



The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years

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How to raise empowered girls in a princess world

It's no secret that little girls love princesses. Behind the twirly dresses and glittery crowns, however, sits a powerful marketing machine, encouraging obsessive consumerism and delivering negative stereotypes about gender, race, and beauty to young girls. So what's a parent to do?

The Princess Problem features real advice and stories from parents educators, and psychologists, and children's industry insiders to help equip every parent with skills to navigate today's princess-saturated world. As parents, we do our best to keep pop culture's most harmful stereotypes away from our kids, but contending with well-meaning family members and sneaky commercials can thwart us.

The Princess Problem offers language to have honest conversations with our kids and shows us how to teach them to be thoughtful, open-minded people.

The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years Details

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From Reader Review The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years for online ebook

McKenzie Tozan says

It's September, and in a matter of weeks, my first daughter will be born. In a rush of summer cleaning and nesting, reading parenting books and planning-planning-planning, I have also found myself searching for books to begin my daughter's library, as well as books and resources that may assist in raising my daughter in the best way possible in the midst of today's expectations. I wish I only meant researching the best schools and starting a college fund; but, unfortunately, what I'm researching extends into far more personal territory: how my daughter will potentially measure her self-worth . . . and even how she may measure others'.

Dr. Rebecca Hains, author of *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years*, offers a thorough and insightful text which presents research surrounding the princess mentality that has infiltrated our culture; the pleasures and problems this mentality presents; and how we as parents, guardians, and mentors can teach our children to better navigate and overcome the shortcomings of this mentality, without completely dismissing the fun of princessdom.

The book is systematically divided into two parts. The first focuses on Dr. Hains' research methods surrounding the princess problem, as well as background and summative information in support of why this mentality is problematic and how we can begin thinking of correcting it. The second part breaks the princess problem down into subcategories, unpacks their meaning and role within the problem, and presents subcategory-specific solutions.

I was drawn to this text originally for a variety of reasons—being a declared feminist, having a background in Gender and Women's Studies and Psychology, being a soon-to-be-mother (of a daughter, no less), and having my particular background as an onlooker (to friends raising their daughters)—but I was also interested in what it could teach me about what I did not experience as a child. While I have certainly witnessed the princess obsession that now appears to enslave childhood, I was not in the least way interested in dolls, Barbie or princesses; in fact, whenever I was given one, or given a gift that was glaringly pink, it often would remain in its original package or stored away on some unreachable shelf in my bedroom. Instead, I played with dinosaurs. And Hot Wheels cars. And more dinosaurs (Jurassic Park was huge when I was little and was the first movie I ever saw in theatres, so that ended up being more of my obsession). I guess I saw dolls and their equivalents as boring; there wasn't all that much to do with them but dress and undress them, and playing dress-up was a hassle, not a joy. I wanted to run around outside, roll in the mud, and come back inside to scatter my cars and dinosaurs all over the room. I wanted to play with blocks and build things in kindergarten with the boys. And I wasn't interested in all the mean things the girls said or the jewelry they played with at recess; I wanted and found kindness, comradery, and a healthy level of competition running around with the boys instead.

Perhaps "obviously" this led to problems in my relationships with other girls and my willingness to confide in them later on; dealing with boys was so much easier. What's interesting, though, is that this all so largely stems from those earlier desires: I chose to play with dinosaurs and cars instead of dolls and clothing, which impacted who I played with and how I played, which led to potentially-different relationship and gender development. I witnessed a glaring princess obsession in other girls (though, I did not note it as a "princess obsession" at the time but, rather, noted their excessive pink clothes, jewelry, make-up and fascination with boys) and also made note of how those girls were treated differently than the girls who were more like me. Looking back, there was a hierarchy to navigate. By living outside of the princess obsession, I was able to progress in ways dissimilar from the other girls, focusing far less on appearance and romantic relations with boys (I didn't fantasize about getting married until my husband proposed, and I didn't worry about my _____

appearance until midway through high school), though I did feel like an outcast and was largely shunned by those around me for being different, and still feel this shunning in other settings to this day.

