

Study finds Disney Princess culture magnifies stereotypes in young girls

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Children don't have to completely disengage with princess culture, but parents should foster a wide variety of interests and talk to their kids about media influences, according to new research from BYU. Credit: Mark A. Philbrick/

Parents tend to be careful about what media their children consume and often look to ratings to guide their movie choices. But one symbol might be more powerful than any rating or review—the Disney logo. Heralded by adults and kids alike, Disney Princess animated movies are the quintessential "kids' movies," positive and enjoyable for all.

But new research from BYU family life professor Sarah M. Coyne shows that engagement with Disney Princess culture isn't so harmless—it can influence preschoolers to be more susceptible to potentially damaging stereotypes. These stereotypical behaviors aren't bad in and of themselves, but past research has shown that they can be limiting in the long term for young women.

"I think parents think that the Disney Princess culture is safe. That's the word I hear time and time again—it's 'safe,'" Coyne said. "But if we're fully jumping in here and really embracing it, parents should really consider the long-term impact of the princess culture."

The study, published in *Child Development*, involved 198 preschoolers and assessed how much they interacted with Disney Princess culture (watching movies, playing with toys, etc.). The assessments of princess engagement and gender-stereotypical behavior were based on reports from parents and teachers and an interactive task where the children would sort and rank their favorite toys from a varied collection of "girl" toys (dolls, tea sets), "boy" toys (action figures, tool sets) and gender-neutral options (puzzles, paint).

The researchers found that 96 percent of girls and 87 percent of boys had viewed Disney Princess media. And while more than 61 percent of girls played with princess toys at least once a week, only four percent of boys did the same.

For both boys and girls, more interactions with the princesses predicted

more female gender-stereotypical behavior a year later.



Disney has come a long way, but still has some work to do, says Coyne.

Gendered behavior can become problematic if girls avoid important learning experiences that aren't perceived as feminine or believe their opportunities in life are different as women.

"We know that girls who strongly adhere to female gender stereotypes feel like they can't do some things," Coyne said. "They're not as confident that they can do well in math and science. They don't like getting dirty, so they're less likely to try and experiment with things."

Greater female stereotypical behavior isn't worrisome for boys because the boys in the study who engaged with Disney Princess media had better body esteem and were more helpful to others. These beneficial effects suggest that princesses provide a needed counterbalance to the hyper-masculine superhero media that's traditionally presented to boys.

However, the negative effects for girls aren't limited to damaging stereotypical behavior alone. The study also shows that girls with worse body esteem engage more with the Disney Princesses over time, perhaps seeking out role models of what they consider to be beautiful.

"Disney Princesses represent some of the first examples of exposure to the thin ideal," Coyne said. "As women, we get it our whole lives, and it really does start at the Disney Princess level, at age three and four."

Children don't have to completely disengage with princess culture—it's not realistic to avoid the abundant princess movies, toys and branded merchandise. Instead, parents should foster a wide variety of interests and talk to their kids about media influences.

"I'd say, have moderation in all things," Coyne said. "Have your kids involved in all sorts of activities, and just have princesses be one of many, many things that they like to do and engage with."

For both genders, the study discovered that parents who discuss princess media with their children have a significant effect on their children's behavior. Coyne adds that it's important to be careful about the way in which parents talk to their kids about princesses.

"It's frustrating when the dentist sees my daughter and says, 'Look at the little princess!' because she's so much more than that," Coyne said.

"When we talk to little girls, we hear less of 'You're so smart, you worked so hard, your body can do great things!' but that is the more important message we should be sending."

Parents also shouldn't be afraid to discuss the good and bad of Disney Princess culture. Coyne says not to get too heavy with younger children, but pointing out the positives and negatives can help kids be more aware of the media they're consuming. She's even done this with her own daughter:

"What drives me crazy is when you get a [princess](#) who's not gender stereotyped, like Merida from Brave," Coyne said. "I took my daughter to see it, and afterward we had a great conversation about how strong, brave and independent Merida was in the movie. And then in the marketing, Disney slims her down, sexualizes her, takes away her bow and arrow, gives her makeup—feminizes her. So then we're at the supermarket and see this 'new Merida' on fruit snacks and soup cans, and I point it out to my daughter and we have a conversation about the difference. And now when we're at the store, she'll see the soup can herself and say, 'That's not the real Merida and I'm not buying it.'"

Coyne is not alone in her thinking. In 2013, a [petition on change.org](#) from [A Mighty Girl](#) has more than 260,000 supporters to #KeepMeridaBrave.

Coyne's daughter was three years old when work began on the study, and while it's rare for Coyne's research to impact her life directly, these findings hit close to home.

"This study has changed the way I talk to my daughter, the things I focus on, and it's been really good for me as a parent to learn from this study,"

Coyne said. "I usually can't say that my research findings have such a personal impact on my life."

Coyne has authored more than 80 studies on media influences, gender, aggression and developmental psychology in top peer-reviewed publications. Her work on how profanity in the media increases teen aggression appeared in *Pediatrics* and another study on how video games can be good for girls was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

More information: Sarah M. Coyne et al, Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children, *Child Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12569](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12569)

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