

BOOK FORUM

Inside Out

Pixar Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures; 2015.

The personified emotions that run headquarters in an 11-year-old girl, Riley, are the stars of the film *Inside Out*. Sadness, Fear, Disgust, Anger, and Joy. The premise of the movie seeks to explore a question we are likely all familiar with: “what is going on inside their head?” Headquarters, the setting for much of the film, shows us just that. It is a playful demonstration of very real brain functions, such as neural pathways, memory storage, memory recall, and how emotions shape how we respond to the world around us.

The 5 emotions in this film seem to be taken from the 7 universal facial expressions of emotions: sad, happy, angry, disgust, fear, surprise, and contempt.¹ The 2 emotions that were left out, surprise and contempt, are something of a missed opportunity. However, in a world where adults can consistently and accurately identify only 3 emotions—happy, sad, and pissed off—I respect the slow ease of introducing additional emotions.²

Inside Out sets up the function of headquarters and its inhabitants early on, with introductions of emotions as characters:

“That’s Fear. He’s really good at keeping Riley safe.”

“This is Disgust. She basically keeps Riley from being poisoned. Physically and socially.”

“That’s Anger. He cares very deeply about things being fair.”

Joy, the pursuer of fixing situations and the definition of “good vibes,” attempts to problem solve alongside Sadness for the explicit plot. The 2 emotions learn to work together and find value in both of their functions to support Riley as a developing human being. They acknowledge how they are intertwined and make Riley’s first mixed memory—a memory with more than one emotion attached to it, mixed feelings, if you will. The value of feeling all our emotions, even if it is a messy mix, is clear in *Inside Out*.

A discussion that seems to be missing about the film in the 7 years since its release is the impact of adults’ emotional capacities on children. Three separate moments in the film create a clear subplot for me:

1. Following a move across the country, Riley’s mom says this to her child: “I guess all I really want to say is thank

you. Through all this confusion, you’ve stayed our happy girl. If you and I keep smiling, it’ll be a big help.”

2. Riley has an emotional first day at a new school and expresses emotions other than happiness to her parents. For this atypical expression, her dad yells for her to go to her room. Later, he avoids apologizing and says, “So things got a little out of hand downstairs, do you want to talk about it? Come on, where’s my happy girl?”
3. After Riley comes home from attempting to return to the place where all her happy memories were made (otherwise known as running away), she says: “I know you don’t want me to, but I miss home. You need me to be happy.”

When grown-ups in a child’s life only make space for one acceptable emotion, there are consequences not only for family relationships but also child development. Maybe due to this missed message from *Inside Out*, Disney appears to still be trying to explore this phenomenon of approved emotions in child–parent relationships in a more recent release, *Encanto*. Emotions are personified in that film through one character, Peppa, who is allowed only “clear skies,” which is the character’s personal weather pattern only when she’s happy.³ *Inside Out* provides a wonderful depiction of the power dynamics of this pressure from parents to be “happy” that is missing in *Encanto* due to Peppa being an adult.

I find myself curious about this subplot of allowed emotions in films that often parents and children watch together. These film depictions create tension with larger pop culture conversations around the continued overvaluing of happiness, on always being positive. Joy in *Inside Out* appears to mirror this message for most of the film.

Joy: “But think of all the good things”

Anger: “No, Joy. There’s absolutely no reason for Riley to be happy right now”

These cultural messages of “think positively and be happy” are at the expense of every other emotion we have as human beings. It is concerning that of the scholarly articles written about toxic positivity, none appear in a search related to the impact on children. Consider that an entire movie had to be made to introduce the ideas en masse to a new generation of children and parents that feeling sad is

okay, that mixed feelings do and are supposed to happen, and that when happiness is used to distract from other emotions instead of letting them be experienced, higher stakes build up.

Not only is there a buildup for Riley in the movie that leads to her trying to run away, but also the viewer is on a similar journey of built-up emotions. Joy is quick to deflect and return the viewer to happy, happy, happy: “we are going to have a good day, which will turn into a good week, which will turn into a good year, which turns into a good life.” Even when there are other emotions to be felt, the viewer is sucked into Joy’s narrative and moved along, until we meet Bing Bong.

Bing Bong is Riley’s imaginary friend who, for many adult viewers, became a representation of childhood.⁴ The loss of play and childhood that is shown through Bing Bong caused an emotional uproar that many took to the internet to share.⁵ Interacting with Bing Bong is the first time in the movie that Joy slows down her happiness message enough to feel something else: sadness and grief. The transition from her happiness tirade to the jolt of losing Bing Bong is the moment the viewer is finally given space to feel into other emotions that have been compellingly distracted and disrupted through the film.

Joy learns the lesson about valuing other emotions before Riley’s parents do, but the movie does conclude with a heartfelt reunion. After rewatching *Inside Out* following

the more recent release *Encanto*, I do wish the film would have attempted a more meaningful repair conversation between Riley and her parents similar to what we saw with Mirabel and Abuela.³ Showing parents a new way of viewing a healthy childhood—accepting all emotions—without even an imperfect guide is a missed opportunity in this film that I hope has a presence in the sequel *Inside Out 2*.

Inside Out not only explores emotions and their value in our lives, but the film also begins a trend in Disney films that subtly consider the ways grown-ups’ uncomfortableness in expressing and holding space for many emotions impacts children. For Riley, physically moving back into a space where the acceptable emotion happened the most often was her way of dealing with the impact. For the children in our lives, the impact might look different. It’s time to expand comfortableness and model the value of the wide range of emotions in our lives to support healthy childhoods and personal development.

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