I bring this up, because so much of this seems to correlate with the princess problem and our culture's princess mentality. The subcategories of the princess problem include a fixation on romance and physical (outward) beauty, a lack of realistic gender and racial diversity and representation, as well as the overwhelming obstacle that is childhood marketing (toys, clothing, snacks, etc.). When considered from a psychological and sociological standpoint, this combination of shortcomings may dictate to young girls who they should be (in the sense of appearance and beauty), what they should do (by way of career) and who they should have relations with (emphasizing, often, popularity and romantic relationships of limited means). To look at this from a broader standpoint, much of what is presented by this princess mentality attempts to teach our girls what it means to be a girl, what she should value, and how she should measure others' success as individuals and members of our society. Looking back on the girls who I grew up with and their behavior, I can see how their involvement with princesses and other-girl specified items (as well as how they were raised to view themselves as princesses, or were encouraged to view themselves as 'of a higher variety') might have influenced them, their behavior and their decisions. If less time had been spent on fairy tales, make-up and valuing outwardly-assets, as opposed to developing deeper and more meaningful relationships, these girls potentially would have been much more open-minded about who they could and would interact with, which very well may have impacted their later personalities and decisions.

I'm really not here to demonize girlie toys, make-up, princesses, or the color pink; nor do I feel that this is the goal of *The Princess Problem*. Though playing dress-up and wearing make-up and playing with dolls were not my first choices of entertainment, I have had enough friends over the years, watched enough family members get ready for going out and have babysat enough children to understand the appeal of these activities. I will even go so far as to say that I can see their merits, despite their potential limitations. Like many other things that we present to our children—perhaps questionable television, or video games, or even just spending too much time indoors—there are ways of striking a balance. I believe, as Dr. Hains does, that allowing our children to be exposed (at least somewhat) to the princess mentality not only presents us with teachable moments, in which we may teach our daughters (and sons) greater critical thinking skills, as well as methods of further navigating the media, but we can also fixate more so on those areas of princessdom that are actually of higher quality—as love, generosity, and giving of the self should not be viewed as negative attributes, assuming these are given willingly and for the right reasons, and to the right people (which could easily be discussed, and even debated, in some of our princess films).

This relates specifically to Dr. Hains' central idea and solution against the negative aspects of princess mentality—that is, our ability to better-navigate, critique and use the media, our pop culture, and even the deviations between the values presented by the princess mentality and our current cultural ideals. Dr. Hains refers to parents, guardians and mentors as “pop culture coaches,” who are able to look at the stories and films presented to our children, as well as the items sold to our children (and what they suggest about a child's ideal behavior), and the values and goals that are suggested by these products—and teach our children how to look at all of these things with a critical eye, question their merit, and adjust their acceptance of the products and their messages based on the values and perspectives preserved in their own home. These are abilities that can only strengthen our children's later critical thinking skills, and it gives them the opportunity to begin questioning moral ambiguity, as well as seeing the “gray” in what the media often tries to present as “black and white”. In addition to her unpacking of the subcategories of the princess problem in Part 2, Dr. Hains also unpacks potential solutions for each of these subs (for girls and boys), and she also has a variety of tools and resources available on her website, which include parent-child discussion guides for each of the Disney princess films, as well as pop culture coaching tips for beyond the princess problem, which includes other areas of media-fixation.

Being a soon-to-be mother and having the academic background that I have, I cannot recommend this book and its supplemental resources enough. There are obviously potential social and psychological problems that

can arise from presenting princess stories (and their equivalents) to our children; but because of the overwhelming presence of princesses in our culture, our children will be exposed to these stories whether or not we are the ones who share them: in their schools, when with friends, by their friends' parents, etc. So in the long run, then, it seems to me that it would be better to somewhat-expose my children to these ideas, but only alongside the appropriate critical thinking skills. I do not mind the idea of my children enjoying a story if they can also point out its specific merits, why they like it, and where it might fall short. If they have a clear understanding of how beauty is over-emphasized, how gender and race need better and more-frequent representation, and that being a princess is not everything, then that opens the door to sharing with them the actual merits of these stories: overwhelming love, a positive relationship with nature (that's always been my favorite part about princess tales—wanting to sing with birds and clean my home with a whole herd of forest friends), having confidence in personal beauty (though, again, striking that balance!), as well as love and respect that are at times awarded and valued between the princess and supporting characters. I love this idea of being able to share this large aspect of our culture with my daughter, while also seeing her as able to move beyond it and find empowerment despite her involvement with it—measuring her success in actual successes, rather than in beauty and popularity and the like. That, to me, is beautiful: that possible middle-ground of embracing something so large from our culture, but also challenging it and moving beyond its limitations.

