Childhood, Kinship, and the Unparalleled Popularity of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

by Morgan Shiver

When the American network Nickelodeon launched in 1979, it became "the first television outlet specifically for children" and was branded as "all kids, all the time" (Pecora 15). Geraldine Leybourne, former president of Nickelodeon, describes the network as "a home base for kids" (Jenkins 136). From the late seventies to present day, Nickelodeon has continually emphasized child viewers and develops its series with a child audience in mind. In 2002, Nickelodeon branded its animated programming as "Nicktoons," identifying a target demographic of six to eleven-year-old boys (Barnes). The series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), designated a Nicktoon, was created with this audience in mind. Yet, although *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was created for children, it attracted––and continues to attract–– substantial adult viewership. Its multigenerational appeal and popularity are largely unprecedented among Western children's television series. In an acceptance speech for the Peabody Award, which acknowledges excellence in storytelling[1], creator and executive producer Michael Dante DiMartino acknowledges, "one of the questions people most often ask is, 'Why does *Avatar*, an animated kids show, appeal to so many different age groups?'" (Peabody). In this article, I argue that much of the series' groundbreaking success and multigenerational appeal can be attributed to its constructions of childhood, which distinguish it from other contemporary Western children's programming.

Created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is set in a fictional world comprised of four civilizations: the Air Nomads, the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribe, and the Fire Nation. Although fictional, the four nations are inspired by the iconography and traditions of early industrial Eastern and indigenous cultures.[2] Within each of these civilizations, a small percentage of the population can manipulate, or "bend," one of the four elements. The show's protagonist, twelve-year-old Aang, is the Avatar, an individual reincarnated throughout time who can bend all four elements. The Avatar's primary role is to maintain peace among the four nations. The series begins when Water Tribe siblings Katara and Sokka discover Avatar Aang, who has been missing for one hundred years, frozen in an iceberg. During his absence, the Fire Nation has risen to power and is now attempting to conquer the world, killing the entire Air Nomad population in the process. As the last known airbender, Aang, along with Katara and Sokka, must confront a world in turmoil and the impending threat of the Summer Solstice, when firebenders' power peaks.

Though its finale premiered nearly two decades ago, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is still being watched today and continues to be popular with adult viewers. A press release from Nickelodeon on September 5, 2007, distributed ahead of the show's season 3 premiere, discloses that the series reached an audience of 18.4 million viewers, with only 8.9 million of that number being children ages two to eleven ("Nickelodeon's *Avatar* Returns"). While this release does not include specific data for adult viewership, it shows

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that a majority, fifty-two percent, of the series' viewers were above the Nicktoon's target age range. During its original run, multigenerational appeal was already a defining factor of the series. Although the series wrapped in 2008, it never fully left the cultural landscape, and when *Avatar: The Last Airbender* became available on Netflix in the Summer of 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, its popularity with all ages skyrocketed.[3] Almost instantly, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* saw a massive resurgence in viewership, topping Netflix's charts for two straight months, becoming the show with the longest-ever consecutive run on the streamer's top ten TV series chart (Spencer). Notably, the next nine closest series to its record at the time all targeted older audiences; *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was the only series on the list with a TV-Y7 rating.[4] The series' massive success on Netflix and the notable trend of adult-centered series' popularity on the streaming service suggests that *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s viewership continues to extend far beyond its intended child audience. The show's contemporary adult following becomes even more evident as fans around the globe, like those featured below, express their love of the show online, many proudly declaring their enjoyment as adult viewers. In their 2018 tweet via X that received 835 likes, @ilovesuki posted pair of hands shaking that represent "child me" and "adult me", both of whom are continuing fans of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Similarly, @Isha_Bassi in a 2019 message via X explains they are, "a full-grown adult" who is "rewatching avatar : the last airbender for the billionth time because of how good it is".

Because of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s multigenerational appeal, viewers and scholars often attempt to separate *Avatar: The Last Airbender* from the very genre in which it was created, children's television. Repeatedly, discussions of the series begin with qualifiers that distance it from the children's television genre, as if its complexity and cross-generational appeal make it incompatible with what a "kid's show" is supposed to be. For example, a reviewer for *Forbes* writes, "[A]nd though it's a children's television show, it has earned praise for its complex characters and storylines that appeal to adults as well" (Sandler). A reviewer for *Salon* claims, "Despite having originally aired on Nickelodeon, and despite being marketed as a children's title, Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko created an epic with an appeal that spans generations" (McFarland). Even the voice actor behind Aang, Zach Tyler Eisen, admits, "I don't want to call it a kid's show because that's kind of putting it into a box" ("Meet the Cast"). What Eisen, critics, and many others confront is an inability to recognize the series as a children's series because it doesn't adhere to standard expectations of Western children's television.

