

Theater provides body image boost for children

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New research has found for the first time that theater productions can help to promote healthier body image in young children.

Led by Professor Viren Swami of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), the new study evaluated the responses of [children](#) aged 5-9 before and after attending productions of Cinderella: the AWESOME Truth at a [theater](#) in London.

Previous research suggests that children begin to understand societal standards of appearance by the age of five, and [body dissatisfaction](#) begins to develop in both girls and boys from the age of six onwards.

Professor Swami, a [body image](#) expert, was consulted during the development of Cinderella: the AWESOME Truth, with the aim of producing a show that could help children develop positive body image and self-image.

A contemporary new version of the traditional story was developed via workshops with over 200 children. The show includes topics such as body shaming and its effects, managing appearance expectations and anxieties, the impact of social media on body image, and the value of friendships in promoting healthier body attitudes and improved self-esteem. Children learn that what makes them "awesome" is what they and their bodies can do, not what they look like.

The researchers recruited 54 girls and 45 boys, and their body appreciation was measured before and after watching the show, which was staged at the Polka Theater in Wimbledon. The participants also answered open-ended questions about their own uniqueness and awesomeness.

Published in the journal *Body Image*, the research found that body appreciation scores for both boys and girls improved after watching the production. The number of responses covering what made them "unique" or "awesome" also increased post-attendance, for both boys and girls.

Importantly, these improvements were achieved while maintaining near universal enjoyment of the show and delivering key learning outcomes, as assessed through the children's qualitative responses.

Viren Swami, Professor of Social Psychology at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), says that "we know that body and appearance dissatisfaction is associated with detrimental health and psychological outcomes, including symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, disordered eating, and decreased physical activity, and this can begin in children as young as six."

"Due to social media, children are becoming aware of unrealistic and unhealthy aspects of body image at an ever-younger age. Therefore, it is important to find new ways of countering these threats by delivering positive messages to young children. We have found that theater is one way of successfully talking to [young children](#) about appearance and positive body image."

"It may not be feasible to reach all children through theater given production costs and barriers to attendance, for example ticket prices. However, we have shown there is merit in using theatrical performances to promote healthy body image messages, as well as potentially embedding drama and theater with a body image focus in school-based curricula."

Co-author of the study Sarah Punshon, who wrote and directed *Cinderella: the AWESOME Truth for One Tenth Human* says that "children's theater has huge potential to promote positive body image. Engaging storylines, relatable characters, and the use of 'magic' and music are all key."

"Developing the show via in-depth exploration with children meant we could tap into current concerns and desires, and create a story which

emphasizes that what really makes a person awesome is what they and their bodies can do, not what they look like. We're particularly delighted that the improvement was attained for both boys and girls—previous studies have suggested that body image interventions may be less effective for boys."

Peter Glanville, Artistic Director of the Polka Theater, says that "it's wonderful to have rigorous evidence of the impact of this unique co-production. We know from comments received that audience members carried on singing the songs and talking about the show long after the curtain went down. Cinderella was an antidote to so many of the prevailing negative images children and their families are confronted with."

More information: Viren Swami et al, Promoting positive body image in children through theatre: An evaluation of Cinderella: the AWESOME Truth, *Body Image* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.05.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.05.006)

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