



Mulan

Movie Review

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

Section I

Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**
Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.
- **Introduced to new solutions**
We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.
- **Emotional vocabulary**
Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.
- **Identify with characters/stories**
You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identify as a character goes through process in their life.

Section II

This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

Section III

How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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Comprehensive Review

Transfiguring Adoption's Overview:

Mulan is the newest addition to the ever-growing list of live-action Disney remakes. The anticipation for this one seems to be extra high, due largely in part to the repeated changes to its release date. But it's finally available! (Though does require a premium upgrade to Disney+ to be able to view. The film will release for free on the platform on December 4th).

For those who loved the animated version in the 90s and go into this expecting catchy musical numbers and a comical dragon sidekick: you will be disappointed. The movie takes on a more serious/darker tone but is still a great retelling of the story we know and love. I knew what to expect going into it and was pleasantly surprised to find how many small details were put into the film to pay homage to the original. And the best part for me was that we still get some of the music, it's just used as an instrumental underlay to the film, rather than having the characters break out into song and dance. I did find myself slightly disengaged in the second half of the film. Without the humorous banter with Mushu and even the comical quips of the emperor that we get in the cartoon all we're left with is pretty much...extended battle scenes. There's a new character- Xian Lang the sorceress- but even that added storyline was brief and not enough to keep my full attention.

**** Spoilers Could Be Ahead ****

How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

This movie does not directly relate to foster care or adoption, Mulan is raised by both of her biological parents. And while families will likely enjoy the film as entertainment, there wasn't a lot of theming or content that lends itself to discussion that's particularly relevant to foster/adoptive families or trauma.

That being said there are a lot of positive messages about defying expectations, embracing individual gifts, fighting for what you believe in, family responsibility and being brave, loyal, and true. All of these are themes that can lead to good family discussions, despite not being specifically relevant to trauma. There is also a fair amount more violence than the cartoon so families should proceed with caution.

Discussion Points:

- **Embracing Gifts/Individuality**

As a child Mulan is reported to have a lot of Chi (life force/energy). Her father explains that this is a great gift and usually predicts someone is to be a great warrior. However, in the society/era in which Mulan lives women are not allowed to be warriors and therefore her father instructs her to hide her gift to better fit in with society. Mulan defies him and joins the army first by pretending to be a man and later by revealing and embracing her true self—Chi and all. Her gift ends up allowing her to defeat the enemies and save the emperor and all of China. Talk to children about their own gifts and unique talents. They might feel like these things make them ‘weird’ or ‘different’ so it’s a great opportunity to talk about how Mulan felt that way as a child, as shown in the movie, but in the end it was only by embracing the ways in which she was different that she is able to save her friends and country.

- **Family/Societal Roles**

Throughout the movie there is a lot of discussion around gender roles—men are supposed to be warriors and women are supposed to be dutiful wives. Both roles are important to society and both boys and girls can bring honor to their family in these different ways. There is also a lot of talk about honor/dishonor and how a child’s behavior reflects on the entire family and can bring either honor or shame. Mulan defies these teachings as she pretends to be a man in order to join the army and is eventually cast out when it’s discovered she’s a woman. However, instead of letting it shame her she fights back and proves she can be every bit as much a warrior as a man. We also see how this societal structure shapes Xian Lang, the sorceress, and how she turned to a life of crime due to being an outcast. This can be a good way to have a conversation about how gender expectations and roles are different in our society and the struggle to get them here (women’s suffrage movement, etc.) and how some cultures view this differently.

- **Value Systems**

Brave. Loyal True. These are the values that are inscribed upon Mulan’s sword and taught to the soldiers throughout training. Mulan embodies all of them. She defies her family and fights in the war, demonstrating her bravery. She is determined to stick by her fellow soldiers and protect her country even after they have rejected her, this is loyalty. And though she initially deceives the soldiers by pretending to be a man she comes clean about that in the end and embraces the truth. At the end of the movie a fourth value is added: Devotion to Family. Mulan is determined to make things right with her family after leaving them in deceit, even when it means leaving her friends and turning down a very lucrative job offer. This can be a great starting point for having a

conversation about what values your child feels are important or what values your family holds.