Although many critics, scholars, and fans attempt to separate *Avatar: The Last Airbender* from the genre of children's television, it is in fact a children's television show and should be considered as such. Maintaining this classification allows for recognition of how the series diverges from existing standards for contemporary Western children's television. These divergences, the most prominent of which I believe is the show's construction of childhood, can then be considered in conversation with *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s other most distinguishing quality within the genre: its multigenerational popularity. I argue that *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s constructions of childhood embody

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what childhood scholar Marah Gubar calls the "kinship model," an approach that emphasizes connection between children and adults, rather than difference. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* distinguishes itself among other Western children's series by not actively isolating or ostracizing older generations, allowing the series to resonate with viewers of all ages. Recognizing the kinship model approach within the series, I posit that *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s constructions of childhood are a significant factor in the series' unparalleled popularity because they create opportunities for multiple generations to connect with characters and content on screen.

Critical discourse on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* largely centers on the series' engagement with colonialist discourses and representations of gender, race, and nationality (Kerr; Lewis; Sjoquist; Yao). Scholars have also explored its sustained fan engagement and cultural relevance, such as Thomas Van Hoey's examination of how fans reference the series in political meme-making. However, despite its status as a children's series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has received little attention within the field of children's literature and media, perhaps because it does not conform to contemporary Western conventions of children's television. Some of the series' qualities align with Noel Brown's concept of "kidult" media, works that fall under a distinct genre that "target[s] an undifferentiated audience across multiple age groups" (35). While *Avatar: The Last Airbender* could be described as "kidult," my analysis deliberately situates the series firmly within the genre of children's television—originally produced for and marketed to a child audience on a kid-centered network—in order to consider how its kinship model constructions of childhood, as a deviation of genre norms, may contribute to its appeal across generations.

In the remainder of this article, I exemplify the series' kinship model constructions of childhood by exploring how *Avatar: The Last Airbender* defies the boundaries between children and adults, rather than reinforcing them. First, I connect Gubar's kinship and difference models to the children's television genre, to show how kinship model approach may invite broader viewership. Then, I present some of the prominent intersections between childhood and adulthood within the show, most notably its (technically) 112-year-old protagonist Aang, to demonstrate how the series constructs childhood in connection to adulthood. Lastly, I explore how kinship is represented in the series' intergenerational relationships, wherein the uncommon presence of well-developed adult characters invites exchanges of power and mutual understanding between age groups rarely seen on Western children's television. It is these relational, rather than oppositional, constructions of childhood that I suggest have made *Avatar: The Last Airbender* one of Nickelodeon's most enduring and popular series (Porter; Van Hoey 187).

Constructing Childhood in Children's Television

As a genre, Western children's television is grounded in the idea that children are inherently different and separate from adults. The industry is substantially affected by

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consumerism and commercialism; since its inception, children's programming and networks have created spaced designed specifically for child consumers (Banet-Weiser). This emphasis on children as consumers frequently results in a dismissal of all things adult, both directly and indirectly within children's series. For example, despite having adults (likely parents) in its studio audience, *Howdy Doody*'s (1947-1960) theme song begins with the question, "Say kids, what time is it?" (Muir). Similarly, every episode of the modern-day *SpongeBob SquarePants* series (1999-Present) opens with the line, "Are ya ready kids?" (Hillenburg). Addressing the audience as "kids," both shows fail to recognize adult audiences, embodying the child-centered consumer approach most common within the genre.

Adult viewers are often further excluded by the common "Adults Are Useless" and "There Are No Adults" tropes in children's programming ("TV Tropes"). These conventions result in adult characters who are clueless, insignificant, or entirely absent, such as Danny Fenton's parents in Nickelodeon's *Danny Phantom* (2004-2007), who don't discover their son is a half-human, half-ghost superhero until the final episode of the series, or the classic *Peanuts* specials (1965-2011), in which adult voices are replaced with instrumental noises. Nickelodeon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s original home network, similarly emphasizes child viewers while rejecting all things adult. Sarah Banet-Weiser, author of *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship,* explains that "an important element of Nickelodeon self-construction is the network's insistence that kids are an active audience in their own right, separate from the world of adults" (33). Largely, Western children's television shows and networks try to distinguish their child audiences and eschew any associations with adults.

