

Cinderella – What are the potential advantages of fairy tales for children?

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The article uses the example of *Cinderella* to describe what children gain from fairy tales.

The majority of fairy tales take the family as their starting point. It is, however, not a place of stability and security; hostility, poverty and parental anger prevail, making life unbearable for children. The heroes and heroines in fairy tales are mostly adolescents and young adults who leave their family or stand up for themselves against their parents.

CHILDREN SEE SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES REFLECTED BACK AT THEM

Fairy tales remind children of their own external and internal experiences and emotions:

- the fear of being abandoned by parents
- grieving for loved ones who have died – in *Cinderella* her biological mother
- the experience of injustice, anger and jealousy on the part of the stepmother and stepsisters
- the fear of not being loved by parents, as well as being embarrassed and humiliated in front of others
- not feeling secure
- the nagging doubt whether they will be able to survive by themselves, although they must
- the sense of their own diminutiveness and worthlessness as a child and a young person
- the loss of their own name through nicknames: the name “Cinderella” shows contempt and robs the girl of her true identity
- insufficient opportunity to spend time together with parents

FAIRY TALES UNBURDEN CHILDREN OF THEIR FEELINGS

The children watching or listening are afraid for Cinderella, share in her suffering, share in her hope, and are happy about the positive ending. Children can very quickly imagine themselves as Cinderella. Cinderella (as the victorious heroine in the end) becomes almost like the children’s inner companion, standing by their side, for in the fairy tale the happy ending is certain and promised.

The children recognise that Cinderella does not have it any easier, and that they are not alone with their difficulties. Children look for consolation if they find themselves in a situation where they are disaffected with their parents, or if they feel deprived or neglected.

With *Cinderella*, however, they experience a positive development: modesty and humility are extolled and rewarded. Showing courage leads to resolution and reward; poverty, contempt and degradation do not last forever, and pain and suffering always come to an end.

What follows is Cinderella’s elevation: from servant girl to princess, from powerless dependency on father and stepmother to royal autonomy, from the dissolution of the nuclear family, to the terrible stepfamily, to starting her own – royal – family.

If children feel anger and aggression, for example towards their own mother, then they can transfer these feelings to Cinderella’s stepmother, and this brings children great inner relief.

CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL

Children often experience injustice in their everyday lives or realise that there is injustice in the adult world, too. They often experience verbal or physical violence, and they can be very hurt by others victimising or bullying them, especially if there is no apparent reason for this.

You reap what you sow – in this case, evil. Fairy tales put particular emphasis on this model, and rightful punishment follows directly on from this. With *Cinderella* children are relieved by her redemption, for it means that evil is punished and therefore also defeated. Children also like to feel schadenfreude. They feel inner satisfaction if evil does not triumph in the end.

Cinderella does not attach importance to power, wealth and beauty. We do not get very far with envy, greed and violence – characteristics ascribed to the stepmother and stepsisters. We must behave positively and act independently and responsibly – this is the message of *Cinderella*.

FAIRY TALES AS MODELS FOR COPING WITH LIFE

The small, weak and humiliated fairy tale heroes and heroines, whom nobody thought capable of anything, solve the problems they face with flying colours and overcome the difficulties they encounter – children too experience this within their own families. How often do children's own parents, in particular, have images of them in their heads which do not acknowledge many of their competences and abilities?

Cinderella shows children that they too must actively ensure their own progress and happiness. They can indeed rely on kind helpers, but the impetus must come from themselves. This is what allows their dreams of future happiness to grow, as well as the hope that things will soon take a turn for the better. *Cinderella* does not remain passive but becomes active; she changes her difficult situation and directs her energy towards improving her circumstances. Why should she spend any more time with such a stepmother and such stepsisters?

Cinderella and the prince show children, by their example, how they can have self-worth, love for themselves and confidence in themselves.

CHILDREN LOOK INTO A SYMBOLIC MIRROR

Cinderella is resilient: she is not destroyed; evil ricochets off her; she has and shows the power to resist. She does not let adverse conditions affect her too much. Resilience means giving the child confidence in his/her own abilities – *Cinderella*'s late mother probably gave her this confidence.

Cinderella treats people and animals lovingly. She cultivates an inner relationship with nature and friendship with animals: she communes with the animals and treats them with respect.

The animals are her kind helpers, and they support her (Ill. 1). Her stepmother and stepsisters on the other hand do not even notice the animals or nature. The fairy tale of *Cinderella* teaches children that:

- The more they try to achieve their objectives using violence, the less likely they are to succeed.
- If they want something stubbornly and at all costs, they will not get it.
- Evil destroys itself, rightful punishment follows, and goodness triumphs.

PREDILECTION FOR SECRETS AND SECRET NOOKS AND CRANNIES

The white horse in the stall, the owl (Mother Owl) in the loft, the secret hiding place for the jewellery – these are the places to which *Cinderella* retreats in order to escape from the animosity of her stepmother and stepsisters. This is where she finds protection, understanding, peace and strength. The animals are the kind helpers who have been sent by her late mother.

Children have similar secret nooks and crannies. Children are allowed to have secrets and keep them to themselves or keep them within their friendships. Children know what it is like to feel abandoned and all alone – even if their parents have not died but are simply not there, or do not spend any time with them.

SIBLING RIVALRY

Cinderella has to share everything in her home with her terrible stepsisters and even give them her own room. Her own father does not help her and does not respect her wishes. Children know only too well the consequences of sibling rivalry. They can empathise with *Cinderella* and feel her pain – she is feeling what they are feeling. When a new sibling is born, or in blended fami-

lies, children find themselves asking: What is left for me? What still belongs to me? Am I still of any value?

CHANCES FOR CHILDREN

Children love fairy tales – but why? They are not stories about small children: the fairy tale heroes and heroines are usually adolescents and young adults. Children's daydreams and burning desires are focused, in particular, on the longing to grow up as quickly as possible. Fairy tales show them the many different ways in which children grow up. Fairy tales are symbolic translations of psychological processes, dreams in story form.

Children experience this when they watch the 3 film versions of *Cinderella* (ARD/ZDF/DEFA). They can be successful themselves, even without their parents, who are not perfect or all-powerful.

Children encourage themselves and each other. This is why peer groups are important. Within peer groups, children give each other strength, grow up together, come together, cultivate friendships. *Cinderella* and the prince show children, by their example, how to do this: the prince no longer relies on his father; he acts independently and is successful.

Fairy tales boost children's confidence: there is always a solution, always a happy ending! For children, the core message of fairy tales, and of *Cinderella* in particular, is: you can cope with life, even under difficult circumstances. ■

THE AUTHOR

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