Cautionary Points:

- **Violence**

There is a LOT of fighting in the movie. And while there were battle scenes in the original film, seeing them with real people is a much different experience than seeing cartoon fighting. There is even one scene where Mulan and the troops show up in a village and find only smoldering ashes and piles of dead bodies which is fairly disturbing. At the end of the movie Mulan fires an arrow and kills Bori Khan which is shown on screen.

- **Threat of Loss**

There are a number of times in the movie it appears something terrible has happened or will happen to the characters. When Mulan's father is preparing to go to war her mother says that he will not return. Later when Mulan's unit is about to go into battle they say, "who knows who will live past tomorrow. We may never see each other again." These sentiments might be upsetting for children who have experienced loss. There is also a scene where Mulan is struck with a weapon and the screen fades to black, making the audience believe she's been killed (it turns out she is okay, and her corset protected her). But there are several scenes between when she is hit and when she rises again including one where her fellow soldiers cannot find her. This uncertainty might be stressful for some children. Another scene shows Hong Hui and the other soldiers locked in a fierce battle and Hong Hui tells Mulan to lock the door, trapping the soldiers with the enemy, so that the enemy cannot hurt anyone else. We aren't sure they if are going to make it for some time, though eventually they all come through okay.

- **Shapeshifting/People not being who they appear**

Xian Lang is a sorceress who is able to turn into a bird but also inhabit other human bodies in order to gather information or deceive others. We see her pretending to be a random soldier to gain entrance to a village and destroy it from within and again as a civilian survivor to gather intel from the emperor himself. Children who have experienced trauma at the hands of their caregivers often develop difficulties with trusting adults. They often blame themselves for the abuse they suffered and not being able to see it coming. Because of this they may feel uncomfortable seeing characters in the movie falling for the deceit of this sorceress pretending to be other people. Mulan is also deceiving her fellow soldiers by pretending to be a man.

- **Implied nudity**

Though we don't see any full nudity there are several scenes where it is heavily implied.

When Mulan first joins the army barracks, we see lots of men in various states of undress (though all wearing underwear/shorts). One of their towels drops and we don't see anything, but we see Mulan's facial expressions which make it clear that she saw something uncomfortable. There is also a scene where Mulan goes swimming in the lake since she can't shower with the other men and it is clear she is not wearing anything based on her concerns when one of her fellow male soldiers arrives and begins to undress for swimming with her.

- **Teasing related to grooming habits**

Mulan is unable to shower with the other men since that would reveal her true identity as a woman pretending to be a man. So, she goes what appears to be several weeks of working out without bathing and it gets to the point where the other soldiers are teasing her and telling her she 'needs to shower' and 'stinks'. It is very common for children who have experienced trauma, especially sexual abuse, to develop issues around bathing and hygiene which could have resulted in their own teasing by peers. So, while Mulan's friends are clearly engaging in playful teasing in the movie, it could be upsetting to children who might be sensitive regarding this area.

- **Natural Disaster**

Mulan arranges for a cannon shot to hit a mountain and cause an avalanche as a strategy to help defeat the enemy in battle. We see many of Mulan's companions also buried under snow for a brief time (though they are all okay in the end) and she rushes into the falling snow to rescue Hong Hui. In addition, we see a village in smoldering ruins after being burned to the ground and later the Emperor's palace is set on fire. For children who have lived through the trauma of a natural disaster such as a wildfire or severe winter weather these images might be difficult to watch.

