



The Moral Power of Children's Films

Family films shape children long after the credits roll. These overlooked treasures teach sacrifice, mercy, courage, and service.

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The best family films are more than merely “clean.” They actively [form the character](#) of the people who watch them.

Brigham Young, the second president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught, “Upon the stage of a theater can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards; ... and the greatness of truth. The stage can be made to [aid the pulpit](#) in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life.”

In that spirit, I am always searching for great [films](#) that can help my children grow in virtue while they are being entertained. There are a great number of [films](#) that accomplish this from all over the world, and through the power of streaming, including in many cases on free apps or websites, these films are more available today than ever before.

So here are some of the best [films for children](#) that most families have probably never heard of:

‘The Big Bad Fox and Other Tales’

After learning he’s not as intimidating as a big bad wolf, a fox steals three eggs, intending to raise the chicks and then eat them. But when they hatch, they call the fox mommy, and everything changes.

It’s a Belgian film and is animated in bucolic watercolors.

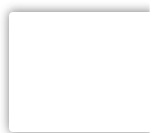
The film is about turning from a consumption mindset to a stewardship mindset. It is about sacrificing for those we love. The fox becomes something better, not through removing barriers to allow his “true self” to shine through, but by repeatedly choosing to protect someone weaker than himself.

“The Big Bad Fox and Other Tales” can be viewed on Kanopy, Hoopla, and YouTube.

‘Children of Heaven’

If viewers are willing to read captions, there are hundreds of beautiful family films from around the world to watch. But for many children, the captions themselves are a significant barrier to entry. So I’ve only included this one subtitled film. It is the perfect children’s movie.

A brother loses his sister’s shoes. His family can’t afford another pair, so they have to share. The brother wears the shoes to school in the morning, then races home so his sister can go to school in the afternoon.



The children are good, but not perfect. But their selfishness is answered with mercy, and their pettiness with compassion.

The characters grow and change as they focus on being there for their family members. And the climax is really unforgettable.

While it was nominated for an Oscar, most parents aren't looking in the Foreign Language Film category for inspiration. This one is definitely worth it.

"Children of Heaven" can be viewed on Kanopy, Hoopla, and YouTube.

'Ernest & Celestine'

The premise of "Ernest & Celestine" is that bears and mice fear each other. But a bear and a mouse become friends anyway.

It's a film about navigating prejudice, but in a way that encourages an internal locus of control, within a story that is pitched in a way that is appropriately gentle for kids.

The film is charming and cozy. It spawned a handful of sequels that are all also worthy films in their own right. So if families love the characters as much as I do, they can spend plenty of time with them.

"Ernest & Celestine" can be viewed on Kanopy and Tubi.

'Kirikou and the Sorceress'

This French-made Senegalese film tells the story of a baby, Kirikou, who is born into war and drought caused by an evil sorceress, Karaba. Kirikou goes with his uncle to confront Karaba, whose hatred comes from a thorn in her back. But she doesn't want to remove it because it has become deeply a part of who she is.

The animation is striking and unlike anything American animation has produced. The tale teaches a deeply important principle about how to make real change in the world.

It is also an opportunity to talk about culture. The film can feel very strange to American audiences because of its pacing, forthright narration, and the fact that the baby Kirikou is naked throughout the film. The film contains frequent nonsexual nudity in its African setting. It does not align with American modesty norms, and it may not be a good fit for families who prefer to avoid all nudity.

"Kirikou and the Sorceress" can be viewed on Prime Video.

'A Letter to Momo'

Momo and her father get into a big fight right before he dies. Her internal demons come to life as three demons in her attic.

By turning the real moral weight of her words into physical avatars, the film makes its rather weighty themes comprehensible to children. The demons are also hilarious.

The film is not only about learning to forgive yourself, it's also about letting our feelings of guilt motivate us to become better people. The film undersells just how powerful repentance and forgiveness can be. So I might want to open that up for a conversation with my kids after the film. But it is fairly minor.

"A Letter to Momo" can be viewed on YouTube.

'Long Way North'

A Danish film set in Russia, "Long Way North" tells the story of Sasha vindicating her grandfather by going on a grand (sometimes scary) adventure.

The film fits firmly into the modern heroine empowerment template. But rather than it being about discovering herself or proving others wrong, the film is about Sasha being empowered as she becomes useful. She has to work in sometimes humiliating circumstances. She studies a lot. And slowly she begins to gain the confidence of those around her, whom she needs to accomplish her goals.

Sasha is a fantastic example to children of what success often actually takes. Sasha makes some reckless decisions, and while the film usually contains consequences for

them, those consequences are rarely clear. This could open up conversations with kids. The movie also includes characters smoking, drinking, and using (non-profanity) name-calling.

"Long Way North" can be viewed on Prime Video and Roku Channel.

'Millions'

In this delightful movie from Oscar-winning director Danny Boyle, 9-year-old Damian finds a bag of money right before the UK is set to move to the Euro. He and his 12-year-old brother Anthony wrestle with what to do with the cash.

The film is mostly about generosity. But it avoids making answers simple. After all, the money was never really his. And the film manages to bring the ethics of a question like "What is money for?" to a level that children can engage in it.

The film is also colorful, funny, and imaginative. Among the many sources of Damian's charity are also a pair of missionaries, providing one of the better depictions of Latter-day Saints on screen.

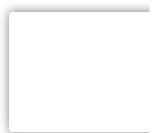
The ending is suspenseful, and there is smoking and drinking, so this is better for older kids, eight and up, but it is certainly enjoyable for the whole family.

"Millions" can be viewed on Prime Video and Disney+.

'Okko's Inn'

This 2018 anime film is a rather straightforward story about grief. Okko loses her parents in a car accident, so she moves into her grandmother's inn. And there she begins serving the guests and the burdens they carry.

The film teaches that dealing with our emotions is not only about inward processing, but also about turning outward and serving the people around us. She learns to deal with her own wounds while helping others heal theirs.



This is a very Japanese movie. It is steeped in the culture and traditions of Japanese life, and many supernatural elements come from Japanese folklore. It may require a good conversation with kids to detangle the ideas in the film from doctrine about the afterlife.

"Okko's Inn" can be viewed on Hoopla.

'The Painting'

Containing one of the more whimsical premises for a film, the story is set in an unfinished painting. The figures in the painting are all at various degrees of completion, which causes conflict among them. When a completely finished figure falls in love with a half-finished figure, several characters leave the painting in search of the artist who created them to ask him to finish.

It is essentially a Romeo & Juliet tale about love overcoming prejudice, but with a much more accessible back half for children.

The film's central metaphor also opens up interesting questions about the nature of the relationship between the figures and their creator. Most of the insights about taking accountability for ourselves and those around us are fantastic. But there are certainly takeaways that could feel atheistic. It's certainly worth asking kids, "What is the difference between our Creator and the painter of the paintings?"

"The Painting" can be viewed on Hoopla and Tubi."

'Paper Planes'

A young boy has a talent for building paper airplanes and advances through competitions while his father remains emotionally distant.

It sounds like a setup for a conventional sports underdog movie. It is not. It is borrowing from the trappings of that type of film to ask bigger, more interesting questions, such as, *Does winning matter if it's detached from generosity, family, and friendship?*

The characters often act badly in the pursuit of victory, but the film often recognizes that this is not virtuous and can diminish our ability to be there for the people around us.

It can become a little bit over the top at times in its discussion of death and depression, so it's certainly not one for a cheery movie night. But this is the sports movie that provides the moral context for all of the other great sports movies.

"Paper Planes" can be viewed on Starz, YouTube, and Tubi.

About the author



C.D. Cunningham

C.D. Cunningham is a founder and editor-at-large of Public Square magazine.