Noelle says

If you loved Peggy Orenstein's, 'Cinderella Ate my Daughter,' then you will relish Rebecca Hain's, 'The Princess Problem.' Where Orenstein looks at "the dark side of the girlie-girl," Hains expands the exploration of princess culture by turning toward its marketing and how it has affected consumerism long term. While the princess obsessed culture can be tricky to navigate, this book does not chastise the idea of little girls wanting to be princesses. However, it does offer insight into where Disney and other companies have fallen short in their representation and how parents can address these inconsistencies with their children. Even if you don't have children Hain's research gives the reader pause, and in many cases a sobering reality check about how girls see themselves and how they are represented.

Margaret Sankey says

I was only peripherally aware of the Disney Princess juggernaut, or how tightly coordinated and planned out it is. Hains, who worked as a birthday party princess as well as a researcher, offers both the behind the scenes marketing and casting as well as the applied results in terms of hardened earlier gender roles, body image and the awful effects of things like, say, only selling the official dresses in a limited range of sizes. I was lucky, I guess, to be a little too old to have encountered the full force of this, and isolated from mainstream pop culture. When I evidenced any interest in princesses, my family pointed me towards real ones, which was a reality of perhaps seizing power and running large enterprises, but possibly at the cost of marrying an inbred cousin and having to kill him with the connivance of the army and the state church.

Liz says

This book did a good job covering the bases of the problems with Princess Culture, from impossible beauty standards to lack of racial representation.

Monica Fastenau says

The author talks about being a pop culture coach, helping kids engage critically with movies, toys, and other areas of pop culture. I love this—you can't protect your kids from all questionable media (although one of the earlier chapters walks you through creating a suitable media diet for your child), but you can give them the tools to deal with the hurtful messages our culture often presents. So important, so interesting, and definitely worth a read if you're a parent or educator.

Read the full review here: <http://newberyandbeyond.com/adult-non...>

Kelly says

I raised two boys and two girls, so I know firsthand how ruthless marketing can be to children (and parents) of all ages. I also know that marketing to boys is different from marketing to girls as is product placement and the amount of merchandise available to boys vs. girls. We watched many Disney movies with the kids, and too often I was frustrated with the passive, beautiful princesses in the movies. My girls liked to play dress up, but they grew out of their princess fixation at a young age. However, they were still bombarded with what society told them a young girl should be and how she should act, and I witnessed many of my daughters' friends being raised to be princesses who relied on others to fend for their needs. Like Hains, I see nothing wrong with princess culture IF we educate our children and have meaningful conversations with them about what the movies and products are portraying. Over thirty years ago, I wrote a research paper about sleeping princesses in fairytales who could not be awakened without a man's kiss (their awakening being much more than merely physical), so this princess problem is not a new topic for me.

We frequently (and too easily?) trust Disney and others to get it right. Why would someone want to harm children, right? The harming is perhaps not (usually?) intentional but it occurs anyway with racial and gender prejudice along with stereotypes of beauty and personality. (Have you ever seen what Disney movie princesses look like if their eyes were not oversized? Research it; it will make you think. Here's one example: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jenlewis/if-...>

We condemn Barbie for her proportions, but we overlook this "subtle" change in the movies.)

Hains is not saying that children's love of princesses is wrong. She claims that we need to have frank conversations with our children about what it means to be a princess and determine what their inferences are based on what they view. Don't believe me when I say children's interpretations are startling? Just watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjUop...>

I like that Hains challenges readers to think about our own biases, shaped by media's influence. Hains also breaks the information down into age groups and provides titles of books that families should read together (and this librarian certainly appreciates that). In fact, Hains offers many additional readings, and her works cited is quite extensive. With plenty of advice and a break down of many of the Disney movies, Hains offers insight into the media and marketing world of the princess culture and provides tools that parents can use. You don't have to be a parent to find this book interesting and engaging; this book is illuminating on many levels.

NW says

Anyone with a child in their life (parents, grandparents, caregivers, etc.) should read this book. It's not bashing princess culture, but it provides practical advice for helping your children become media savvy. Boys can also learn from this!

