

Happy Feet

Sinking into The Ocean

P. Donohue Shortridge

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The movie, *Happy Feet* is inappropriate for young children. I plead with you not to expose your child to this movie.

Dancing and singing penguins? What's not to love?

But the trailer and tie-in promotions for this movie belie what leaps out from the screen directly into your child. There are seriously dark undertones to this movie that will traumatize your young child.

Please consider the following two points as you read this:

1) Your child is Mumble.

When film-makers animate and anthropomorphize animals or inanimate objects (e.g. the movie, *Cars*), your child identifies with the main character. In the case of *Happy Feet*, the main character, **Mumble**, has Gerber-baby blue eyes, is cuddly like your child's teddy bear and speaks sweetly just like your innocent child. Your child is this character.

In one scene, a terrifying monster seal with ugly dark teeth and what looks like blood on his mouth almost captures and eats your child.

2) Your child experiences every trauma in the film as happening to him. Literally and very seriously for real.

Children under six years old are still forming their concept of what is real and what is not real. To them, everything is literal. You may think they know the difference, but the younger the child, the less likely it is that he knows that fish do not dance and penguins do not sing. Unlike older children and adults, the young child cannot differentiate fact from fantasy. He also does not get jokes, sarcasm and irony. That is why your

child needs lots of experience in the natural world and engagement in age appropriate language so he can acquire reality directly from his experience.

In this movie, your child as Mumble will encounter (in his mind for real) scary monsters who almost kill him,

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inanimate objects such as an excavator as a watery monster, watching a friend almost die, sexual innuendo and man-is-bad themes, as well as being lost from his mommy, being rejected by his daddy while mommy goes along with it, being shunned by the community, and having to assuage his father's guilt, not to mention shouldering the burden of saving the world. The environmental issues I will address separately.

But first:

- In one scene, a terrifying monster seal with ugly dark teeth and what looks like blood on his mouth almost captures and eats your child;
- In another, your child as the naïve baby gets separated from his father and calls out to find his mommy;
- Your child's daddy tells him he doesn't fit in and must leave, and mommy stands by daddy as he does so;
- Even the girl he is sweet on rejects him.
- Later, his traveling partner almost chokes to death and he and his friends fail to remove the chokeholder.

- Earlier, Mumble's father dropped him when he was in the egg and dad now thinks that is the cause for Mumble being different. The father expresses guilt about this. Your child will see the daddy lie to the mommy that there is nothing wrong. Later, we see that the daddy is depressed; it falls to your child to figure out a way to relieve his daddy of his depression.
- There is lots of sexual innuendo, including bumping and grinding to pop music. At one point, the character Lovelace, voiced by Robin Williams says in a salacious tone, **"It's time to retire to my couch of perpetual indulgence; ladies, which one of you is first?"**

I saw this movie on January 2nd in the afternoon. There were about 40 adults and 60 children in the theater. Of the sixty children, I would say half were less than five

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years old and many of them were under three years old and a few even 18-24 months. One young boy near me spent the entire movie on his mommy's lap, chewing his fingernails. In the scene where Mumble's father sends him away, a little child a few rows in front of me screamed out, **"Come back Mumble – his daddy is bad."** This sobbing child was inconsolable and later just buried her head in her mother's shoulder for the rest of the movie. Thankfully, on two separate occasions, I noticed mothers leaving the theater with their young children mid-movie.

I did notice that a few 8/9 year-old girls were tapping their feet and making grinding dance moves in the aisle during the over-the-credits-ending pop music.

And finally, the man-is-bad environmental themes:

Fishing is bad.

Man is bad.

The world is polluted and

Man hurts animals.

The filmmakers make no apologies about inserting their environmental positions into *Happy Feet*.

George Miller, the Australian director of the film said that he changed the original screenplay to amplify the environmental themes and that, "You can't tell a story

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about Antarctica and the penguins without giving that dimension."

Gary Miller, (presumably the director's brother) is a behavioral ecologist who served as the film's penguin consultant. He states that *Happy Feet*

is a story that mirrors real life. From Antarctica to the Galápagos Islands, penguins find themselves increasingly threatened by human activity. Threats include overfishing, oil spills, human encroachment, and global warming.

Director Miller told a children's magazine that the movie teaches children, ". . . if you don't pay attention to it, it all just crumbles away."

The earth will all just crumble away?

Veracity of all these claims aside, is environmental Armageddon an appropriate concern for young children? Your young child now absorbs that it is appropriate to worry about not enough fish for the penguins in Antarctica because you, his parents, brought him to see this movie, thus it must be true and he should indeed fret about it. So now your child worries about something he doesn't really understand.

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You may say, so what, I want my child to be concerned about the environment. Yes, but a) is your child old enough to grasp these issues at the cognitive and not merely visceral level? and b) is the movie telling the truth?

Basically, are you raising a critical thinker or a true believer?

Studio executives don't think the environmental issues in this movie are a problem. They rationalize that since children,

are exposed to more environmental issues than they used to be, the environmental themes are not a turnoff like it might have been 10 or 15 years ago.

Who knows if they are concerned that the movie's environmental issues be factual?

The marketing department for Warner Brothers was coy when asked about this unadvertised plot line, replying that, "the green theme was hard to shoehorn into the ad campaign."

Disingenuous?

I suggest that you decide for yourself by viewing the trailer for *Happy Feet* again after you've seen the movie.

One more point: *Happy Feet* burst onto the number one spot in the first weekend it was out partially because of massive, I mean massive amounts of money spent on pre-release advertising and tie-ins. 10 promotional partners include Burger King, Comcast, Sears, General

Mills and Roche, makers of Tamiflu, who will offer *flu-facts* featuring *Happy Feet* characters. Your child was already saturated with the message to go see the movie before it opened. And he will now want you to buy all things *Happy Feet*.

Happy Feet grossed \$178 million in 2006 (7th largest grossing movie of the year) even though it was on screen for only the last six weeks of the year. An astonishing number of young children have seen this movie.

It won't be long now until it's out on DVD and I urge you not to rent or purchase this movie. Take your child to the zoo or best of all let him freely explore in nature at your near-by open space.

Donohue Shortridge, a Montessorian since 1980 speaks and write on topics related to children and their families in the American culture. pds@pdonohueshortridge.com

P. Donohue Shortridge



fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture