

Portrayals of pain in children's popular media: A qualitative analysis of parental beliefs and attitudes

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BACKGROUND

- Pain is prevalent in childhood. All children will experience everyday pains (e.g., minor bumps, scrapes, bruises) and one in four Canadian youth suffers from chronic pain (i.e., pain lasting > 3 months)¹.
- Children's earliest pain experiences may shape how they understand and experience pain across their lifespan.
- Recent evidence suggests that children's popular media may model maladaptive, distorted, and gendered depictions of pain to young children².
- No literature to date has investigated how parents of young children perceive media portrayals of pain and their opinions towards such portrayals.



OBJECTIVE



This study aimed to examine how parents perceive painful instances depicted in young children's media.

METHODS

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 59 parents (52.5% mothers) of healthy children aged 4 to 6 years.
- Parents were recruited from within the community.
- The interview was designed to assess parents' general beliefs and attitudes towards pain depicted in children's media
- E.g., "In your experience, how has physical pain been portrayed in children's movies and TV shows?"
- E.g., "How do you think pain is portrayed in girl characters versus boy characters?"
- Thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun & Clarke, 2006



RESULTS

Dismissive and Unrealistic Slapstick Comedy

"I feel like it's actually portrayed fairly **unrealistically**. It's stuff that would cause real harm, and they always tend to like make jokes and stuff about it." -- (P001, Mom)

"It's **played for laughs**, like it's slapstick comedy" -- (P002, Mom).

"If somebody falls down and it's played for laughs, it teaches [children] that's funny, and you don't necessarily have to help the person... **The right reaction is to laugh at them, not to help.**" -- (P048, Mom)

Procedural and Recurring Pain: Realistic, Yet Rare

"I don't think I've seen needles, which is why it's **such a foreign thing** for [my child]." -- (P021, Dad).

"It tries to be...as real as possible with lessons about how to deal with the emotions pre, during, and post [needle]. I **think it gets portrayed in a very accurate way**...they talk about some tools and strategies to deal with the emotions that [children are] anticipating." -- (P018, Dad)

Portrayed Pain's Lessons

"[Pain] is a part of life, and it **helps normalize [pain]**— that we can get past it rather than have to shut everything down." -- (P049, Mom)

"It can **show a bad message** in that....pain is so transient it shouldn't bother you." -- (P010, Dad)

"**Boy characters are rough and tough** and laugh it off immediately. Whereas the **girl characters get a little bit more sympathy** for their injuries or...the accidents. I think that also keeps going with the **gender roles and stereotypes** that we have." -- (P060, Mom)

Pain Portrayal (Does Not) Matter for Pain Experience

"I **wouldn't necessarily say that [pain influences children's pain experiences]**. In my experience with my children, their pain is always very subjective to them and [embedded] in the moment of what's going on with them. I've never heard them reference a TV show or a movie. It's almost [like] they have two separate worlds." -- (P034, Mom)

"It gives them...some language and some experiences that they can then build off of. So, it could be play, it could be having a conversation, sometimes I'll hear what's coming out of the shows echoed back...I **think it's another means of giving those [painful experiences] language, a response pattern that is socially acceptable.**" -- (P038, Mom)

And I believe **without parental interjection** in how to behave and respond in situations, [children] will respond by what they have seen and what they've deemed is acceptable, and with young impressionable minds, what is acceptable is what they see as the norm. -- (P028, Dad)

Ideal Portrayal of Pain: A Conundrum

[More realistically portrayed pain] can be very powerful, but that **emotional impact can also be very exhausting**. You can't go through your day just constantly feeling emotions like that. And so, it would be kind of hard to show an accurate depiction of various types of pain in every show because it would eventually make the shows not very appealing to watch. It would just be too much investment, too much energy put into them. And so, to some extent you can kind of understand how pain just becomes like a comedic element and you just move on from it. **You don't have a opportunity to really depict [pain] properly.** So it's a bit of a **conundrum**. A bit of a trap. -- (P015, Dad)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

- Consistent with key messages found in previous literature², findings reveal parents' beliefs that: pain portrayals are often unrealistically and comedically portrayed, that media lacks depictions of certain types of pain (e.g., procedural), the necessity of parent interjection to help children interpret pain portrayals/make sense of their own pain experiences; and the challenges behind 'ideal' pain portrayals (e.g., balancing entertainment and appropriate realism).
- Parents agreed that pain portrayals contained messages for children, however, opinions regarding the message of the lesson varied. Several parents commented on the presence of gendered messages, noting the abundant differences between boy and girl characters' pain.
- Parents serve as a key socialization agent for young children; thus, it is important that parents remain aware of underlying messages portrayed in media so that they can optimally discuss pain portrayal in children's media.

REFERENCES

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