This emphasis on the singularity of children and rejection all things "adult" embodies what Gubar calls the difference model, a method of constructing childhood that highlights "the radical alterity or otherness of children, representing them as a separate species, categorically different from adults" (451). The difference model is readily visible on kid-centered networks like Nickelodeon, where "the idea that 'adults just don't get it' has cultural currency" and a "divisive generational strategy" increases appeal to child viewers (Banet-Weiser 179). Even the few children's series that do attract adult viewers, such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* or *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1995), tend to sustain this difference by incorporating content intended only for adults, including sex-based humor or adult pop-culture references. As Heather Hendershot observes, "children's shows that adults enjoy often offer winks to their grown-up viewers and include 'edgy' (as the industry puts it) material, material that is slightly mean or off-color" (187). Such shows perpetuate the separation of "adult" and "child" categories by positioning adults as superior, granting them access to content and meaning unavailable to younger viewers. Whether explicitly or implicitly, most contemporary Western children's television, particularly animated series, offers little common ground between generations, exhibiting a difference model approach to constructing and representing childhood.

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In contrast to the dominant difference model approach, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* constructs childhood in a way that reflects Gubar's kinship model. The kinship model emphasizes that separate "child" and "adult" categories are necessary in representing age, but that they are not inherently oppositional or irrevocably different. It rests on the premise that "children and adults are akin to one another, which means they are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar" (Gubar 435). Gubar explains:

> There is no one moment when we suddenly flip over from being a child to being an adult. Our younger and older selves are multiple and interlinked, akin to one another rather than wholly distinct. So even though the categories "child" and "adult" neatly carve up the human community into two separate classes of people, kinship-model theories try to counteract that tendency by stressing the gradual, erratic, and variable nature of the developmental process. (454)

Gubar's recognition of the "gradual, erratic, and variable" nature of human development emphasizes the fluidity between childhood and adulthood. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* exemplifies this kinship model approach by constructing representations of childhood that are shaped through connections to adulthood rather than in opposition to it.

Gubar's difference and kinship models provide a useful framework for understanding how *Avatar: The Last Airbender* constructs childhood and engages viewers across generations. Unlike many Western children's series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* does not rely on generational division to attract its audience. Instead, it embraces kinship and connection between age groups through its characterizations and intergenerational relationships. By resisting the isolating tendencies of the difference model, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* not only distinguishes itself within the genre of children's television but also invites a multigenerational audience to engage with and connect to its stories.

Child-Adult Intersections and Relatability

Avatar: The Last Airbender's protagonist, Aang, functions as one of the show's most significant intersections between child and adult. According to Gubar, successful kinship model discourses demonstrate that one's younger and older selves are to an extent "interlinked" (454). Aang, who physically appears to be an adolescent but is technically one hundred and twelve years old (on top of being part of an infinite chain of reincarnations), exemplifies this concept. Neither exclusively a child nor exclusively an adult, Aang is in one moment referred to as "a living relic" ("The Library") and told in another, "you're just a child" ("The Avatar"). As he navigates the complexities of his simultaneously young and old identity, his shifting childlike and adultlike traits embody the "gradual, erratic, and variable nature of the developmental process" embraced by the kinship model (Gubar 454). Through Aang, the series constructs a nuanced representation of childhood that invites connection across age groups, contributing to the show's multigenerational appeal.

Aang's complicated child-adult status first becomes apparent in the flashback sequence where he learns he is the Avatar. In this scene, viewers see Aang as a true child,

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both physically and biologically twelve years old. As Aang narrates, he recalls that he was "playing with some other kids" and "trying to teach them how to do the air scooter," a signature airbending move he invented ("The Storm"). Aang is jubilant as he rides the air scooter, showing other children his invention. Here, surrounded by peers, Aang is undeniably childlike. The tone shifts abruptly when he enters a room of Air Nomad elders, who inform him of his Avatar identity. The elders explain, "normally, we would have told you of your identity when you turned sixteen, but . . . we need you, Aang" ("The Storm"). The shift as Aang moves from childlike play to adult responsibility establishes the distinct adult and child categories of the show. Because the kinship model stresses "relatedness" between age groups "without implying homogeneity," separate "child" and "adult" categories is necessary in kinship model constructions of childhood (Gubar 453). For there to be kinship between two age categories, those age categories must remain distinct. Aang's experience with the monks suggests that within the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* distinct age categories are socially reinforced as childhood is associated with carefree, unbridled excitement and adulthood is associated with responsibility and gravity; this leaves room for kinship and connection to be formed between the two groups.