Discussion Questions

1. Mulan and her sister are very different. Do you think you are more like Mulan or her sister Xiu?

Caregiver Note: This question is primarily just a light question for fun and to get the conversation going. Xiu is quiet and obedient, she listens to her parents and seems perfectly happy to accept her ‘family duty’ to be a beautiful and submissive wife. Mulan on the other hand rebels at every turn—chasing chickens along roofs and climbing buildings and has a lot of trouble sitting still and doing as she’s told. Children are more likely to feel like they are similar to Mulan; trauma often causes children to engage in behaviors that are not socially acceptable so they will likely relate to her difficulties fitting it.

2. Mulan overhears her parents talking about her and how she needs to be different. How do you think this makes Mulan feel?

Caregiver Note: Mulan’s mother feels that it is time for Mulan to learn how to be a ‘proper young woman’ and prepare to be married and fulfill her family obligations to find a husband and be a good wife. Mulan’s father has let her be herself throughout her childhood rather than rebuking her for her differences. However, he agrees to talk with her about her behavior. We see Mulan’s face when she overhears this, and it clearly hurts her. It is common for parents and other adults to talk about the best approach for dealing with ‘difficult’ children and chances are your child has overheard a similar conversation as Mulan did—maybe not from a parent but a social worker, teacher, counselor, etc. By talking about how Mulan feels here it might give some insight into similar experiences they’ve had and how they felt about it.

3. Mulan’s father tells her it’s time for her to ‘hide her gift’ and ‘learn her place’. Do you think he was right to do so?

Caregiver Note: This is clearly a difficult conversation for her father to have with her. He loves Mulan exactly the way she is but also understands the society in which they live and how they will treat Mulan if she continues to be so different. He states he is doing this to protect her, and he likely believes that. However, as the movie goes on it turns out that Mulan’s gift is what saves not only her and her family but all of China. So, while her father’s advice came from the right place, it turned out to be wrong. This can be a way to start a conversation about the importance of listening to caregivers and how they want what’s best for their children but also that sometimes adults can be wrong or make mistakes. Obviously, we want our kids to trust and listen to our advice, but at the same time if a child has experienced an abusive or neglectful caregiver, they have experienced the adults in their life being wrong in some way. So, it’s important to talk about intentions and the importance of having open conversations.

4. Mulan tries to do as her father asks and behave like a ‘proper young woman’ when she is matched. How does this turn out?

Caregiver Note: Mulan tries very hard to be the person her parents (and society) want her to be. We see this in the scene with the matchmaker where Mulan is trying very hard to be proper and do everything correctly. However, the scene goes hilariously wrong when she tries to protect her sister from a spider. This is a great analogy for how pretending to be someone we’re not will never work out. Of course, there are times we have to conform to the rules of society but it’s important to find a balance and have opportunities to express their individuality within those rules.

5. Several times during the movie we hear the phrase, “there can be no courage without fear”. What do you think this means?

Caregiver Note: First this advice is given to Mulan by her father and later Mulan uses it to rally her fellow soldiers on the eve of battle. Her commander tells her that it’s normal to be fearful before heading into a fight and she is no less a soldier because of it. Fear is a normal part of life, and courage and bravery doesn’t mean never being afraid but about going forward even when you are afraid. Children who have been through trauma often have lingering anxiety and fear about things they have experienced or even stimuli that might trigger a flashback and feel weak because of these worries. Explain to them that it’s actually proof of their courage that they get up and move forward every day despite their fear and they have incredible inner bravery that they are able to overcome their fears.

6. We see references to a phoenix several times in the movie and Mulan’s father tells her it is their village’s protector. Mulan herself is a lot like the phoenix in that she is constantly rising back up out of the ashes of defeat to keep fighting. If you had to pick an animal to be your protector, what would you choose? Why?

Caregiver Note: When Mulan is struggling to go on and feeling lost she sees a phoenix in the sky and it reminds her of who she is and where she came from and helps her to find the inner strength she needs to go on. This is mostly just a fun question, but the type of animal the child chooses could provide some insight into their thoughts and worries. For example, they might choose a ferocious animal like a bear or lion because it could protect them from an abuser, or a bird that could carry them away when they were scared or in trouble.

