

The Effects of Children's Media and literature on their mind and idea of happiness

Introduction

One of the most provocative debates concerning today's youth six and under is whether they are ready to be exposed to complex intricacies of the contemporary world and its imperfection. Many question children's mental capacity to handle these ideologies, due to being unable to form abstract thought. Children gain the summation of what happiness is through childlike scenarios, which is further supplemented by *The Happiness Project*, where a father details his experience at Disney World and ponders the connection between fictional circumstances and ideal happiness (O'Hagan par. 9). The connection influenced by one's childhood filled with depictions of a simplified world, as well as proof the sentimentality remains prevalent in adulthood, can be connected with pleasure. In addition to this, *Virtue and Happiness* conveys how happiness is the most important acquisition in life, "The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable" (Mill par. 1). Seeing as how Mill pertains to happiness as being the end goal for all endeavors, efforts to ensure that the perception of happiness remains realistic are crucial to avoid disappointment. Nicholas Jankowski, former Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, states that most children's media portray real-world events and issues falsely. This misrepresentation influences the child's perception of the world and happiness and could harm them when they come to realize the distinction (Jankowski 1). The prominent danger parents see with children's media, and writing is the way they fabricate issues and ordinary circumstances.

However, other parents believe that it is healthy for children exposed to oversimplified media and literature because when the child can distinguish reality and fiction, they can think

abstractly and understand the intent that connects the two. With children worldwide exposed to content like this, with varying reception, many wonder what the best course of action is for the healthy mental development of children. Many are concerned that, if not handled efficiently, it could result in a countless number of children with serious psychological problems stemming from the notion that the world is incredibly different than initially seemed. Children's media and literature can harm a child's perception of the world as they fabricate issues and foster unrealistic expectations of the real world that do not exist brought about by the theory of mind, which deludes their view of life and happiness in the future. The solution is to make children's media and literature more realistic and to ensure it encapsulates both the positive and negative aspects of the real world.

Children and their perception of the Real World

Parents often disagree with whether the fictional portrayal of events in children's media and literature blurs their line of reasoning between the real and fake, or enhances it with an understanding of symbolism present in media and literature if it exists at all. Children's media and literature have adverse effects on a child's development because fabricating real-world events in a fictitious manner fosters misconceptions about the real world. Sue Aran, professor of Audiovisual communication, argues that children easily become manipulated visually, and studies show that their thought processes are also susceptible to change (4). This would indicate that the content of television programming has the potential to be detrimental to a child's mind. Daniel Anderson, University of Massachusetts, states that if the media shows idealized circumstances, children will likely perceive it as real, validating the risk their perception is prone to delusion. In addition, children today are exposed to television for more extended periods than

in the past (1). Children process and interpret visual information from media and literature more in-depth than the real world due to the unbalanced level of exposure favoring the former.

Coupled with the fact that children are easily visually manipulated from Aran's research, children obtain a distorted view of the world that could become dangerous in the future due to misconceptions in everyday societal situations.

In addition, Debbie Golos of Utah State University argues that illustrations in children's books may misrepresent issues in real life and cause a child to have a distorted view of real-life problems (1). Golos used the illustrations in a book to render being deaf incorrectly linked with specific cultures. These misconceptions can replicate to a much larger extent, given evidence of children being susceptible to maintaining information (accurate or not). They may cause children in the future to incorrectly label others in a certain way. Aran, Anderson, and Golos believe that children should not expose themselves to media and literature that promotes a false facade of a life that does not fully cover the issues of the real world they will eventually have to face. In contrast with the real world, which seems unfamiliar and intimidating, children will fundamentally perceive the vivacious circumstance depicted by media and literature geared toward them as real. Given other evidence that is contradictory by stating that children can make abstract connections that promote moral judgments. The difference in opinion between parents and psychologists relies on whether children can perceive the fictional situation seen before them as real or fake.

Some parents believe that the oversimplification of children's media and literature is positive, due to its simplicity, and children grow to understand its symbolism with age as abstract thought develops within the child's mind. David Swanson, professor of communication at the

University of Illinois, argues that even though the effect of television and literature on children may be significant, it should not be considered the issue. Because children are able to compare and contrast both television and real peers and ideologies with ease (1), Swanson states that children are capable of finding elaborate and abstract connections with the world and media. Matt Briggs of the Department of Film and Media argues that situations foster the distinction between reality and fantasy for a child that prompts complex thinking, and moral judgments are more apparent as child ages and advances in language and abstract thought (1). The acquisition of complex thoughts draws the line to fantasy and its potential useful applications to the real world in the future. This suggests that instead of children's media being a hindrance, in children developing a clear sense of the real world, which is affirmed by Aran, Anderson, and Golos, it adds to it.

While studies show that in theory, children should be able to make these conceptual connections between children's media and the differences of the real world, there is no way to prove it. The point of the studies testing children was for data to be applied in real-life, and once the results were applied, it is shown that adults and older teens around 18 cannot adjust to the demands that the real world brings (Chock 1). This brings stress due to the realization that the real world was nothing like the vivacious depictions in children's media when they were younger, as, on a subconscious level, one cannot accept the fact.

