and they can see quite a lot about what we think is masculine and what we think is feminine, if they keep their eyes open.

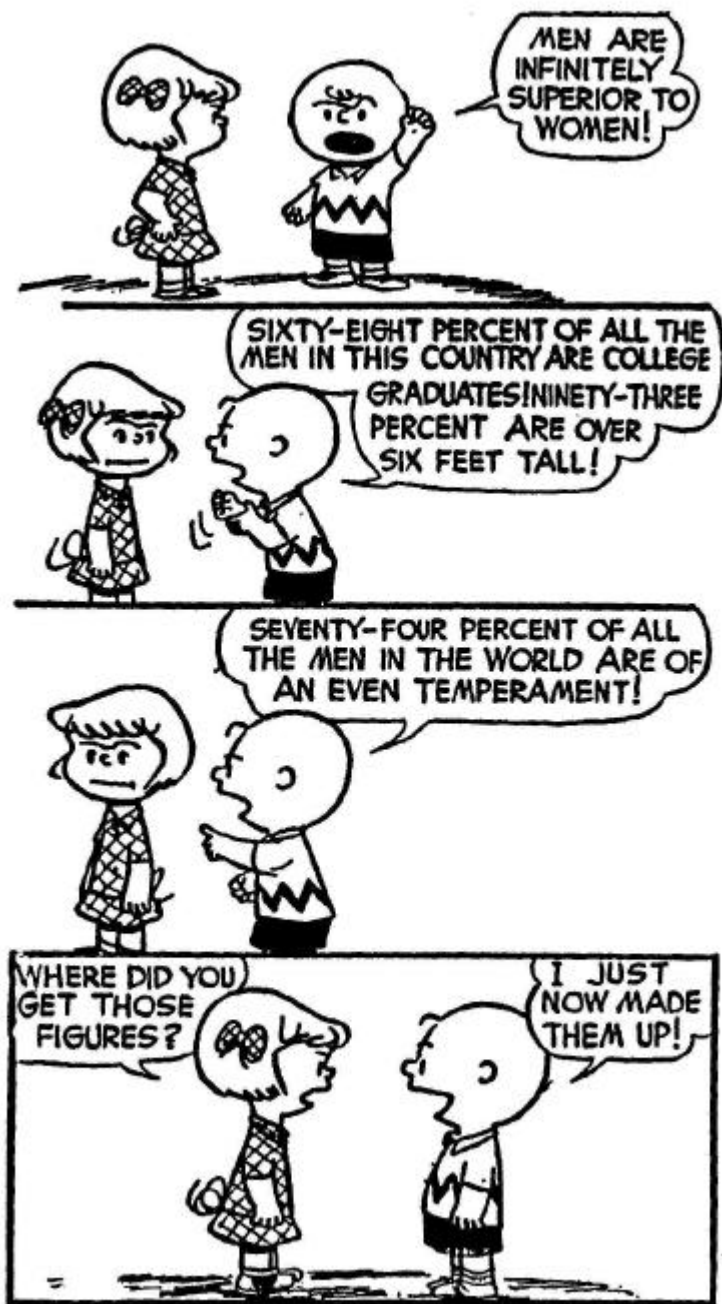
Go to the library and look at some picture books for little children. You will see girls with dolls and boys with trains, animals dressed up as females cooking and shopping, animals dressed up as males kicking balls and driving cars. The older the child gets, the more the details are filled in.

Of course, traditional stories like 'Sleeping Beauty' are bound to have old, fashioned kinds of heroes and heroines. But what about modern television programmes for the under fives? Do you remember seeing Andy Pandy and Teddy 'boy' puppets, playing all the games, while the 'girl' Louby Lou (not even animated while they were about) had to clear up all the mess they made without them seeing her?

Next time you are in a shop that sells birthday cards, look at the ones for children. A great many of them are clearly sex differentiated. And then look at the gift wrapping paper: unless you go for asexual stripes and abstract patterns, don't think the paper left over from wrapping Joe's birthday present will do for Jane's - it won't.

Even food can carry the message. Sweets, breakfast cereals, ice lollies - all things that children like - often carry, instructions about which sex is to eat what.

So by the time children reach school age they have had five years of 'You are a boy - this is what boys



do' or 'You are a girl girls behave.' From the beginning the girl's attention is directed in: on herself and on the home. The boy looks out: curious and adventurous, laser gun in hand, outer space is the limit.