



# Absentee Parents in Disney Feature-length Animated Movies: What are Children Watching?

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## Abstract

Globally, Disney animated films integrate education into entertainment for families with children. This study uses the Social Capital Theory as the framework to support its focus on parental attention to children's developmental learning needs. This exploratory study examines how Disney animated movies over the last eight decades portrayed parents in the life of the leading child characters. With three inclusion criteria (figure-length, animated, and at least one child being the protagonist), we found 155 films for the general audience released between 1937 and 2020. We read relevant website-posted plots and themes of each selected movie from three major informational websites. Data included the leading child, parents or parental figures, and the central theme of the movie. Most of these 155 stories ( $n=97$ , 61.3%) did not mention the child's biological parents. Half of the 48 parental-presence films projected life in a single-headed family and the main characters' heroic image. The movies released during 2000–2020 showed a higher parental presence than the previous seven vicennial periods. Findings show that families could use Disney animated movies illustrating fantasy and reality. Parents can engage children in discussions about friendship and family relationships after watching a movie. If children continue consuming Disney movies, parental involvement is needed to facilitate discussions of real-life learning to help children develop communication skills.

**Keywords** Parental inclusion · Heroic belief · Gender-based discussion · Single-headed families

As a classical icon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first full-length animated feature produced by the Walt Disney Company in 1937. Since then, Disney animations have been a popular means to entertain and educate children. According to Nwokocha (2020), the top Disney movies to watch online globally during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic were seven animated films: *The Lion King* (1994), *Frozen* (2013), *Mulan* (1998), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Brave* (2012), and *Cinderella* (1950 and 2015). In six out of these seven films (86%), however, the main characters do not have parents present in the story.

Disney animated films with popular songs represent an educational means valued by parents and teachers (de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2017). During the first few months

of January 2020, when COVID-19 began to impact the world negatively, there was a monthly average of 94,000 search hits for *The Lion King* (1994), 69,000 hits for *Aladdin* (1992), 36,000 hits for *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and 10,000 hits for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (MTS, 2020). These films' leading child characters have one or both parents being absent in their lives. In addition to these films, hundreds of other animated features are children's favorites, but parents are not the focus. We started to use the theoretical framework of parental involvement as social capital to formulate research questions to check if Disney animated films have mentioned the reasons behind why parents are absent in their stories.

## Parental Involvement as Social Capital

As supported by the Social Capital Theory, parents' consistent presence in a child's life is essential to increase social capital for the family. McNeal (1999) used research data from parent–child discussions to support the correlation between children's academic outcomes and parental

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time commitment in parent-teacher organizations. Social capital in a family is a function of parental involvement to strengthen a child's cognitive and behavioral development. A part of this involvement becomes parental learning in achieving children's positive outcomes in education and self-efficacy (Cleland & Lumsdon, 2021; Harding et al., 2015). With this framework, "parental presence" is a function of parents' participation in a child's daily activities with home-based support to promote the child's developmental needs. It stresses the importance of parental involvement in a child's learning. With this theoretical support, our study focused on parental presence in movies designed for children. Our questions are: To what extent do these movies describe parents' roles? Was it an increase in parental presence among the films between 1937 and 2000?

## Existing Analyses on Animated Films and Families

Current literature has questioned the impact of superhero books on youth who experienced early parental loss (Betzalet & Shechtman, 2017). Since Disney films play an essential role in children's learning process, critics voiced concerns that parents are often not portrayed in child-oriented movies. Some analyzed the content of Disney's animated films concerning its presentation of issues about social vulnerability about gender role differentials, and the races or ethnic backgrounds of the main characters. In a study by Faherty (2001), the top ten animated films described factors determining human diversities (cultural, ethnic, gender, and family structure) and many other social issues. Most issues were justice-related, concerning people with physical disabilities, speech impediments, intellectual disabilities, families living in poverty, and parents killed, incarcerated, missing, or dead. Another study focusing on 26 Disney animated classics and films in the early 2000s found four major themes: (a) strong family relationships, (b) diversity among families, (c) elevated father role and marginalized mother role, and (d) **gender**-based power differentials (Tanner et al., 2003). Some of these films provided information to help the audience appreciate individual differences and cultural diversities.

In discussing parenting roles, Brydon (2009) used *Finding Nemo* to illustrate how a father could play the "mothering" role without a maternal figure in the family. After observing many Disney movies, Boxer (2014) asked, "Why are all the cartoon mothers dead?" to examine a phenomenon faced by many famous Disney characters such as Ariel, Bambi, and Nemo. Boxer analyzed selected movies

to describe a good father figure after the death of a nurturing mother. The analysis focused on the importance of the "fathering" shift away from the 'stepmother stereotype' presented in Disney's classic movies such as *Cinderella*. Nevertheless, the limited literature used popularity as the main criterion of film selection.

Disney's core value is to provide "family entertainment" through storytelling to "inform and inspire people around the globe" (Walt Disney Company, 2020b, Np). This value supported the intent of this present research to analyze if the information about the parents in the story could connect children to topics such as family relationships and protection. The analysis of the entire genre of Disney animated movies will help select suitable films for use in counseling to address how parents provide support and protection for the family and solve problems in times of despair.

