

The Lion King, Disney Princesses, and Rising Above Negative Media Messages

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Remember 'the circle of life' in *The Lion King*? What was that all about? Lions are at the top of the food chain and are therefore naturally better than all other animals—especially hyenas, who deserve their poor circumstance? That doesn't sound like the Disney I used to know.

Remember when Princess Ariel gave up her voice? Why did she sacrifice that plus everything she'd ever known for a prince she'd never met? Not sure, but hey, she kept her looks. Maybe she didn't need her voice because she had nothing worthwhile to say?

What about Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*? Yeah! She saved the prince! Yes, but only because of what seems to be her only valuable trait—hint: her name—beauty. The storyline doesn't change much for Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Jasmine and Cinderella—all saved because of their beauty. Didn't they have other virtues?

Not So Innocent Messages

These seemingly innocent stories give potentially harmful messages to an innocent audience: Our children. What is wrong about these media messages is wrong in millions of others, and unless we do something about it as parents, our children will grow up with distorted, negative views on race, gender and class in the real world.

What do these stories and other media messages teach our children—and us—about race, gender, and class? Why should we care and what can we do about it?



What Media Messages Teach Our Children—And Us—About Race, Gender, And Class

A CNN study recently asked randomly-selected black and white children from across the nation about their preferences when it comes to race. A similar study that was done 60 years ago found that an overwhelming majority of both races preferred light-colored skin. And surprisingly—or maybe not—the CNN study found similar results. A majority of both races said they believe light skin is better looking than darker skin, and that lighter-skinned children are more intelligent than those with darker skin.

In our *Lion King* example, the lions are a naturally 'elite' group. One popular scholarly study points out that "the film reinforces the concept of a hierarchical society—a segregated society." Hyenas are portrayed in the Disney movie much like African Americans are seen in popular media—as 'outcasts' (Lind, 2010, p. 144). Thanks for nothing, Mufassa.

Negative media messages regarding gender are in everything from Disney's Princess stories to cologne advertisements in magazines to reality TV shows like 'extreme makeover'. A child doesn't have to be very old to understand that Cinderella was not saved because of her hard work and patience, but because of her looks. And the media doesn't let up as children grow up. As 'Extreme Makeover' teaches us, making dramatic changes to your body is acceptable and rewarding. One researcher argues that today, "women generally do not undergo cosmetic surgery because they feel forced to become beauty queens ... [but] rather ... to attain a feeling of normalcy which might be necessary for their overall sense of well-being and belonging in society" (Lind, 2010, p.196). Sounds more like drudgery than 'happily ever after'.

Men are portrayed negatively at times, but not to the same degree as women. One researcher points out that negative media messages "put [women] into a terrible double bind. They are supposed to repress their power ... their exuberance and be simply 'nice', although they also eventually must compete with men in the business world and be successful. They must be overtly sexy and attractive but essentially passive and virginal" (Lind, 2010, p.144).

Why We Should Care And What We Can Do About It

Parents of children involved in the CNN study were sometimes emotional and confused about why their child preferred lighter skin. Some said they were sure their child didn't learn those stereotypes at home. And maybe they're right, because their child—like every child—has a powerful and



constant teacher that isn't his or her parents: The Media.

Our children will learn about race, gender and class whether we teach them about it or not because the media never stops teaching. It is all around us and always with us; it's in our pockets, at the mall, on our coffee table, in our living room, bedroom and at work with us. Even

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children in poor countries in Africa can watch American television shows and see American advertisements. The media world simply cannot be escaped.

But as parents we can help our children rise above the chaos. We can do this in at least two ways:

First, don't believe everything Mufassa says. And watch out

for Jasmine.

Second, notice and then discuss issues regarding race, gender and class with your child. Start with examples like *The Lion King*, Disney Princesses and TV shows like 'Extreme Makeover'. Becoming aware of negative media messages is essential if we ever hope to rise above them. Look for them in shows, advertisements, movies and songs not mentioned here. You'll find plenty that are appropriate for your child, no matter their age, race, gender or class. You'll never regret paying attention to and discussing these issues with your child, but you might regret doing nothing—negative media messages become more persuasive with each passing day.

They are also becoming more unavoidable, and they will continue to teach about race, gender and class in ways that are proven to be distorted and narrow. You are your child's best defense against these things—not Disney.