

Experts Say Fairy Tales Not So Happy Ever After

Are fairy tales just harmless stories of beautiful princesses, grand adventures, and brave deeds? No, indeed. In reality there are many harmful messages cleverly hidden within these popular stories.

In particular the concern is that fairy tales might be a bad influence on women. For the woman's part of the story, the heroine stays trapped often in a tower guarded by a villain or a dragon. These women do not make an effort to make their own dreams happen and rely on a man to come fix their problems. The girl is then forced to wait for her savior – prince charming or a knight in shining armor to come and fight the dragon and then free her so that she can get married in a huge castle and live happily ever after. Fairy tales teach girls that they are weak and helpless and need a man to make them happy, to take care of them, and complete their lives.

In other words, the woman's portion of the story involves staying trapped in the castle and awaiting her rescue – much as women would once have stayed at home with their parents until they met a man who could support them. Today, though, things are different, and women are expected to live life as they choose and pursue a career and go traveling and do all the other things that men do. However, children who read fairy tales could end up with outdated views of the woman's role and this could potentially have a negative impact on their ambition and their eventual life outcome.

Some studies have suggested that girls who read a lot of fairy tales have lower self-images than others. No wonder when many fairy tales place the utmost value on appearances. This could also be because of the conventional image of the princess – of being slim and beautiful and attracting men from around the world – like Sleeping Beauty, 'Belle' from Beauty and the Beast, or Helen of Troy. Any of these emphasize looks as the most important feature of those princesses (you rarely hear about the over-weight-yet-smart-and-kind princess). This, of course, is not a great message to send in that it again stifles ambition, but it can also be damaging for the self-image of those girls who are not slim and beautiful and may feel worthless and unimportant. This may be worsened by cartoon versions of princesses who again are typically portrayed as slim and beautiful.

Fairy tales, which are still read by millions of American children, say it pays to be pretty. It's important to understand the messages our children receive about traditional gender roles, especially during a time when women are encouraged to be independent and rely on their brains rather than beauty. Women today – despite increasing independence for many – still tend to value beauty and appearance. From early childhood, girls are read fairy tales about princesses who achieve vast riches simply because their beauty makes them special. That's a powerful message that can inhibit young women who feel they do not meet society's expectation of what it means to be attractive. These powerful messages that say women need to be beautiful may compel some women to seek beauty at the expense of other pursuits, such as careers or education.

This emphasis on looks can cut both ways. This emphasis on labeling people based on looks is both dangerous and harmful to children. The message is clear: pretty people are good and valued; so therefore, ugly people must be evil and wicked and deserved to be punished. This teaches children to judge others based on physical appearances rather than on a person's character. This message is particularly troublesome in today's society of inclusion, acceptance of differences, and focus on inner beauty.

Another problem that some might find with fairy tales is that they present a unrealistic view of romantic love. Fairy tales have blown our expectations of love completely out of reality, and this can be dangerous to young, impressionable children who watch or listen to them thinking that things like this actually happen in real life. First of all, they can have children believing in love at first sight. There is absolutely no way you can simply look at someone and instantly fall in love with them. There is attraction, which can make you want to get to know the person, but you cannot fall in a true kind of love solely based on looks. Fairy tales also turn love into a short process. A wedding comes along shortly after the two lovers meet and they are assumed to be happily ever after. It takes time for love to grow, but many people rush into it without much thought. Fairy tales also seem to leave out a lot of the confusion and hardships that come along with love. The prince and princess never have any disagreements and absolutely never get in fights. Everything is always flowery and happy, which does not come close to representing a real relationship.

Fairy tales present a false view of reality. Fairy tale princes lead exciting lives of adventure, heroic deeds, wealth and riches, and true love. For most men there are rarely challenges as heroic as fighting dragons, and the reality tends to be more along the lines of fighting deadlines and pushing pencils. This can lead to dissatisfaction for those whose lives are not quite as exciting or fulfilling as they hoped based upon the fairy tales read as children. Fairy tales do not tend to focus what happens after the hero and the princess ride off into the horizon. What then? Most all the fairy tales that American children know finish with “and they lived happily ever after,” and real life is not always that way. There are struggles and conflicts in life and people are not always happy -- despite what fairy tales would have you think.

While fairy tales do teach some valuable lessons, there are also many negative aspects of these outdated stories. Although fairy tales may seem fun and innocent from the outside, they are teaching children false ideas about love, gender roles, and concepts of good versus evil, which can lead to problems later on with extremely high expectations, depression, body image issues, and an unreal look on life.