## Method

This exploratory study examines how Disney animated films over the last eight decades portrayed the presence of parents in the life of the child characters. Parental presence is a phenomenon where one or both parents are physically present in the screenplay or mentioned in the movie. For example, in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Queen Leah, Princess Aurora's mother, is a minor character. The "parental presence" variable is coded as "mother, alive." In *Frozen* (2013), Anna and Elsa's parents died in an accident; again, in *Frozen II* (2019), a sunken ship reminded the audience the sisters' parents died at sea. The parental presence variable for both movies is identical: mother and father were mentioned but dead. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) has a stepmother because the biological mother passed. Even though the father is still living, he is not with the child. Thus, the parental presence code is "mother, dead" and "father, away." Since both parents are not present, they are "absentee parents."

Disney animated movies were the target due to this company's international popularity in moviemaking for children and families with the "widest age range in audiences" (Hubka et al., 2009) and family relationships as the theme (Tanner et al., 2003). The reason for selecting Disney as the analysis target was its mission to use movies as an educational tool to "inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling" (Walt Disney Company, 2020b, web page).

Data collection took three steps. The first was an exhaustive search of Disney animated movies through three internet websites: Disneyanimation.com, Movies.disney.com, and Wikipedia.org. We provided research training for an assistant who helped with data collection. Our assistant identified 155

Disney animated movies that fit the inclusion criteria (the protagonist is a child, the movie is feature-length, and an animated film released for the general audience). A feature-length film must be longer than 40 min (British Film Institute, 2020). These movies started from having sound and color to the most recently released (see Table 1). Those films marked with an asterisk are 58 sequels of previously released movies with a new screenplay.

The second step was to use these websites to identify the names of the leading child characters and whether their parents were present (in the movie or mentioned as alive) or absent (mentioned but died or away or not mentioned). Since previous literature analyzed only a few Disney films, the final step was to use the entire collection within the past eight decades to determine the trend of absentee parents in the movies. This analysis is a visualization method to show this trend over the past 80 years.

Our research notes contained measures to operationalize three variables. The first was the “age of the film,” i.e., the number of years between the release year (of the film) and 2020 (data collection year). The second was the “parental presence” variable in four nominal categories: 1) both parents are present in the movie (or mentioned alive), 2) only one parental figure (mother or father) is absent, 3) absence of both parents either by death or being away, or 4) no mention of parents in the movie. The third variable was the “proportion of films with absentee parents,” calculated by the number of movies without parents (category 3 and category 4) divided by the number of films in the decade.

## Data Analysis

The data sources identified 155 Disney animated feature-length films released between 1937 and 2020. The research question is: How do Disney animated films portray the main child character’s parents in the stories? If parents are absent in a selected film, a follow-up question could be: Does the movie provide information about the causes for absentee parents? SPSS 26 was the statistical software for descriptive and bivariate analysis. Table 1 shows data listed by the featured films by title, movie length, main characters, the leading child’s biological parents, and the primary theme described in the cinematic plot. The assistant used keywords (“movie name,” theme or moral, or purpose) to search the internet to find the primary theme for each movie. We checked all movie descriptions from the internet with the exact keywords and watched 35 free-access films (over 20%) to ensure data accuracy and trustworthiness for further analysis. Since the information collected for this study came from secondary sources (movie websites and publicly accessible films), this study does not involve human subjects. Therefore, research ethics reviews are not required.

## Results

### Increase in Animated Movie Production

Table 1 lists 155 movies released between 1937 and the first quarter of 2020—a history of 83 years of Disney animated feature-length film production in colors and with sound. The average length of these films was 84.86 min (Median = 82,  $SD = 16.7$ ). The shortest movie, *Saludos Amigos* (1943; 42 min), was a viral-cartoon cinematic movie. In comparison, the longest movie, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971; 139 min), was a “live-action plus animated” fantasy film that integrated cartoon technology into a human-acting movie. There were 27 (17.4%) releases between 1937 and 1979 (annual average = 0.64 movies) less than one movie per year) and 128 (82.6%) releases between 1980 and 2020 (annual average = 3.2 movies).

Figure 1 shows the growth of feature-length animations primarily released in the last two decades (2000–2020). The most recent two decades had more films than the previous vicennial. At mid-point, there were 78 releases between 1937 and 2002 in 65 years and 77 releases between 2003 and 2020 in the most recent 18 years. Comparing these two groups of films (1937–2002 vs 2003–2020), the percentages of films having absentee parents (70% vs 68%) or not (30% vs 32%) showed no statistical significance,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.161$ ,  $p = 0.688$  ( $v = 0.0065$ ). This statistic shows the absentee-parent phenomenon happened regardless of time.

