

Children with asthma marginalized in movies, researcher says

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This summer, superheroes like Spider-Man, Batman, and even Snow White will showcase their staggering strengths on the big screen.

A Rutgers–Camden professor says that [children](#) with [asthma](#) are the real-life superheroes, facing down breathlessness and operating life-saving devices whenever and wherever asthma attacks strike.

Cindy Dell Clark, who teaches anthropology at Rutgers–Camden, recently published research that analyzes Hollywood's portrayal of children with asthma in the journal *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*.

According to Clark, Hollywood often depicts children with asthma, the leading chronic illness of U.S. children, as vulnerable characters, not heroes. Showcasing asthma as a form of weakness adds drama to action films and levity to comedies. The habit of stereotyping asthma in movies, her research suggests, should be rethought by Hollywood and its writers.

Clark says the media, as well as other social contexts like school and peers, matter significantly for how the 9% of Americans under 18 with asthma view their illness and commit to its treatment. Adherence to medication for severe asthma, which requires steady attention and consistent relationships with physicians to monitor symptoms, can fall short among children and adolescents.

"Asthma is not a telethon disease," Clark quotes a mother of a child with

asthma in her studies. "People don't understand the nature of a child suffering with asthma," adds the Rutgers–Camden researcher. "As a society, we don't want to pay attention; we don't want to face up to the fact that inhaling the air around us, including polluted air, can impede breathing and sometimes life."

In her research, 66 films that dramatized asthma were analyzed, including *Goonies*, *Toy Story 2*, *As Good As It Gets*, *Signs*, and *Without A Paddle*. The analysis revealed four main ways of stereotyping asthma: implying that the character with asthma is wimpy; that asthmatic breathing is how a person with asthma reacts under stress; that if a child would just exert enough willpower, asthma can be overcome; and in a couple of movies, that the character can attack their enemies through asthma, such as using an inhaler as a weapon.

"None of these stereotypes have medical backing," notes Clark, who points out that when asthmatic children experience an attack, time and again remain calm. For instance, children have to convince the teacher that they need to get their inhaler (from the school nurse), all while calmly enduring poor breathing until they obtain relief. "If asthma was so widely psychosomatic, as movies imply, it would not be so pronounced in geographic areas of extreme air pollution," she adds.

To learn how children react to movie scenes with asthma, Clark interviewed children ages 9-12, including kids with asthma and kids who were the best friends of asthmatic children. Clark's research shows that stereotypes in movies do influence healthy kids to believe that asthma is stress-induced, even though their asthmatic friend shows otherwise. The research also showed that children with asthma resented the way their illness was depicted and worried that what they saw was a harbinger of stigma and unfair treatment.

The Rutgers–Camden researcher says that asthmatics' use in movie

narratives has been a plot element as early as 1943 in the film *Song of Bernadette*. She's also seen several movies and television shows utilizing asthmatic stereotypes since her study was concluded.

"Asthma is an extremely common and very frightening condition. My own ethnographic research shows the troubles and necessary courage children with asthma have. It is too bad that movie scripts fall back on a lazy writer's stereotype so often, and depict asthma as worth being stigmatized."

More information: Clark is the author of the books *In Sickness and in Play: Children coping with Chronic Illness* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), *Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), and most recently, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research* (Oxford, 2011).

Provided by Rutgers University

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