As Aang physically moves from an environment full of children to one that includes only adults, his personal identity becomes muddled. Both spaces are clearly coded, and Aang must navigate the expectations of each. Monk Gyatso insists that "'Aang needs to have freedom and fun. He needs to grow up as a normal boy,'" while other elders argue, "'The Avatar should be training,'" and insist Gyatso "'cannot protect him from his destiny'" ("The Storm"). Gyatso attempts to preserve Aang's childhood, but once Aang's identity is revealed, there is no undoing his fate. Despite being twelve years old, Aang, as the Avatar, is not expected to behave like a child. At the same time, the image of Aang on the air scooter, occurring only moments earlier, is still fresh in viewers' minds. As the responsibility of the Avatar title weighs on the young boy's shoulders, he becomes both child and adult.

One hundred years later, Aang still exhibits the childlike "freedom and fun" that Monk Gyatso championed while also bearing the adult responsibilities of the Avatar ("The Storm"). After being rescued from an iceberg in the series' pilot, his first request is: "'I need to ask you something . . . Will you go penguin sledding with me?!'" ("The Boy"). These first lines in the series, establish him as a goofy, excited, spontaneous young boy. Even after he learns of the Fire Nation's global threat and recognizes his responsibility to bring peace to the world, he retains his sense of play, sometimes to the point of recklessness. On Kyoshi Island, Aang dives into icy water to ride a giant Elephant Koi, looking to impress fourteen-year-old Katara as he calls out, "You've gotta watch me!" ("The Warriors"). He doesn't pause to consider danger or consequences and appears genuinely shocked when a massive, vicious Unagi pursues him. Aang's inability—or unwillingness—to consider the consequences of his actions is distinctly childlike. His frequently "childish" actions are reinforced by the fact that he is repeatedly spoken to like a child: "Settle down, young man" ("The Blue"); "Hey, you're the kid who beat the Blind Bandit" ("The Blind"); "What are you

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kids doing out past curfew?" ("Return"). Even though he's an all-powerful reincarnated ancient being, he still often behaves like a young boy and is perceived as a child.

Yet Aang acts like an adult just as frequently, complicating his age presentation. As Avatar, he frequently exercises authority over adults. In "The Great Divide," Aang asserts himself as a prominent leader when he successfully unites the Zhang and Gan Jin tribes by claiming he was present during the event that sparked their century-long feud. He tells the group, "I might not look it, but I'm a hundred and twelve years old. I was there one hundred years ago on the day you're talking about" ("The Great Divide"). After Aang clarifies the "confusion about what happened" on the fateful day the feud began, the tribes reflect on his story and walk away as a united group ("The Great Divide"). They grant him the same authority and respect they would a wise old man because, in a way, he is one. Afterward, Aang admits to Sokka and Katara, "I made the whole thing up" ("The Great Divide"). Janet Varney, voice actor from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s sequel series, *The Legend of Korra,* describes this exact moment in the series, saying, "that's an adult lie––it's an adult lie that an adult tells children,'" recognizing Aang's adultlike influence as he guides the tribes ("Meet the Cast"). As Aang assumes the role of Avatar, his adult characteristics appear as often as his childlike tendencies.

The dual nature of Aang's adult and child behaviors reflects the kinship model's insistence that "development is not always linear," emphasizing the akin nature of childhood and adulthood (Gubar 454). At times, Aang flips between child and adult in mere seconds. When Aang pretends to be a Fire Nation student in the episode "The Headband," he corrects his teacher's history lesson, prompting her to respond, "I don't know how you could possibly know more than our national history book, unless you were there a hundred years ago" ("The Headband"). Sitting in a school room surrounded by children, Aang is a child. However, when he momentarily asserts authority over an older teacher by referencing his century-old knowledge, he is an adult. At recess, Aang bows to a teenage student, recognizing him as an elder, then immediately struggles to relate to the younger generation of Fire Nation children, using the outdated slang, "Flameo, hotman!" ("The Headband"). While these adult and child actions remain distinct, they happen in such rapid succession that viewers are forced to recognize that Aang, through body and action, is an amalgamation of child and adult.

By constructing child-adult intersections through Aang on screen, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* creates connections that span generations off screen, contributing to its multigenerational appeal as a television series. Building on Albert Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Cynthia Hoffner establishes that "children and adults form affective attachments to recurring television characters and personalities," highlighting viewers' wishful identification with television characters, which "involves sharing characters' experiences." Shared experience and self-recognition are essential for viewers to relate to characters on screen. So, as Aang acts as both a child and adult, child and adult viewers may relate to him.