### Increase in Parental Presence

Among the 155 films, the majority ( $n = 97$ , 62.6%) did not mention the leading child’s parents in the story. Only 24 movies (15.4%) presented information about both parents. For example, at the beginning of *Mulan* (1998), both parents were briefly there to set the stage before Mulan leaving to join the national army in China. Eight films (5.1%) explicitly described both parents were dead or away. In 47 films (30.3%) containing information about one parent, only 24 biological parents (11 mothers; 13 fathers) were present. For those child characters without parents, two had stepmothers: *Snow White*’s stepmother (the “Evil Queen” Grimilde) and *Cinderella*’s “wicked stepmother” (Lady Tremaine); six had adoptive parents: Tarzan’s adoptive mother (Kala, the gorilla) in *Tarzan 1* and 2; Tod’s adoptive mother (Widow Tweed) in *The Fox and the Hound*; Lilo’s legal guardian (Nani, the sister) in *Lilo & Stitch 1* and 2; Kronk’s adoptive parent (Yzma, the witch) in *The Emperor’s New Groove 2*. None of these 155 films mentioned a stepfather. Among 40 films that mentioned one or both parents of the main child, 24 mentioned both parents alive, four mentioned the mother

Table 1 Disney feature-length animated films, 1937–2020

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
1	Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	12/21/1937	83	Snow White	Yes, but dead [with step-mother]	Yes, but away	Need for a family
2	Pinocchio	02/07/1940	88	Pinocchio	No	No [Fathering figure: Creator]	Self-worthiness
3	Fantasia	11/13/1940	125	Mickey Mouse	No	No	Wish for a better life
4	Dumbo	10/23/1941	64	Dumbo	Yes, alive	No	Love, family and courage
5	Bambi	08/13/1942	70	Bambi	Yes, but dead	No	Death and loss
6	Saludos Amigos	02/06/1943	42	Goofy & Donald Duck	No	No	Intercountry relationship
7	The Three Caballeros	02/03/1945	71	Donald Duck	No	No	Intercountry relationship
8	Make Mine Music	04/20/1946	75	Music Instruments, Singers and Dancers	No	No	Music
9	Song of the South	11/20/1946	95	Johnny	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Problem solving
10	Fun and Fancy Free	09/27/1947	73	Mickey Mouse, Don Duck, Goofy, and Jimmy Cricket	No	No	Differences in roles
11	Melody Time	05/27/1948	75	Singers	No	No	Singing
12	The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad	10/05/1949	68	Ichabod	No	No	Friendship
13	Cinderella	02/15/1950	74	Cinderella	Yes, but dead; Stepmother	Yes, but dead	Blended family and forgiveness
14	Alice in Wonderland	07/28/1951	75	Alice	No	No	Growing up
15	Peter Pan	02/05/1953	77	Peter Pan and Wendy	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Youthful innocence
16	Lady and the Tramp	06/16/1955	76	Lady and Tramp	No	No	Life differences
17	Sleeping Beauty	01/29/1959	75	Aurora	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Love conquers all
18	101 Dalmatians	01/25/1961	79	Perdita and Pongo	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Love for animals
19	The Sword in The Stone	12/25/1963	79	Arthur and Merlin	No	Yes, alive	Grow up well
20	The Jungle Book	10/18/1967	78	Mowgli	No	No	Evil of capitalism
21	The Aristocats	12/24/1970	78	Duchess and Thomas	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Family
22	Bedknobs and Broomsticks	12/13/1971	139	Price	No	No	Musical
23	Robin Hood	11/08/1973	83	Robin Hood	No	No	Brotherhood
24	The Many Adventures of Winnie Pooh	03/11/1977	74	Winnie the Pooh	No	No	Solid friendship
25	The Rescuers	06/22/1977	78	Bernard and Bianca; Penny	No	No	Good vs. evil
26	A Tale of Two Critters	06/22/1977	48	Bear cub and young Raccoon	No	No	Friendship while being away from families
27	Pete's Dragon	11/03/1977	128	Peter	No	No	Courage and maturity
28	The Fox and the Hound	07/10/1981	83	Tod and Copper	No [Tod adopted by Tweed]	No	Friendship
29	The Black Cauldron	07/24/1985	80	Taran	No	No	Personal honor

Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
30	Basil- The Great Mouse Detective	07/02/1986	74	Basil	No (dead?)	Yes, alive but away	Loyalty
31	The Brave Little Toaster	09/18/1987	90	Toaster	No	No	Loneliness conquered
32	Who Framed Roger Rabbit	06/22/1988	104	Roger	No	No	Racial-ethnic discrimination
33	Oliver and Company	11/18/1988	74	Oliver	No	No	Love and redemption
34	The Little Mermaid	11/17/1989	83	Ariel	No	Yes, alive	Dream of unproblematic life
35	Duck Tales: The Movie- Treasure of the Lost Lamp	08/03/1990	74	Scrooge McDuck	No	No	Life adventure
36	*The Rescuers Down Under	11/16/1990	77	Bernard and Bianca	No	No	Never give up
37	Beauty and the Beast	11/22/1991	84	Belle	No	Yes, alive	Anger
38	Aladdin	11/25/1992	90	Aladdin and Jasmin	No	No for Aladdin [Jasmin's father: King]	Finding yourself
39	Nightmare Before Christmas	10/29/1993	76	Jack Skellington	No	No	Be yourself
40	The Lion King	06/15/1994	88	Simba	Yes, alive	Yes, but dead	Importance of family
41	A Goofy Movie	04/07/1995	81	Max	No	Yes, alive [Goofy]	Brotherly love
42	Pocahontas	06/23/1995	81	Pocahontas	No	Yes, alive	Civilization imposed
43	Toy Story	11/22/1995	81	Andy	Yes, alive	No	Life goal
44	James and the Giant Peach	05/25/1996	84	James	No	No	Friendship
45	Hunchback Notre Dame	06/21/1996	91	Quasimodo	Yes, but dead	Yes, but dead	Beauty within self
46	Hercules	06/27/1997	93	Hercules	Yes, alive	Yes, alive [Zeus]	Strength and skill
47	Winnie the Pooh's Most Grand Adventure	08/05/1997	85	Winnie	No	No	Friendship
48	*Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas	11/11/1997	72	Belle	No	No	Hope
49	* Beauty and the Beast: Belle's Magical World	02/17/1998	92	Belle	No	No	Humility and forgiveness
50	*The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars	05/19/1998	72	The toaster	No	No	Brave
51	Mulan	06/19/1998	88	Mulan	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Family's honor, respect for elders
52	*Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World	08/04/1998	72	Pocahontas	No	No	War prevention
53	*The Lion King 2: Simba's Pride	10/27/1998	82	Kiara	Yes, alive	Yes, alive [Simba]	Importance of trust
54	A Bug's Life	11/25/1998	95	Flik	No	No	Economic exploitation
55	Doug's 1st Movie	03/26/1999	83	Doug and Skeeter	No	No	Friendship

Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
56	*The Brave Little Toaster to the Rescue	05/18/1999	74	The toaster	No	No	Functionality
57	Tarzan	06/18/1999	88	Tarzan	Yes, but dead	Yes, but dead	Impact of cultural heredity
58	Mickey's Once Upon a Christmas	11/09/1999	70	Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy	No	No	Personal wishes
59	*Winnie the Pooh: Seasons of Giving	11/09/1999	70	Winnie	No	No	Giving
60	*Toy Story 2	11/30/1999	95	Woody and Buzz	No	No	Choice
61	*Fantasia 2000	12/17/1999	75	Mickey and Donald	No	No	Improvisation
62	*An Extremely Goofy Movie	02/19/2000	90	Goofy and Max	No	Yes, alive	Work hard on victory
63	Dinosaur	05/19/2000	82	Aladar	Yes, but dead	Yes, but dead	Survival and leadership
64	The Emperor's New Groove	12/15/2000	78	Kuzco (the emperor) [no leading child in this film]	No	No	Self-deception
65	*The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea	09/19/2000	77	Melody	Yes, alive [Queen Ariel]	Yes, alive [King Eric]	Managing future
66	Recess: School's Out	02/10/2001	84	T.J. Detweiler	No	No	Life goal
67	*Recess Christmas: Miracle on Third Street	11/06/2001	90	T.J. Detweiler	No	No	Running for life miracles
68	*Lady and the Tramp II: Scamp's Adventure	02/27/2001	70	Lady, Tramp, and Scamp	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Independence
69	Atlantis: The Lost Empire	06/03/2001	95	Milo Thatcher and Kida	No	No	Power, knowledge, and morality
70	Monsters, Inc	11/02/2001	92	Boo	No	No	Good vs. evil
71	*Mickey's Magical Christmas: Snowed In at the House of Mouse	11/06/2001	65	Mickey	No	No	Wishes for a safe trip home
72	*The Hunchback of Notre Dame II	03/19/2002	70	Quasimodo (when he was a child)	No	No	Justice, punishment, and freedom
73	*Peter Pan II: Return to Never Land	02/10/2002	73	Peter Pan and Jane	Yes, Jane's mother, Wendy	Yes, alive	Growing up conflict
74	*Cinderella II: Dreams come true	02/26/2002	73	Cinderella	No	No	Family life
75	Lilo & Stitch	07/21/2002	85	Lilo	No	No	Women and identity
76	*Mickey's House of Villains	09/03/2002	70	Mickey	No	No	Success
77	*Winnie the Pooh: A Very Merry Pooh Year	11/12/2002	65	Winnie and Rabbit	No	No	Friendship

Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
78	Treasure Planet	11/27/2002	95	Jim	No	No	Growth and development as adventures
79	*101 Dalmatians II: Patch's London Adventure	01/21/2003	74	Patch	No	No	Importance of lives
80	*The Jungle Book 2	02/14/2003	78	Mowgli and Baloo	No	No	Fear and confidence
81	Piglet's Big Movie	03/16/2003	89	Piglet	No	No	Friendship
82	Finding Nemo	05/30/2003	100	Nemo	Yes, but dead	Yes, alive [Marlin]	Don't give up
83	*Atlantis: Milo's Return	05/30/2003	80	Milo and Kida	No	No	Self-value in reality
84	Brother Bear	11/01/2003	85	Kenai	No	No	Empathy
85	Kim Possible: A Sitch in Time	11/28/2003	66	Kim	No	No	Past vulnerability
86	*Recess: All Growned Down	12/09/2003	61	T.J. Detweiler	No	No	School life
87	*Recess: Taking the Fifth Grade	12/09/2003	62	T.J. Detweiler	No	No	School life and advancement
88	Teacher's Pet	01/16/2004	74	Leonard	Yes, alive	No	Fulfillment
89	*The Lion King 3: Hakuna Matata	02/10/2004	90	Timon and Pumbaa	No	No	Be positive: no worries
90	*Winnie the Pooh: Springtime with Roo	03/09/2004	65	Winnie and Roo	No	No	Friendship
91	Home on the Range	04/02/2004	76	Maggie and Grace	No	No	Give me a home
92	*The Three Musketeers	08/17/2004	68	Mickey, Donald, Goofy	No	No	Friendship
93	The Incredibles	11/05/2004	116	The Parr Family: Violet, Dash, and Jack Jack	Yes, alive [Helen]	Yes, alive [Brad]	Embrace our true nature
94	*Mickey's Twice Upon a Christmas	11/09/2004	68	Mickey, Minnie, and Daisy	No	No	Friendship
95	*Kim Possible: The Villain Files	12/07/2004	87	Kim	No	No	Keep the world safe
96	*Mulan 2	02/01/2005	79	Mulan	No	No	Power of being a daughter
97	*Pooh's Heffalump	02/11/2005	68	Pooh, Heffalump, Woozle	No	No	Morality
98	*Tarzan 2	6/14/2005	74	Tarzan	No	No	Helpfulness
99	*Kim Possible Movie: So the Drama	08/08/2005	71	Kim	No	No	Crime fighting
100	The Proud Family	08/19/2005	91	Penny Proud	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Achievements
101	*Lilo & Stitch 2: Stitch Has a Glitch	08/30/2005	72	Lilo	No, [Legal guardian: Nani]	No	Challenge in lives
102	*Pooh's Heffalump Halloween	09/13/2005	67	Winnie and Lumpy	No	No	Friendship

Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
103	Chicken Little	11/04/2005	81	Chicken Little	Yes, but dead	Yes, alive	Courage
104	*The Emperor's New Groove 2: Kronik's New Groove	12/13/2005	75	Kronk	No [Adopted by Yzma]	No	Be nice
105	*Bambi II	02/07/2006	75	Bambi	Yes, but dead	Yes, alive	Losing a loved one
106	The Wild	04/14/2006	95	Animals in the Zoo	No	No	Animal life
107	Cars	06/09/2006	117	Lightning McQueen	No	No	Relationships matter
108	*Brother Bear 2	08/29/2006	73	Kenai	No	No	True love conquers all
109	*The Fox and the Hound 2	12/12/2006	69	Tod and Copper	No	No	War and fight
110	*Cinderella III: A Twist in Time	02/06/2007	75	Cinderella	No	No	Improvement of life
111	Meet the Robinsons	03/23/2007	95	Lewis	Yes, abandoned the child	No	Keep moving forward
112	Ratatouille	06/29/2007	91	Remy	No	No	Believe in one's own self
113	*My Friends Tigger and Pooh: Super Sleuth Christmas	12/06/2007	43	Winnie and Darby	No	No	Friends work together
114	Wall-E	06/27/2008	103	Wall-E [the robot]	No	No	Self-awareness of strengths and liabilities
115	Ponyo	07/19/2008	103	Ponyo	No	Yes, alive	Acceptance and love
116	*The Little Mermaid: Ariel's Beginning	08/26/2008	77	Ariel	Yes, but dead	Yes, alive	Life challenges and dreams
117	Tinker Bell	09/18/2008	78	Tinker Bell	No	No	Friendship, curiosity
118	Bolt	11/21/2008	96	Bolt	No	No	Protect the ones you love
119	*Tigger & Pooh and a Musical Too	04/11/2009	60	Winnie and Tigger	No	No	Friendship
120	Up	05/29/2009	96	Russell	No	No	Honesty and appreciation
121	*Tinker Bell and the Lost Treasure	10/27/2009	82	Tinker Bell	No	No	Friendship
122	The Princess and the Frog	12/11/2009	97	Tiana and Naveen	Yes, Tiana's mother	Yes, Tiana's father but dead	Key to success
123	*Toy Story 3	06/18/2010	108	Andy, Woody, and Buzz	Yes, alive	No	Unconditional love
124	The Secret World of Arrietty	07/17/2010	95	Arrietty	Yes, alive [Homily Clock]	Yes, alive [Pod Clock]	Friendship to heal loneliness
125	*Tinker Bell and the Great Fairy Rescue	09/21/2010	79	Tinker Bell and Lizzy	No	No	You are not something else
126	Tangled	11/24/2010	100	Rapunzel	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Comfort zone
127	Cars 2	01/24/2011	120	Lightning McQueen and Mater	No	No	Friends are treasure
128	Mars Needs Moms	03/11/2011	88	Milo	Yes, alive	No	Childhood pain, unconditional love



Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
129	Winnie The Pooh	7/15/2011	63	Winnie the Pooh	No	No	Friendship
130	Phineas and Ferb: Across the 2nd Dimension	08/15/2011	78	Phineas Flynn and Ferb Fletcher	No	No	Good vs. evil
131	Brave	06/22/2012	100	Merida	Yes, alive [Queen Elinor]	Yes, alive [King Fergus]	Don't be afraid
132	Frankenweenie	09/20/2012	87	Victor and Sparky	Yes, Susan Frankenstein	Yes, Ben Frankenstein	Good things for love
133	Wreck-It Ralph	11/02/2012	101	Wreck-It Ralph	No	No	Caring and compassion
134	*Tinker Bell: Secret of the Wings	08/31/2012	92	Tinker Bell	No	No	Cure
135	Monsters University	06/21/2013	110	Mike and Sulley	No	No	Good vs. evil
136	Planes	08/09/2013	92	Dusty	No	No	Facing fears
137	*Phineas and Ferb: Mission Marvel	08/16/2013	137	Phineas and Ferb	No	No	Life mission
138	Frozen	11/27/2013	109	Elsa and Anna	Yes, but dead [Queen Iduna]	Yes, but dead [King Agnarr]	Importance of family
139	*Phineas and Ferb: Star Wars	01/26/2014	60	Phineas and Ferb	No	No	New hope
140	*The Pirate Fairy	04/01/2014	90	Zarina	No	No	Friendship
141	*Planes: Fire & Rescue	07/18/2014	84	Dusty	No	No	Moral worldview
142	Big Hero 6	11/07/2014	108	Hiro Hamada	Yes, but dead	Yes, but dead	Anti-violence
143	Inside Out	06/19/2015	102	Riley Andersen	Yes, alive [Mrs. Anderson]	Yes, alive [Mr. Anderson]	Recover joy after traumatic experience
144	The Good Dinosaur	11/25/2015	94	Arlo	Yes, alive [Momma Ida]	Yes, but dead [Poppa Henry]	Fear and life
145	Zootopia	3/4/2016	90	Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde	Yes, for Judy [Bonnie Hopps]	Yes, for Judy [Bonnie Hopps]	Inclusiveness
146	Finding Dory	6/17/2016	120	Dory	Yes, for Nick [divorced]	Yes, for Nick [divorced]	Celebrating differences
147	Moana	11/23/2016	107	Moana and Maui	Yes, alive	Yes, alive	Patience is beneficial
148	*Cars 3	6/16/2017	102	Lightning McQueen	Yes for Moana [Sina]; Yes for Maui [abandoned the child]	Yes for Moana: alive [Sina]; Yes for Maui [abandoned the child]	Set life goal high
149	Coco	11/22/2017	109	Miguel	No	No	Treasure our family
150	*Incredibles 2	6/15/2018	125	The Parr Family: Violet, Dash, and Jack Jack	Yes, Luisa	Yes, Enrique Rivera	Objectivism
151	*Ralph Breaks the Internet	11/21/2018	112	Wreck-It Ralph and Vanellope von Schweetz	Yes, alive [Helen Parr]	Yes, alive [Bob Parr]	Friendship and different dreams
152	*Toy Story 4	6/21/2019	100	Andy	No	No	Don't stop loving even after some has passed
153	*Lion King (Remake)	7/18/2019	118	Simba	Yes, alive [Sarabi]	Yes, but dead [Mufasa]	Happiness is a choice

Table 1 (continued)

#	Film title	Date of First Release	Length (mins)	Leading child character	Biological mother	Biological father	Theme or moral
154	*Frozen II	11/22/2019	103	Elsa and Anna	Yes, but dead [Queen Iduna]	Yes, but dead [King Agnarr]	Truth, anti-colonialism, unity from change
155	Onward	3/6/2020	103	Ian and Barley Lightfoot	Yes, alive [Laurel Lightfoot]	Yes, but dead [Wilden Lightfoot]	Sibling love and personal growth

\*Sequel; /No/Not Mentioned

alive but not father, four mentioned only the father alive but not mother, and eight mentioned both parents died or were away. The statistic,  $\chi^2(1) = 10.975, p = 0.001 (v = 0.0308)$ , even with a small effect size, shows that a higher proportion (70%) of the parents are there with the child. However, 75% of these 155 movies did not mention parents in their plot. These are called the “no mention” cases.

Table 2 compares parental presence figures in the 155 films in the past eight decades (1937–2020). A significant finding is that Disney presented its effort to proportionately increase the presence of one or both parents to 57.6% in the most recent decade, comparing to 26.23% in its previous decade. Films within the immediate past decade (1–10 years ago) had shown an increased proportion (30.3%) of “having both parents mentioned,” 20.6% higher than the previous decade (11–20 years ago) of 9.7%. Figure 2 produces a visual comparison between the proportions of parental presence and absentee parents over the eight decades. The ratio of having one or both parents presented in the story ranged between 15 and 65%. It had an upward trend from the 1930s to the 1950s but dropped in the 1960s. When the child’s biological parents are mentioned but absent in the story, the reasons are related to death, divorce, adoption, or child abandonment. It is the “no mention” cases responsible for most unknown causes of having absentee parents.