Children's Media and Literature and the Theory of Mind

Psychologists have researched the "Theory of Mind," which states that one attributes their thoughts and feelings onto others, fictional or otherwise, and subconsciously creates a summation of an ideal life. Raymond Mar of York University's Psychology Department argues

that the "Theory of Mind" is critical in a child and necessary for children to develop awareness (1). The fictional engagements from media and writings are the primary way children define social situations and become a ground in which they base an ideal society. The "Theory of mind" can alter and either be a motivator for life or an unrealistic and disappointing vision.

Children's media and literature have negative effects on a child's perception of the world as it fosters standards of the real world that do not exist. Children's desires result from exposure to appealing factors shown in television programming at a young age (Smith 1). These factors, such as the setting, or a lack of responsibility, in contrast with the real world intentionally seeming more appealing, draws on children's preferences to fiction and thus attribution of desires onto fiction as well. A child's ideal lifestyle is unconsciously the summation of aspects of imagery they were exposed to. Often children's media and literature are exaggerated to an unrealistic extent. Children strive for this as their future, and the impossibility negatively affects their perception of happiness as adults. Smith's research aligns with the "Theory of mind" effects on the child's mind and their idea of happiness, and whether this acts as motivation or a hindrance to a child is situational.

The prospect of children visualizing an idealized life from media and literature geared toward them is healthy as pondering what leads to an ideal state of happiness may help them in reaching fulfillment in the future. *The Happiness Project* summarizes how the whimsical yet unrealistic imagery and circumstances seen at Disney World create a sense of idealized happiness fostered by sentimentality "we are visiting a part of our belief system that experience has failed to dull..." (O'Hagan par. 9). The perception of happiness has been subconsciously influenced by appealing imagery represented in children's media. O'Hagan, as an adult, still

bases happiness on childhood standards (such as the vivacious imagery of Disney), validating the proof of lasting effects despite impossibility, the imagery at Disney is still a scale other circumstances that bring happiness are compared too. Donald Roberts of the Department of Communications argues that identification of realism in children's television is a positive thing as does not only the ability to distinguish fantasy and realism exist, but also the child attributing thoughts, feelings, and questioning of self-contentment to fictional characters in a children's program with a distorted view of reality aids in developing awareness (1). This states, in the future, given the "Theory of mind" effects that suggest as children develop self-awareness and intuition, as adults, they will accept that their childhood ideals of happiness are unattainable and be satisfied nevertheless. Rejecting Smith's research, Roberts summarizes that regardless of the exposure to appealable factors in children's programming and literature, children essentially recognize and accept the false content with age, with no subconscious repercussions.

Given the creative liberties taken with children's media and literature manifest happiness at the price of the truth, children's media and literature's standards of happiness are all too often unattainable, their line of reasoning derived from a fictional circumstance in which situations are idealized. Research at the *American Psychological Association* asserts that many factors determine whether a children's program will have any effect on their perception of the outside world and mindset (Wright 1). Such determinants are related, such as a child's ability to connect to a fictional character causing children to feel for them, resulting in being more prone to mental influence. In this state, given specific circumstances, children will be unable to draw the line between reality and fiction, often at the expense of their perception of happiness, resulting in children never genuinely being satisfied.

Solutions & Limitations

The proof that children's media and literature depicting real-world events can dangerously be unaligned with real-life also deludes a sense of risk in children (Wahlberg 1), which could be harmful in the future as adults are given that there is evidence that all of the above proceeds into adulthood. The solution to the fictional and unrealistic representation of society in children's media and literature is to alter it to be more realistic, acknowledging the real world's imperfection while delivering justice to its positives. Producers of children's shows and authors could still deliver what every current children's show and literature has, usually something for the child to take away, without the unrealistic facade that children interpret as real-life without awareness. If children were exposed to more realistic content that would convey the same messages and life lessons, albeit without the vivacious exterior, the original intent of this media and literature to teach children life lessons would be apparent, and children would understand the real world and the positive and negative attributes with nothing to contrast. Given children imprint subconscious ideals of happiness onto realistic characters in realistic situations, the motivation to strive for their goals of contentment and satisfaction would be clearer and avoid the feeling of loss.

Limitations of the solution are the sentimentality and unwillingness of society to expose the realistic content to their children due to the standard oversimplified version of the word "realistic," causing fear. Realism in children's media and literature is typically demonized. However, society defines "realistic" in such narrow terms that when one says "realistic," they think of violence. Realism is not synonymous with violence, and the positives of history should not be overlooked. Deborah Stevenson, of the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library

and Information Science, argues that sentimentality goes against attempts to recover academically (1), including children's media and literature as well.

Conclusion

It is imperative that society disregards sentimentality and acknowledges that children's media and literature are fictional far past the point of reason. Despite real-life not being as appealing as fictional realities, humanity often yearns for, real-life acceptance with its positives and negatives is more critical to acquire an understanding and happiness in the world. The future envisioned for the next generation not be some obscure, frivolous reality, but a culmination of authentic history and culture.

Word Count: 2198

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