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Experts wonder what effect 'princess culture' is having on girls

By Krista Jahnke
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The princess craze is major, from parties, dolls, play castles and books to tiaras, play gowns, play slippers, princess wigs and everything in between. But what message does this booming culture — which centers on pristine appearances, happy endings and finding a prince to love — have for little girls?

Most experts and parents agree that the princess culture can be a minefield of good and bad.

"The age girls are expected to be conscious of their appearance has gotten younger and younger," says Peggy Orenstein, author of "Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches From the Frontlines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture" (Harper Paperbacks, \$14.99).

"Girls putting on a crown? Big deal," she says. "But she's going from her Disney princess (doll) to her Disney princess lipstick to her Bratz doll to the Kardashians."

Orenstein says it's not that she believes all girls who play princess at a young age will grow up to have issues. But she is concerned that princesses are "the only game in town" for girls.

Today's little girls don't just love princesses, they go through a noticeable developmental "princess phase," says Orenstein, who first wrote about the princess phenomena for the New York Times Magazine in late 2006. While kids have always engaged in "royal play," she contends, something has changed.

"It's 24 hours a day, 365 days a year," Orenstein says. "It's not just play princess but be a princess. It's often scripted play, based on the Disney movies. And it's playing with the 26,000 princess products, most of which are really geared toward appearance and an emphasis on defining the self outside-in rather than inside-out."

In 2000, Disney lumped all its princesses together into a brand called "the Disney Princess," which has accounted for more than \$4 billion in retail sales, according to a 2011 Disney release.

The princess movement might get another boost this month. Beginning Jan. 31, "Sophie the First" will debut on Disney Jr., a channel aimed at preschoolers and young elementary kids.

Sophie is a child princess, which Disney points out makes her different from its lineup of princess superstars, who are teens or older.

But the notion that Disney can reach an ever-younger crop of girls worries Orenstein.

"Kids' brains are at their most rigid on gender stereotypes at this age, but their brains are also most flexible overall," says Orenstein, who has written other books about childhood culture. "And they're forming ideas and standards about how to treat themselves and the other sex. These are tracks they're laying that will stay with them the rest of their lives. It's stratified when all girls are princesses and all boys are superheros. That is going to have implications for them down the line."

Robert Thompson, the director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, says the idea of dressing up little girls like princesses would have been politically incorrect in the late '60s and the 1970s. But adults who grew up in the past three decades, when gender equality was more assumed, lack the same urgency in pointing out their flaws.

Thompson points to the reality show "The Bachelor" as a cautionary tale: modern women believing they'll enter into a continent-hopping catfight and emerge with the glass slipper of love.

"You can't go very long on the show without hearing someone say, 'It was like a fairy tale,' or, 'I felt like I was Cinderella,' or 'I think I will find Prince Charming.' Then ABC sends them out on dates with a horse-drawn carriage. The whole show is created under the idea that there is a Prince Charming who will try a slipper on 25 women and it will fit one."

Until the bubble bursts. The ABC franchise doesn't have a great track record for producing lasting relationships.

Still, Thompson says he doesn't think playing princess is a sure precursor to problematic behaviors in adulthood. It's just a confusing ideal that parents are going to have to combat sooner or later.

"There is value to fairy tales and a value to fantasy," he says. "It is not all completely a bad thing. But there is a cloud hanging over this idea of princesses. We're conflicted about it."

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