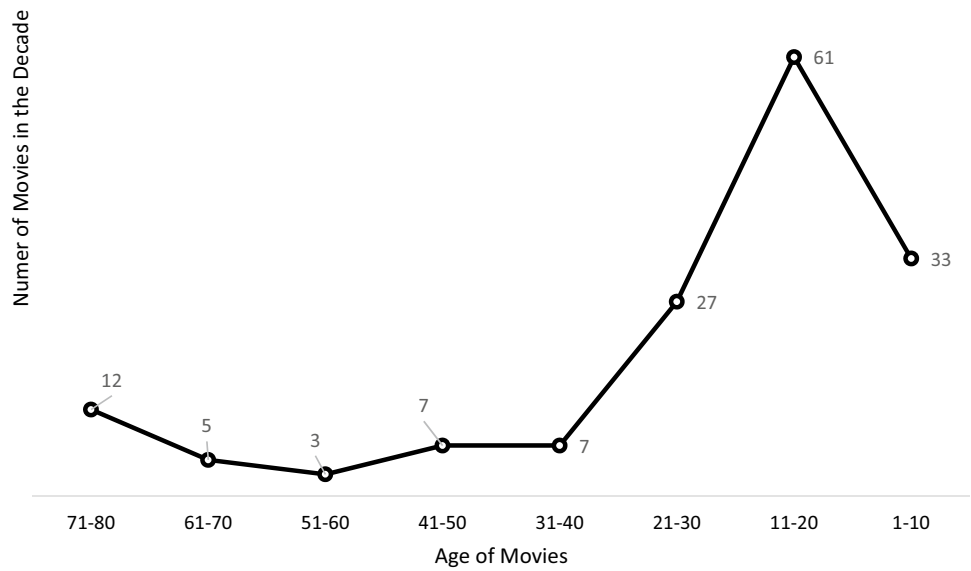
### Themes of the Movies

Most movies (72.9%,  $n = 113$ ) share the message about loving self and others. Their themes are related to self-development ( $n = 33$ ), friends ( $n = 24$ ), life ( $n = 14$ ), love ( $n = 13$ ), family ( $n = 12$ ), future solution and hope (8), past and forgiveness ( $n = 4$ ), grief and loss ( $n = 3$ ), and school ( $n = 2$ ). Other movies (27.1%,  $n = 42$ ) are associated to morality and social values, including discrimination ( $n = 11$ ), good vs. evil ( $n = 7$ ), handling emotions ( $n = 7$ ), power ( $n = 5$ ), intercountry relationships ( $n = 4$ ), roles and functions ( $n = 3$ ), music ( $n = 3$ ), and culture ( $n = 2$ ). These keywords from the descriptions of the movies showed both the micro and macro perspectives of humanity.

### Discussion

A prominent finding in this study was a pattern of more animated films produced by Disney in the past two decades. The supply-and-demand market likely determined this increase when more moviegoers were young parents with children ages two to eleven (Pirnia, 2015). This finding provides three implications for family communication research. First, the fact that children are the primary consumers leads to the main focus on children themselves. It is not surprising to find the recent movie design suits the child’s interest and

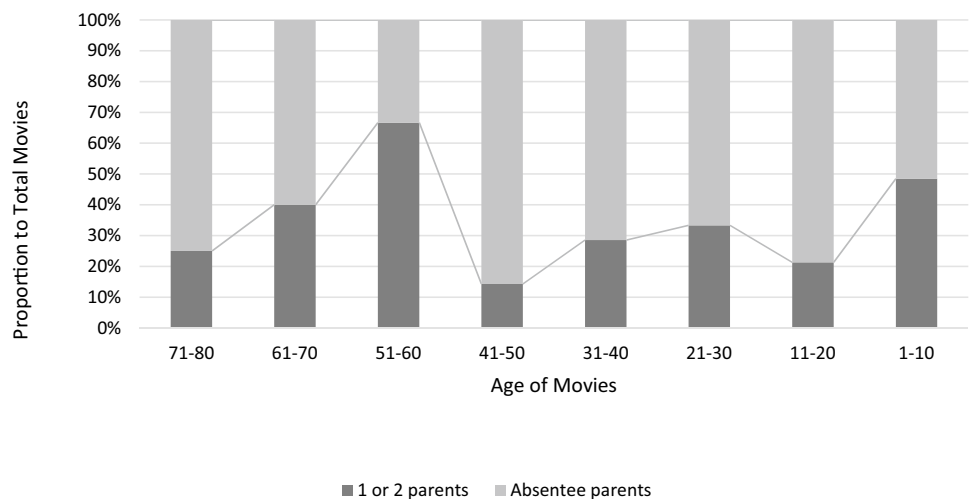
**Fig. 1** Disney animated films: 1937–2020



**Table 2** Mention of parents in Disney animated films: 1937–2020

Age of films (Years ago)	Number of films	Percentage within Decade			
		No mention of Parents	No parents	Mention of one parent	Mention of both parents
71–80	12	58.30%	16.70%	16.70%	8.30%
61–70	5	20.00%	40.00%	0.00%	40.00%
51–60	3	33.30%	0.00%	33.30%	33.30%
41–50	7	85.70%	0.00%	0.00%	14.30%
31–40	7	71.40%	0.00%	28.60%	0.00%
21–30	27	59.30%	7.40%	22.20%	11.10%
11–20	61	73.77%	4.92%	11.48%	9.84%
1–10	33	42.40%	9.10%	18.20%	30.30%
Total # of Films	155	95	12	24	24
% of Total	100	61.29	7.74	15.48	15.48

**Fig. 2** Parental presence in Disney animated films: 1937–2020



the company's core value of using creative technologies to improve the quality of family life (Walt Disney Company, 2020a). Second, the diversity-oriented content also fits the practice of social work for inspiring people to respect cultural diversity and social values of respecting others. Children need guidance to learn about diverse family structures in society. They also need parental support to feel safe in their environment. Diversity and safety are two concepts for parents to share with their children. Third, caregivers could use the content to educate children about unfair situations in society and acceptance of differences. When children have achieved a high level of acceptance, they become more empathic toward other people's misfortune, such as losing a parent or a home or living in a substandard situation without parental support.