We are inundated with marketing ploys in every facet of life and much of it is directed specifically to children, starting at age 2. Companies want to create "customers for life" and the Disney princess juggernaut is the perfect example.

Imaginative play is perfectly fine and encouraged but it's important to balance it with realistic ideals and expectations.

This book touches on how to address the unrealistic appearance of cartoon princesses (eyes bigger than their wrists) and race relations (very limited options for children of color).

In a time when Black Lives Matter and Transgender Rights are current talking points, this is especially poignant. We want to empower our young girls and yet the "Princess Culture" so focused on waiting for "Prince Charming to come to the rescue" is working against that.

Let your daughters know that pink and glitter are absolutely fine, but that doesn't mean they can't be a Princess Firefighter and rescue her own castle. Teach them how to navigate the bombardment of advertisements they face. Do Spaghetti-O's really taste better with Elsa on the label? I doth protest!

Michele says

I liked the book. This is something that I'm fairly well educated in and I don't mind reading more time to time.

What I liked.

- 1) I love the emphasis on media literacy. It's important and she does a wonderful job addressing this in detail.
- 2) I loved that she pointed out that StrideRite and underwear are marketed differently between the toddler genders.
- 3) Chapter 6 was my favorite. I feel like race is something that isn't discussed much. We've been looking for a Middle Eastern baby doll to add to our collection. We can't find one anywhere.

What I hated.

- 1) She touched on this but I wish she went into more details about how the boy movies merchandise isn't even available to girls. My daughter's favorite movie is Cars. We cannot find a single article of clothing that fits her right. Also, when we went to Disney there was a whole building dedicated to Princesses. There was only a small shelf for Cars. She ended up picking out a Mickey bracelet as her souvenir.
- 2) The book got long in a few chapters. I think part of this is that I've read a lot on this subject.

3) I can't stand is how Frozen is painted in such a positive light when it displays so much of what she talks against. It's the only Disney Princess movie that is absolutely not allowed around my child in any shape or form.

Lori Day says

I absolutely loved this book. Not only is it filled with practical advice for parents who are navigating the princess-obsessed years, but it is solidly grounded in research. Dr. Hains, a professor of media studies, is well equipped to lay out the issues in a way that parents can easily understand, while at the same time providing professional analysis that goes beyond what is typically found in the blogosphere. This book has depth and gravitas while being, at the same time, extremely accessible and entertaining. Princess culture is analyzed and explained but not bashed. For parents who are searching for positive ways to guide young daughters through our sexualized and stereotyped Princess World, this book is an invaluable resource. Even if you don't have a little girl, the book is a fascinating exploration of corporate America, exploitative marketing and consumerism, especially of the ways these things negatively affect the female gender and target girls. Highly recommended!

BHodges says

Princesses everywhere. How can parents neutralize the negative impact princess culture can have on young kids while still allowing the kids their autonomy in the interests they pursue? This book has some great advice. It's really a book about raising media literate kids and how parents can establish open communication with their children.

I'll write a longer review later.

Jennifer Cepero says

I won this book from a giveaway on Goodreads to review.

While I am completely aware of the whole "I'm a princess" issue we seem to have today in America, I am a fan of Disney and so of course, allow my daughter to watch the movies/tv shows. She even has the wall decals of each "princess" or girl from Disney, including Tink and her friends.

I don't completely agree with everything in this book. I don't see how this Dr goes on and on about how Disney forces these "princesses" on girls yet doesn't see the issue with Frozen. It has completely toppled all other princesses it seems. Every little girl wants to be Elsa, the snow queen; who in my opinion is actually mean. She does mention how there was no need to have Elsa suddenly become sexy in the movie (my shocked look when that happened watching it was just priceless). Why doesn't she ever say how all queens tend to have power issues, whether they crave it, or like Elsa, who can't seem to control hers.

I do think it's a great tool for people looking to find ways to show their kids other toys/products that don't include princesses. I have actually always been this way with my daughter. I don't like all of her toys being pink or just princess themed. She loves pirates just as much.

Something else that does drive me nuts that she drones on about is how Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella are all submissive women who wait for a prince to come save them. These were made in a time where that was the norm for women. Getting married was the main priority. The future princesses of course were going to be completely different.

