

'Too fat to be a princess?' Study shows young girls worry about body image

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Even before they start school, many young girls worry that they are fat. But a new study suggests watching a movie starring a stereotypically thin and beautiful princess may not increase children's anxieties.

Nearly half of the 3- to 6-year-old girls in a study by University of Central Florida psychology professor Stacey Tantleff-Dunn and doctoral student Sharon Hayes said they worry about being fat. About one-third would change a physical attribute, such as their weight or hair color.

The number of girls worried about being fat at such a young age concerns Tantleff-Dunn because of the potential implications later in life. Studies have shown that young girls worried about their [body image](#) are more likely to suffer from eating disorders when they are older.

The encouraging news for parents is that taking their young daughters to see the new Disney film "The Princess and the Frog" isn't likely to influence how they perceive their bodies.

The UCF study, published online this week in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, concluded that young girls' behavior or self-esteem did not appear to be influenced by video clips of the beautiful, thin princesses in animated children's movies. That's a sharp contrast to earlier studies showing how the self-esteem of older girls and women suffers after short-term exposure to thin, beautiful models on television and in the movies.

While the study found no short-term consequences for young girls, the media's portrayal of beauty likely is one of the strongest influences on how they perceive their bodies because children spend so much time watching movies and television, Tantleff-Dunn said.

That's why it's important for parents to use movies such as "The Princess and the Frog," which premieres Nov. 25 in New York and Los Angeles and Dec. 11 nationwide, to start conversations with their children about weight, [skin color](#) and their perceptions of beauty, she said. They can explain that princesses' tiny waists are not realistic for girls and that children don't need Cinderella's golden hair or Snow White's porcelain skin to look good.

"We need to help our children challenge the images of beauty, particularly thinness, that they see and idolize and encourage them to question how much appearance should be part of their self-worth," said Tantleff-Dunn, who directs UCF's Laboratory for the Study of Eating, Appearance and Health. "We should help them build a positive self-image with an appreciation for many different types of body attributes."

Criticism and teasing from parents, siblings and peers also shape how young girls perceive their bodies, Tantleff-Dunn said. And as their children's most important role models, parents also should avoid criticizing their own bodies.

During the study, each of the 121 girls was taken into a room with a "playmate" -- a trained research associate in her 20s who had experience working with children. After chatting for several minutes, the playmate asked each girl how she feels about the way she looks. Thirty-one percent indicated they almost always worry about being fat, while another 18 percent said they sometimes worry about it.

Half of the girls watched parts of animated children's movies such as

Cinderella that featured young, beautiful characters and appearance-focused comments, such as Gaston telling Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* that she is "the most beautiful girl in town, and that makes her the best." The second group watched parts of animated children's movies such as *Dora the Explorer* and *Clifford the Big Red Dog* that do not contain any appearance-related messages.

In a room that featured a dress-up rack of costumes, a vanity, dinosaurs and more, children then spent about the same amount of time on appearance-related play activities, such as brushing their hair at the vanity, regardless of which set of movies they watched.

While older girls and women tend to compare their bodies to the models', younger children may be more likely to adopt the persona of the princesses while playing, the UCF researchers said.

Source: University of Central Florida ([news](#) : [web](#))

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