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Creator Michael Dante DiMartino suggests that Aang's diverse relatability is an essential part of the show's appeal across generations, explaining:

> From its inception, the series was always about Aang, a young hero who has the overwhelming task of restoring balance to a war-torn world while at the same time he struggles with finding internal balance as he searches to understand who he is and his purpose in the world. No matter what age you are, or what culture you are from, this is a struggle we can all relate to. ("Avatar")

Aang's experience as the Avatar isn't necessarily relatable, but the internal questions about life and purpose that he regularly confronts are issues and feelings that both children and adults may be able to connect with ("Avatar"). The kinship model constructions of childhood the series, which acknowledge non-linear development and avoid both the isolation and homogenization of age categories, allow people of all generations to recognize themselves in the characters. This wide-ranging self-recognition is essential for the show's relatability, and consequently, its enduring success.

Adult Inclusion

Beyond the complicated age status of its protagonist, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* exhibits a kinship model discourse through its presentation of intergenerational relationships. Such relationships are made possible by the series' inclusion of atypically significant, complex adult characters. With a rich cast of adult characters, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* distinguishes itself from other Western children's television series, which rarely feature adult characters of substance or significance. Protagonists Aang, Katara, Sokka, Toph, and Zuko are familiar, young faces in children's television, but older characters such as Uncle Iroh, King Bumi, Hakoda, and Gran Gran are anomalies within the genre. By placing well-developed adult characters alongside its adolescent heroes, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* creates opportunities for meaningful adult-child intersections on screen. These intergenerational connections inform the show's constructions of childhood, expanding opportunities for self-recognition and offering rare examples of intergenerational collaboration and solidarity.

Avatar: The Last Airbender's inclusion of adult characters is even more notable given that most of the well-developed adults in the series are elderly. Within the broad "adult" category, elderly characters are particularly underrepresented and misrepresented in Western children's television, which only further emphasizes differences between generations. In a 2006 study of forty-one animated series across five major children's networks, Tim Robinson and Caitlin Anderson find that nearly 70% of elderly characters are given minor or insignificant roles, and they are frequently portrayed with unflattering physical characteristics and personality traits (Robinson). A significant percentage are depicted as overweight, "ugly," toothless, slow-moving, or needing a physical aid, and 11% are villains (Robinson). The 30% of elderly characters Robinson and Anderson deem positive portrayals appear mostly in teacher or authority roles and are rarely members of

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the main cast. Robinson and Anderson argue that these patterns are pervasive enough to negatively impact child viewers' perceptions of real-life older adults. While adults in general are foreign entities in children's programming, elderly individuals are treated as practically alien. Disney's *Kim Possible* (2002-2007) captures this generational disjuncture between young and old when Kim describes her grandmother as "so old! It's like she's from another planet or something" ("The Golden Years"). As far as Western children's television is concerned, adults, particularly elderly adults, are unrelatable and irrelevant.

Avatar: The Last Airbender begs to differ. A prime example is Uncle Iroh, a member of the main cast for all three seasons. An elderly, tea-loving retired general who abdicated the throne of the Fire Nation, Iroh is an uncommon presence in Western children's television. Throughout the series, he confronts distinctly adult issues like the guardianship of his nephew and the loss of his son. One of his most poignant moments occurs in "The Tales of Ba Sing Se," when he sings "Leaves from the Vine," as he mourns his late son. The verified *Avatar: The Last Airbender* YouTube account describes this moment: "The emotional weight and beauty of this scene is one aspect (of many) as to why *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is regarded as such an iconic show" ("Iroh Sings"). Iroh's impact is also reflected in his enduring popularity among fans. In a 2021 ranker.com poll of the "Best Characters on *Avatar: The Last Airbender,*" Iroh received 1,840 upvotes to be crowned the best character in the series. A Google search for "Uncle Iroh Tattoo" yields a search result of more than 103,000 images featuring fans' permanent dedications to the character. Iroh is an unexpected character on children's television because of both his age and the gravity of his storylines, yet his significance to the series and resonance with viewers is unmistakable.

