

CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA: WHERE IS THE LINE DRAWN?

BY AYAH ALSHEIKA



The portrayal and representation of children in the media, from television to film, is a highly debated subject. It has fostered many conversations over the morality of children being in the public eye, as they are in everything from advertisements and television to movies and social media posts. Works of media with children all seem to have a common thread of involving the child actors in mature content beyond their age. Despite criticism, children are increasingly exposed to social media and being targeted in advertisements and entertainment.

Classic films like, “Honey, I Shrunk the Kids!” and many more depict happy family dynamics, mischievous kids and heartwarming subplots elevated by innocent humor and charm. These movies, some more than 40 years old now, stand as pillars of the film industry, exemplifying criteria of an ideal family film. In recent years, deviations from such dynamics are occurring, in modern content riddled with overly-mature content that is arguably not suitable for such young audiences.

Newer films like “Turning Red,” explore heavier topics like generational trauma, sexuality and complicated family dynamics. However, critics oppose these modern depictions of children, arguing they not only portray inaccurate behaviors of children, but also expose an intended young audience to “inappropriate” content. Sophomore Ella Gambong states, “This movie talks about a lot of traditional cultural households in which mother-daughter relationships might be difficult, and I relate to that a lot. I think maybe this movie should be targeted to people like me who can actually connect to it and not feel uncomfortable or confused like some younger viewers.” The point that this movie acknowledges issues pertinent to only mature audiences begs the question, who are films like these targeted towards?

The answer is children, who are often too young to be exposed to concepts like these.

Exploring sexuality is a significant part of an adolescent’s life, and it absolutely can be depicted in the media to help teenagers see that they are not alone. Movies like “Turning Red”, however, elaborate on these concepts to an audience much too young. One of the numerous critics that reviewed this movie had something to say, “There are lots of fun bits in this movie, but I feel that the message is questionable and heavy-handed for its intended audience.” Many critics argue that the exploration of sexuality specifically should not be involved in children’s media in general; however, a major double standard persists.

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“Little Rascals,” a cult classic, depicts Alfalfa, a 9-year-old boy with a girlfriend. Heterosexuality is, in fact, a sexuality, yet double standards against the LGBTQ+ community dictate only certain displays of sexual orientation as appropriate in children’s films. Perhaps the sexuality of a child should not be discussed at all, especially directed to a youthful audience. Perhaps maintaining the innocence of childhood, free from the complexity of finding one’s identity and sexual orientation should be valued in children’s movies, and important topics as these should be reserved for adolescents who may benefit from such discussions. Movies like “Turning Red” should be targeted to pre-teens, not children, who lack the context to grasp complex topics explored in the film. In general, children should be removed from any discussion of sexuality, as it is inappropriate and unnecessary.

Among the discussion of the portrayal of children in entertainment media, discussions of the “behind-the-scenes” of a child actor’s life has become a groundbreaking revelation. Jeannette McCurdy, a child actor, who was featured in numerous Nickelodeon shows like *iCarly* and *Sam and Cat*, has broken her silence over the exploitation and negative experiences she faced in the industry. McCurdy detailed the extent of her exploitation, “I was pressured to be photographed in a bikini as a teenager. I was uncomfortable, but my manager would remind me: ‘Everyone wants what you have.’” Such atrocities absolutely should not be spoken to a teenager in the public eye. Exploitative management, like McCurdy’s, will likely face no repercussions for the trauma they induced.

Aside from children’s appearances in film and television, a recent ad campaign has struck controversy: a Balenciaga ad, featuring children holding teddy bears dressed in BDSM-inspired clothing, including harnesses, chokers and fishnet stockings. Critics claim this ad promotes pedophilia and child exploitation, and one look at the ad affirms just this. Children absolutely should not be exposed to any sort of sexual content, but to create an entire advertisement starring children with provocative items is illogical and inappropriate. The fact that the creators of the advertisement found no issue with it demonstrates a problem with the media’s overuse of children. Children are exposed to inappropriate content at younger ages, thus fueling the introduction of children to inappropriate content, like this advertisement, in a more formal environment.

Based on situations like McCurdy’s, exploitation is evidently unavoidable for child actors, contributing to the controversy already surrounding children in the media. Overall, the best course of action may be to exclude children from the media, as toxic situations are usually the most prominent repercussions of child acting. Advertisements like Balenciaga’s proves the extent to which companies have gone to exploiting children, and the mature content in “children’s” films continue to prove that children should be excluded from all forms of media until these industries can adapt to treat children as children, not vehicles to promote and depict mature content suitable for older audiences exclusively.