

The Power of the Princess

Parents talked to the author of the new book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches From the Front Lines of the New Girly-Girl Culture* about how the craze affects our kids.

BY PAMELA PAUL

Is it a boy or a girl? It's the first thing anyone asks an expectant mother. So much of who our children are, from the very start, is about their sex. And today, if you're having a girl, that means you're probably getting a princess in your house. Peggy Orenstein, the mom of 7-year-old Daisy and best-selling author of *Schoolgirls*, *Flux*, and *Waiting for Daisy*—books that have focused on female identity—has decided to investigate the tyranny of the tiara—and to try to discover what we can do to help our daughters who are coming of age today have the best sense of girlhood possible.

As the mother of a 5-year-old myself, I'd certainly like to know. So much of my daughter Beatrice's

girlhood seems to involve glittery nail polish, primping, preening, and an almost alarming amount of pink. In fact, the very evening I spoke with Orenstein, Beatrice was getting herself ready to attend yet another princess-themed birthday party—the third one she had been invited to this year.

Parents! What sparked the idea for this book?

Orenstein | Princesses! My daughter went off to preschool, and suddenly life was 24/7 princess. Before that, play had been about blocks and trains and other things, but that came to a screeching halt. I realized, if this is happening in politically correct Berkeley, California, it's got to be everywhere.

Then a friend from New York called and said that when she had her sonogram, the technician turned to her and said, "Congratulations—you're having a little princess!" So girls are gone; we're now having princesses instead.

I started to wonder, what does it mean that our little girls are all about being pretty princesses? Have girls made so much progress that it's no big deal? Or is this the first step toward hypersexualization? I don't remember everything being so pink when we were little—we were all "Free to Be You and Me"—and I didn't know where this new culture of girlhood came from. I wanted to find out why these things arose so powerfully and pervasively, and what were the consequences.

P| Do you think our expectations for girls have changed dramatically in the last 20 years?

O| I think it's become more complex, and that's what's tricky. On the one hand, girls are achieving way beyond what they used to. They're doing great in school, there are more girls on the student council and more women in college, and there's a real, openhearted expectation that girls can and will excel. But at the same time, there's a pressure to define themselves based on how they look, and that's gotten much more intense during the same period.

So it's confusing raising a daughter and trying to figure out, with all this progress as a backdrop, how much of these pink and sparkly things are okay. Is all the bling fine at a young age or not? What does it lead to? We have to wonder what role it plays in girlhood becoming sexualized and commercialized and narcissistic.

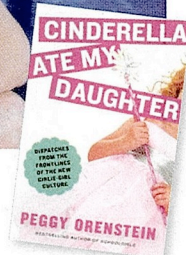
P| What do you mean by narcissistic?

O| For her seventh birthday, Daisy was given a decorate-your-own messenger bag in a box proclaiming, "It's all about me!" You had to iron on decals that said things like "Spoiled" and "Pampered Princess." Daisy said to me, "Mom, isn't it kind of braggy to say that?" I think that as parents, we have to fight against really pervasive messages that try to define girls in terms of narcissism and acquisitiveness.

This is the commercial version of girl power and the self-esteem movement.



Orenstein and daughter Daisy. Below: The book inspired by Daisy is in stores on January 25.



Instead of being about a girl's empowerment and effectiveness in the world, it's actually about her self-absorption and spoiledness.

P| What is the princess culture teaching girls?

O| When children are around age 3 they begin exploring their identity as either a boy or a girl with whatever tools the culture gives them. Princesses are a way for girls to assert what's feminine about themselves.

But princesses are also defining girls by telling them that how you look is who you are. And a lot of parents don't emphasize the stories these princesses belong in—often because they don't want their daughters focused on being helpless and trying to land a man. However, the upside to princesses is that the source material isn't all bad. In the traditional fairy tales, many of the princesses are resourceful and clever

and humble, and show real strength of character. Unfortunately, when you strip all that away, what you have is bling.

P| So what's a parent to do about princesses?

O| There's no need to ban princesses entirely, if your daughter's under their magical spell. Kids do love royal fantasies. But princesses—especially the prescribed ones—shouldn't be the only narrative or fantasy girls have access to or are indulging in.

You also have to be mindful about where the whole princess culture is leading young girls: to wanting lip gloss at age 4 or wearing skimpy outfits by age 5. The challenge for us as parents is to make sure princesses don't become about old stereotypes and divahood but about something bigger and more joyful. □

Three Ways to Turn the Crown Around

1

Tell the Cinderella stories.

There are thousands of versions from around the world, many with strong, female characters. Even the traditional Grimm Brothers' fable features a goofy prince and an awesomely gracious princess.

2

Don't limit girlish things—expand on them.

Loving Barbie is fine, but also give your daughter tools to build a treehouse or a fort for her dolls or blocks to erect a castle. She can wear her tiara while she works.

3

Give your daughter choices.

Rather than constantly saying "no," figure out what you can live with (princess-wise) and empower your daughter to choose from the things that you find acceptable.