7. Xian Lang tells Mulan that, “a lie can only live so long”. What does she mean by this?

Caregiver Note: In order to protect her father, Mulan pretends to be a man so she can join the army in his stead. However, she constantly feels anxious and unsettled about this. Partly because it takes so much of her energy to always be on alert to make sure she doesn't do or say something that gives it away. They are also taught three values in the army: Loyal, Brave, True. Mulan knows she's not fulfilling the 'truth' value, and this bothers her. Eventually she chooses to reveal her true self because she cannot keep lying to the people she has come to care about. This can be a great way to have a discussion about how lying—even when done to protect someone—can never last forever and how it's important to be honest with those we care about, even if it might hurt them.

8. Xian Lang confronts Mulan and tells her ‘we are the same’ and tries to get Mulan to join her. Do you think she's right? How are they alike or different?

Caregiver Note: Hua Mulan and Xian Lang both started out in life very similarly: they were young girls with a lot of Chi, which was something that was only celebrated in men and not women. They both desired the ability to embrace their gifts, however they took very different paths. Xian Lang felt like she'd never be able to have a place in 'normal society' and instead lived on the outskirts and found acceptance with Bori Khan and his gang of raiders hoping that once he took power she'd be able to live freely. Mulan on the other hand did what she had to do to join the army, even if it meant the possibility of risking her life and her family's honor to do so. Even after she was discovered and rejected, she continued to fight for her country and take the path of doing the right thing—fighting *for* instead of *against* her country. But had she made a few different choices she could have ended up in the same place as Xian Lang. And in the end, we do see Xian Lang leave Bori Khan and even sacrifice herself to save Mulan proving again how similar they really were.

9. ACTIVITY: Venn Diagram (Hua Mulan vs. Xian Lang)

Caregiver Note: Yes, those annoying circle graphs we always had to make in school! But they can be a great way to help illustrate similarities and differences. Going along with the last question, this can be a fun way to look at the ways in which these two characters are similar and different.

10. At the end of the movie Mulan is offered a position in the Emperor's personal guard but she declines. Why do you think she did this? Would you have done the same thing?

Caregiver Note: Mulan is honored by the offer but admits that she left her family in bad circumstances and it is important to her to repair the damage she has done with them. Mulan is able to return home and apologizes to her family and is greeted with love and acceptance from all of them, even her father who she had deceived. He tells her 'one warrior knows another' proving his ultimate acceptance of her for everything she is and

even apologizes for trying to force her to be someone else. In the end the emperor presents her with a new sword, and it has an added fourth value: devotion to family. This proves that the emperor also accepted her and what was important to her. This can be a great start to a conversation about doing what you believe is right even when others might not agree. Mulan joined the army to protect her father and serve her country, even when it meant going against her parents' wishes. And she turned down an offer from the emperor himself because she knew she needed to go home. And in the end, she was lauded for both of those choices, even though at the time they were contrary to expectations.

11. ACTIVITY: Core Values/Hanzi Writing

Caregiver Note: There are three values inscribed on Mulan's father's sword that keep coming back to in the movie: Bravery, Loyalty and Truth. At the end of the movie a fourth value is added: Devotion to family. Talk to your child about what their four core values would be if they had to pick. Together cut out or draw a sword on paper or cardstock. Then using a book (or the internet) lookup what the Hanzi (Chinese characters) are for the values they chose and add them to your sword. This can be hung in a child's room as a reminder of what's important to them. For older children they can choose to omit the sword if they want and just draw each Hanzi on a sheet of colorful paper that they can hang up.

About the Reviewer

JENN EHLERS

Jenn is a central Virginia native who received her BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia in 2012. Since then she has worked for a local mental health agency and the Department of Social Services in various capacities and has been involved in her community's efforts to create a Trauma Informed Network. Currently Jenn works in vocational rehab and mentors youth in foster care. When she isn't working, Jenn enjoys writing stories, anything and everything Harry Potter, and spending time with her niece and nephew.