A girl breaks into a house and steals whatever she wants. Another girl is kidnapped by a cruel king and forced to work as his slave; her only means of escape is to make a deal with a devilish imp. Two children are fattened up by a cannibalistic witch who is later burned to death by the heat of her own oven.

These terrifying stories, known to you as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” and “Hansel and Gretel,” have been inflicted on small children for generations. Some enlightened parents, however, have now realized there’s little value in classic fairy tales and are wisely opting for better bedtime stories.

A 2012 study reported in The Telegraph, a noted British newspaper, supports this idea. Nearly 20 percent of 2,000 parents surveyed said they have scrapped classics such as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and “Rapunzel” in favor of more modern stories. One third of parents in the report said their children have been left in tears after hearing the gruesome details of “Little Red Riding Hood.” And nearly half of the parents said they refuse to read “Rumplestiltskin” to their kids because of the story’s focus on kidnapping and execution.

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins agrees that parents are making the right move by limiting their children’s exposure to classic fairy tales. “I think it’s rather pernicious to inculcate into a child a view of the world which includes supernaturalism – we get enough of that anyway,” he told the audience at the Cheltenham Science Festival in 2014, adding that he saw through the Santa Claus sham when he was just 21 months old. “Even fairy tales, the ones we all love, with wizards or princes turning into frogs or whatever it was. There’s a very interesting reason why a prince could not turn into a frog – it’s statistically too improbable.”

Instead, Dawkins suggests that children should be taught scientific rigor rather than magical thinking. Other critics have added that fairy tales promote outdated gender stereotypes along with an irrational belief that life will always be lived “happily ever after.”

Even a pop icon recently weighed in on the issue. “When I was a little girl, I used to read fairy tales,” said entertainer Taylor Swift, as reported by E! News Online: “In fairy tales, you meet Prince Charming and he’s everything you ever wanted. In fairy tales, the bad guy is very easy to spot. The bad guy is always wearing a black cape so you always know who he is, but then you grow up and you realize that Prince Charming is not as easy to find as you thought. You realize the bad guy is not wearing a black cape and he’s not so easy to spot.”

From unrealistic romantic expectations to a frightening reliance on fantasy over fact, the variety of ills created by fairy tales are cause for concern. Clearly, the time has arrived for parents to close the book on the likes of Cinderella, Rapunzel, and the Gingerbread Man.
If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales,” Albert Einstein once famously advised. “If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” Einstein knew what he was talking about. While some critics have recently decided that fairy tales present a danger to young minds, it’s clear from the research that classic children’s tales, from Aladdin to Oz, do much more good than harm.

Some fear that the classic tales are too violent for children, while others fret that the tales promote magical thinking. The truth is that fairy tales inspire children’s imagination, a healthy thing, while exposing them to worlds different than their own. For example, it’s no accident that nearly every culture has some variant of the “Cinderella” story, a tale that speaks of a universal desire to celebrate a downtrodden person’s ability to overcome adversity.

In fact, fairy tales are the perfect tool to help teach children right from wrong, argues Sally Goddard Blythe, director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology and author of a book on the subject, The Genius of Natural Childhood. Fairy tales, she explains, help children understand the complexities of the adult world “not through direct teaching, but through implication.”

In her book, she explains, “Far from demonizing the dwarfs, the story of Snow White shows that underlying physical diversity there can be greater kindness and generosity than is found in the stereotypes of beauty and wealth so lauded by celebrity-worshipping cultures...In many fairy tales (Goldilocks, for example), the smallest and weakest in the group is the one with whom the heroine identifies and in The Emperor’s New Clothes, vanity and pride are revealed as vacuous posturing without substance, masking stupidity and obstructing the use of common sense.”

These stories, she continues, “help children to understand, firstly, the quirks and weaknesses of human behavior in general, and secondly, to accept many of their own fears and emotions.”

Child psychologists agree that fairy tales help children see that there are consequences to each decision a person makes. Even if a situation seems bleak or scary, certain decisions can be made that will improve a protagonist’s situation. And, almost always, there is a “happily ever after” conclusion to the tale, a sign of hope for all of us.

Further, Jack D. Zipes, a retired University of Minnesota professor who has extensively studied fairy tales as part of his work on German linguistics, said the stories teach us to be compassionate. “At their best...fairy tales constitute the most profound articulation of the human struggle to form and maintain a civilizing process,” Zipes writes. They teach us that “the more we give into base instincts – base in the sense of basic and depraved – the more criminal and destructive we become. The more we learn to relate to other groups of people and realize that their survival and the fulfillment of their interests is related to ours, the more we might construct social codes that guarantee humane relationships. Fairy tales are uncanny because they tell us what we need and they unsettle us by showing what we lack and how we might compensate.”

J.K. Rowling, celebrated author of the Harry Potter book series, agrees that critics’ concerns about fantasy tales are unfounded. “I really feel that we’re not giving children enough credit for distinguishing what’s right and what’s wrong,” she said, according to GoodReads.com. “I, for one, devoured fairy tales as a little girl. I certainly didn’t believe that kissing frogs would lead me to a prince, or that eating a mysterious apple would poison me, or that the magical ‘Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo’ I would get a beautiful dress and a pumpkin carriage. I also don’t believe that looking in a mirror and saying ‘Candyman, Candyman, Candyman’ will make some awful serial killer come after me. I believe that many children recognize Harry Potter for what it is, fantasy literature.”

In the end, fairy tales give children a safe way to confront the ugliness in the world while providing them with repeated examples of good triumphing over evil. In today’s complicated world, that’s a message all parents should embrace.
Fairy Tales: Argument Essays

Record your answers on a separate sheet of paper. You must answer in complete, thoughtful sentences.

1. According to Essay #1, what are three reasons parents should avoid reading fairy tales to their children?

2. According to Essay #2, what are three reasons parents should read fairy tales to their children?

3. What could the writer of Essay #1 have done to improve the effectiveness of the essay?

4. What could the writer of Essay #2 have done to improve the effectiveness of the essay?

5. In Essay #2, Sally Goddard Blythe argues that fairy tales help children understand the complexities of the adult world “not through direct teaching, but through implication.” What does this mean?

6. Both essays end with quotes from pop culture figures. What effect does the placement of these quotes have on the reader?

7. Ultimately, which essay wins the debate? Explain the rationale for your answer.

8. What makes a story qualify to be categorized as a fairy tale? List three specific elements you think a story needs to be given that label.