Like any fairytale, Disney movies mix fantasy with reality. However, many well-intended films may have over-emphasized the heroic aspect onto a person and enforced gender role stereotypes (Bahn et al., 2019; Zurcher et al., 2020). For example, the movies released 50 years or more ago, girls and women were the victims waiting for a male rescuer. These fairytales are still popular today, but they have been rooted in many princess characters with ideals leading to a happy ending (Hefner et al., 2017). Colette Dowling (1981) analyzed the "Cinderella complex" (as illustrated in Agatha Christie's (1955) detective story *Hickory Dickory Dock*) to demonstrate how women's "fear of independence" has been learned in their socialization process since childhood. Parental engagement in a child's learning journey would help children discuss differences between fantasy and reality. Children could share viewpoints about any misrepresented information and discuss adjusting the story to enhance cultural sensitivity.

It is also important to note that children may believe certain movies are acceptable in real life in their early learning stages. For example, Cappiccie et al. (2012) applied the basic principles of the critical race theory to analyze the characters in three popular Disney animated films to illustrate the most pervasive forms of racism and micro-aggression. These films are *The Lion King* (background in Africa), *Mulan* (in China), and *Pocahontas* (about an indigenous people). As case examples, these films with content analysis results could be teaching tools for facilitating discussions on cultural stereotypes, societal role distortion, and racism (Bazzini et al., 2010; Hefner et al., 2017). These films' main characters could be advocates of social justice and role models in leadership. They could be a voice for children to talk about any concerns they have experienced in their surroundings. With racism embedded in the movies, social workers could work with parents to address how animated films could be a tool for discussing the impact of stereotypes on the perception toward oneself and others. These discussions

could demonstrate the achievements of equity and fairness in different environments.

Compared to the findings by Bahn et al. (2019), who studied family stereotypes and family caregiver characteristics as portrayed in Disney films from 1937 to 2016, this study supported the implications related to providing adequate guidance for children when they have questions about these crises or other similar situations that they encounter. Serving as a child's guardian involves knowing what children are doing and being knowledgeable about the contents of what children are watching. Each movie has a moral behind the story. Instead of prohibiting children from watching these movies due to implicit biases, parents could guide children to project learning about changing the story to achieve happiness, respect, successful life goal and handling situations through a nonjudgmental lens.

## Implications to Parent–Child Communication

A limitation of this study was the sole use of Disney animated films in the analysis. There are other animated films and family movies that could provide alternative viewpoints for further analysis purposes. Since families play an essential role in these stories for children, parents could discuss what their children expect to learn from these movies. At the same time, children could talk about perceptions about the families in the movies. With the trend that more parents are present and mentioned in the most recent films, the implication of this study included the value of applying these movies in parent–child communication in five areas:

- (1) Know that there are diverse family structures;
- (2) Express from the consumer's point of view the need for family entertainment to provide a healthy balance on what children could and should learn from;
- (3) Address equitable solutions while presenting unfairness in life;
- (4) Remove aggression, biases, and implicit discrimination;
- (5) Use relevant movie clips to help parents think about alternative questions or retell stories to handle personal struggles due to racial and cultural differences.

Another limitation is related to the measure of "absentee parents." When parents are absent due to "no mention," we could only code the parental presence variable as "absence." With no explanations in the movie, some children may wonder why the parents are not there to help. Social workers could use animated films to develop case scenarios for parents to create a question-and-answer list when dealing with the child's concerning "no parents" being there. Based on these five discussion areas, the following potential questions

are recommended as examples to stimulate critical thinking and promote parent–child communication:

- 1) Knowledge assessment: If a problem happened in today's society, what would this child character ask their parents? In this family, who may have questions about this problem/sickness that has been going around?
- 2) Family-focused value: What would be different if you had the power to change a part (or the ending) of this movie? What strengths does this family have?
- 3) Fairness and equity: If the situation has changed based on the principle of justice, what would people in this story have done differently? What would you suggest the parents do if they were present in this movie?
- 4) Family and social support: What support would this child need if this unjust situation continues? Who could help you stay calm if you were the child in this story?
- 5) Search for alternatives: What did this story tell you about safety (health or wellbeing)? Who would provide comfort for the child character in this story if the problem came back?

## Conclusion

This study found that Disney animated films historically have not focused on the entire family unit, mainly by not having the main child character's parents present in the story. New changes have been found in the past decade that parents became more visible in these films. Disney movies being child-focused with families in the background is an understandable approach. This understanding is similar to an explanation by Charles Schulz, creator of *Peanuts*, who attributed his work to the adults not visible in his cartoon strips. Except saying "mwa-mwa," Schulz said, "[adults] wouldn't have room to stand up [in the] only an inch and a half high" daily strip (McCann, 2019, web page). Similar to Schulz's idea of creating a child-friendly environment without the presence of adults, many Disney movies apply the psychology of this comfort zone to help children address learning reflections and talk about their ideal perspectives. With parents in the background in the film and as an audience, Disney animated films can be suitable for children learning from the perspective of other children of how they deal with life crises. Parents develop questions to ask children about their definition of a crisis. Based on the case examples generated from these movies, parents could hear potential questions children may ask if they are distressed about the situation faced by the child characters. In parallel, counselors who work with parents can also serve as life coaches to help parents use appropriate means to communicate with children about their curiosities and concerns.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest in submitting this article to this Journal. This study uses internet websites to collect data; no human subjects are involved, and no informed consent procedure is necessary.

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