

Disney princesses can be good for a child's self-image, researchers suggest

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Children have loved Disney princesses since "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" premiered in theaters in 1937. While this adoration continues to grow in terms of princess movie ratings, some parents may wonder what

effects these idealized images of young women might have on how their children feel about and express themselves.

According to new research from the University of California, Davis, a favorite princess improved—but did not harm—young children's confidence in their own bodies and the diversity of the ways in which they chose to play.

"People are critical of Disney princesses," said Jane Shawcroft, a doctoral student researcher in the Department of Communication and lead author of a recent study. But researchers' findings suggest parents, caregivers and mentors might want to give those princesses another look.

The [paper](#), "Ariel, Aurora, or Anna? Disney Princess Body Size as a Predictor of Body Esteem and Gendered Play in Early Childhood," was published online in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media*.

Disney princesses, from Moana to Jasmine

Shawcroft and co-authors at Brigham Young University categorized Disney princesses, who have become more ethnically diverse and nonwhite over time, into three body categories. The categories researchers identified were thin, average and above average/heavy. For example, Moana from the 2016 film by the same name, was coded as having an average body size. Princess Jasmine, from the 1992 film "Aladdin" was coded as being thin.

By far, the most popular princess among both boys and girls in this study was Elsa from the 2013 film "Frozen" and its sequels. The next most popular princesses were Moana followed by Anna, also from Frozen.

Measuring body confidence and free play

The study focused primarily on how the body type of a favorite Disney princess affects children's body esteem, meaning how confident they feel about their own bodies, and their masculine or feminine play. These two criteria—body esteem and gendered play—are parents' most-cited concerns about Disney princesses, said Shawcroft.

The team estimated body esteem by collecting responses from caregivers about how much their children liked, or felt good about, their bodies. A different assessment quantified children's masculine or feminine play based on their choice of toys. Play guns, for example, is considered stereotypically masculine. Pretty things and dolls are considered stereotypically feminine, researchers said.

The study included 340 children and their caregivers living in the Denver area at the time of the study, which took place from 2020 to 2021. A little more than half the children in the study were girls, and about 84% were white. The team surveyed caregivers first when the children were three years old—and again a year later—to measure any changes in body esteem and gendered play.

Diverse play

Whether a princess was average or thin made a big difference in how the children who loved them felt about their own bodies and the way they chose to play. Children whose favorite princesses had an average body—such as Moana—had higher body esteem a year later. These children were also more open to exploring play that was both stereotypically masculine and feminine, and this was true for both boys and girls, researchers said.

These effects were driven by how frequently the children pretended to be princesses when they played. The more a child pretended to be a princess—if their favorite princess had an average and not a thin

body—the better they felt about their own bodies and the more open they were to different types of gendered play, researchers found.

Shawcroft said part of what might explain these results is that Disney princesses with average bodies are more physically active in their stories.

"They're running and climbing enormous mountains and fighting things," said Shawcroft. "For these princesses, their stories are more about what they can do with their bodies than how their bodies look."

Princesses, thin or not, did not cause harm

An important finding, said Shawcroft, was that having a favorite princess who was thin did not change children's body image or gendered play.

Instead, the researchers described the benefits from having a favorite [princess](#) who has an average body as a protective effect for the young children who loved them.

"Princesses with average body size created a protective effect, strengthening how confident children feel about their own bodies and freeing them to play in different ways," Shawcroft said.

She said that researchers learned that Disney princesses matter much more than most people believe, particularly for children—both boys and girls.

"With children's media, people tend to be critical or dismissive of what kids, especially girls, like," said Shawcroft. "Disney princesses really matter to young [children](#), and we should also recognize that media centered on women and that tell women's stories are important."

More information: Jane Shawcroft et al, Ariel, Aurora, or Anna?

Disney princess body size as a predictor of body esteem and gendered play in early childhood., *Psychology of Popular Media* (2023). DOI: [10.1037/ppm0000494](https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000494)

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