

Is Princess Culture Hurting Little Girls?

By Paige Towers • June 22, 2016 at 4:48pm

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Many people remember Cinderella for her billowing blue dress, tiny waist and golden hair; many others remember her for being so weak and unassertive that a bunch of dopey male mice literally had to step up and help a girl out until she finally nailed down a husband. And while Disney's portrayal of women has made a few strides — for instance, Mulan wielded a sword, Pocahontas had some wicked paddling skills and Merida from “Brave” defeated a bunch of dudes in an archery contest — are things actually better? As a recent study shows, even though Disney princesses are now, you know,

, that still might not make up for Disney's continual mass marketing of sexist stereotypes to young'uns.

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doing things

Many parents turn to Disney for their kids' entertainment, perhaps because it seems like a safe haven in a world of gore and sexfilled media. But newly published research

from Brigham Young University

(BYU) found that little girls who regularly engaged with Disney princess culture were more likely to adhere to damaging gender stereotypes. In fact, this trend can spell trouble in the future when girls later avoid learning experiences or activities that aren't perceived as feminine — or when they're under the impression that their life opportunities are different than a man's.

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In order to gauge princess engagement and gender stereotypical behavior, the study surveyed parents and teachers to assess to what degree 198 preschoolaged children interacted with Disney Princess culture. They found that while 96 percent of girls and 87 percent of boys had previously viewed Disney media, only 4 percent of those boys played with princess toys at least once a week, and 61 percent of those girls reached for princess toys during the same time period.

What are the implications of this? One year later, the researchers found a clear link between increased princess facetime and more female genderstereotypical behaviors. In fact, researchers discovered that the sexism present in Disney films, toys and other products could potentially cause longterm damage on girls' body selfesteem, ability to problemsolve, interest in math and science and #lifegoals. Meanwhile, the female stereotypes presented in Disney culture wasn't so problematic for the boys in the study — they had better body esteem and strived to be more helpful to others.

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It's not always easy to raise a confident and empowered little girl in a culture where female characters in movies and other media are often portrayed as damsels in distress with anatomically impossible thigh gaps. But perhaps we can start evaluating how other facets of culture impact our children's perceptions of gender in other realms. For instance, the peaceful activity that so often signals the end of so many children's days — reading and telling bedtime stories — is frequently littered with sexist stereotypes as well.

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Since bedtime stories are our kids' last interaction with the outside world before sinking into sleep, maybe we can moderate the ratio of helpless princess stories to powerful female characters stories. After all, wouldn't we prefer that our little girls fall asleep dreaming about being as spunky and independent as Beverly Cleary's Ramona, or a fearless adventurer like David Elliott's Evangeline Mudd — both of whom might be tougher than Merida? Or why not read them "Winners Never Quit," by soccer star Mia Hamm, or "Swamp

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"Angel," by Anne Isaacs, which features a young woodswoman who does everything from wrestling bears to building her own log cabin. Now there's a role model.

If you're interested in further nonDisney bedtime reading, here is a PBScreated list
of empowering books for girls to get you started.

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