Becca Markland says

Society is heavily affected by princesses and their messages to little girls, and women. *The Princess Problem* by Rebecca C. Hains, PhD (copyright 2014) is a third wave of feminism guidebook that addresses the issue of princesses in our culture. She notes the impact of the princess culture and its effects on little girls, as well as grown women. Rebecca C. Hains in *The Princess Problem* supports the feminist movement, and hopes that feminism in our culture will further develop.

The Princess Problem includes analysis of various princesses and how they affect feminism. Rebecca C. Hains does this by connecting princess issue to her own personal life as a professor, and a princess at birthday parties in order to study princess culture from a new perspective. She would also interview the parents of the child and get their opinions. “On one hand, many moms have nostalgia for the princesses of their own childhoods, and compared with other popular girls’ toys and media, like the edgy Monster High dolls, parents see princesses as innocent and safe” (xiv). Hains analyzes the information she gets from these parties, and gives parents advice on how to avoid the issues that she discovers.

Through her studies, Hains finds issues with princess culture such as, size, appearance, race, and women’s strength. She organizes this information by issue and then adds what parents, her intended audience, can do to fix it. When writing, Rebecca C. Hains includes many checklists for parents to help them keep their children from this negative influence. For example, when schooling parents about media, Hains says “Talking with your children about media can feel awkward or forced if you’re not used to it. To begin, try making simple declaration statements to share your reactions to what’s on-screen (48). Not only does Hains try and help parents, she also tries to help society by showing the controversy in various famous princesses and their movies. “But otherwise, stories about princesses- from Cinderella to Snow White to Princess Peach- have long underscored the presumed weakness of females and implied that helplessness is romantically desirable” (161). By doing this, Hains is effectively drawing attention to the problem with princesses that has for too long gone unnoticed.

The Princess Problem, which is categorized in the third wave of feminism, is a book which effectively displays the issues with princesses in our culture. It shows how princess culture negatively affects the morals and ethics of our society’s children. The author, Rebecca C. Hains, believes that this needs to change in our society, because it is holding back the growth of feminism.

Cynthia says

Will definitely be referencing this book many times in the years to come! The best part about it is the very practical suggestions to identify our family’s media values, to teach our child about creating her own media (and therefore learning about the decision making process all Media creators undertake), and ideas for creating family dialog around these topics. Grown-ups may have the ability to place Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, etc., into historical context and understand the financial motivations behind a studio’s or a consumer products department’s decisions but a practical guide to age appropriate discussions for helping

children develop their own understandings of those factors is invaluable.

Ragon Duffy says

Well, it's not like I didn't know this stuff already. I mean, as someone who has a daughter that adores princesses, glitter, sparkly dresses and all of that but has also managed to balance that with enjoying many things that are not particularly princess-like, there is already a pretty good balance in our house, nothing particularly new in this book. I did appreciate that it doesn't demonize the feminine, but advocates for the expansion of the feminine for all genders. I really appreciated the framework for teaching about how to be an effective media/societal critic to be useful and applicable. She does repeat it throughout the book so maybe I didn't need so much of that. And also, I think I would have liked to hear more from people with daughters as the main narrator. Not that parents of sons shouldn't be thinking about this or advocating for diverse, nuanced media, it just made some of her personal stories feel forced into the narrative and flattened some of the examples she used from other people. But as an intro to this issue for concerned parents and a template for some good basic steps to helping kids develop well-rounded interests and the ability to think critically about media, this is a good place to start.

Lisa says

Admittedly, this book was preaching to the choir. I already read the author's blog regularly, and agree with most (not all!) of what she says, and consider myself a feminist mother of two young girls. That is the grain of salt to take with this review.

The Princess Problem was an incredibly insightful read with many tips I plan to use with my children as I help them to navigate through childhood and to develop media literacy.

In this book, Hains addresses some of the key problems of "princess culture," namely (1) the emphasis on consumerism and gendered marketing, (2) the narrow standards for beauty, (3) the gender stereotypes, and (4) race representation/lack of diversity. For each set of problems, Hains offers guidelines and tips for identifying your family's values and opening dialogues with your children about these issues. For me, the tips ranged from the self-evidence to things I hadn't thought of at all.

This book is focused more on tips and less on critique. For critique, I would point readers to Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, which I also enjoyed immensely. But for parents who (like me) don't plan to insulate their children from Disney princess movies but also are concerned about raising media-literate children, this book is a must-read.
