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.

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. For example, imagine explaining to a girl why she shouldn’t compare herself to an airbrushed photo of a model in an ad. Now imagine having the same conversation with her about the model-type photos she sees of her friends online. Which conversation do you think would be more challenging?

In this digital age, it’s important for kids to develop media-literacy skills early on. Parents, relatives, teachers, and other adult mentors are uniquely positioned to help kids analyze the gender messages they see on TV, at the movies, in ads, in games, and online – and to encourage them not to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Point out photos that look too good to be true. When you are standing in line at the grocery store with your children, take a look at the magazine covers. Explain how publishers use computers to airbrush images of people. And point out elements of our bodies that would normally be captured in photos but are missing there – like freckles, veins, or wisps of hair.

Seek out positive role models. The fictional characters and stars that kids idolize may not paint a complete picture of boys and girls’ roles. Help expand their horizons by finding role models in books, on TV, in movies, and in real life that show kids how they can be recognized for their talents and brains rather than their looks.

Challenge assumptions. Depending on your kids’ ages, you can talk about common stereotypes and debunk your kids’ accepting them. Use examples from the real world to show that media portrayals often aren’t accurate– like all blondes are dumb, for example.