Iroh's prominent presence within the series creates opportunities for connections between young and old characters, but it is the nuance with which he is presented that truly enables the series' kinship model constructions of childhood and adulthood. Uncle Iroh defies limitations that the Western children's television genre consistently places on characters of his age demographic. Namely, his impressive physicality and acute intelligence make him a more wholly developed elderly character than is typically seen. Although other characters occasionally underestimate Iroh because of his age, viewers are always aware of Iroh's capability––and often, his superiority. In "Sokka's Master," for example, an imprisoned Iroh performs clapping pushups, an act of physical strength rarely assigned to elderly characters. When a guard comes to investigate, Iroh quickly shifts into a ruse, clapping mindlessly into the air with a blank expression. "Crazy old man," the guard mutters before walking away ("Sokka's Master"). Viewers, who are in on Iroh's ruse, recognize the guard's misjudgment and understand Iroh's physical skill and crafty manipulation as he plans to escape from his cell. In most other children's programs, Iroh might be limited to being the "crazy old man" the guard believes him to be, but *Avatar: The Last Airbender* allows him to exceed these stereotypical expectations ("Sokka's Master"). The kinship model constructions of childhood in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are made

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possible by Iroh and other adult characters' presence *and* substance, which grant them more depth than the usual adult seen on Western children's television.

In addition to Iroh, several other significant adult characters recur throughout the series, acting as counterparts to the main child cast and expanding opportunities for multigenerational interactions on screen. King Bumi is a reoccurring character who, despite his status as a centenarian, is physically fit enough to challenge anyone, including the Avatar, with his earthbending skills. Several of Aang's advisors throughout his journey as Avatar are adults, including the monks at the Southern Air Temple, Master Pakku of the Northern Water Tribe, firebending expert Jeong Jeong, and spiritual guide Guru Pathik. Other important adult characters in the series include Gran Gran, Katara and Sokka's grandmother and leader of the Southern Water Tribe, their father Hokkoda, who aids Aang in his attack on the Fire Nation, and past Avatars Rokku and Kioshi, who guide Aang as he discovers his power and responsibility. Like Iroh, these adult characters are generally more present and more fully developed than most adult portrayals in children's television. Although *Avatar: The Last Airbender* centers its story on a group of children, its regular inclusion of extensively developed adult characters creates a congruency between the two age groups that is essential in a kinship model construction of childhood.

Intergenerational Relationships and Power Dynamics

Avatar: The Last Airbender's inclusion of significant adult characters allows the series to exhibit more literal intersections of adult and child categories, as adult and child characters interact on screen. These interactions are made more effective through shared, dynamic power and authority. In many children's series where child characters are the primary focus, social superiority and influence often lies exclusively with children, like in *Codename: Kids Next Door* (2002-2008), in which children run a secret organization that protects the earth, or in *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011), where tween Miley functions as her family's primary earner. With a cast of well-developed adults, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* could easily adhere to a "natural" hierarchy in which adults regularly assert dominance over children. Instead, the series resists granting authority to one age group over the other. Power dynamics constantly shift between characters of all ages, often resulting in an exchange of influence or knowledge. This shared authority underscores the series' kinship model constructions of childhood by simultaneously empowering both age groups, linking them through the aid they may offer each other.

In "The Waterbending Master," Katara challenges traditional adult authority after she is denied access to waterbending training in the Northern Water Tribe. Master Pakku, the tribe's most skilled waterbender, refuses to teach her because of the tribe's insistence that women should not be in combat. Instead of allowing Pakku, an adult male authority, to assert dominance over her, Katara challenges him to a duel, shouting, "I'll be outside if you're man enough to fight me!" ("The Waterbending"). When Sokka tells her she cannot win, she admits, "I know, I don't care," showing that her goal is not to challenge Pakku's

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physical superiority but to assert herself as a qualified, legitimate fighter contrary to his beliefs ("The Waterbending"). During the duel, Katara anchors herself to the ground with ice and growls at Pakku, "You can't knock me down!" ("The Waterbending"). Though she is ultimately defeated, Katara establishes her own authority by both physically challenging Pakku and also successfully changing his mindset, as he eventually offers to train her. Importantly, Katara does not deny Pakku's superior skill; she accepts him as a teacher when he offers. In this scene, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* does not grant full authority to child or adult, allowing them to influence each other equally while still maintaining their individual agency.

A less physical example of an intergenerational exchange of power occurs when Toph, Aang's twelve-year-old, blind earthbending master, meets Uncle Iroh after temporarily leaving her friends. Iroh and Toph, two perfect strangers, immediately acknowledge a similarity between them: "You seem a little too young to be traveling alone," Iroh tells Toph, to which she replies, "You seem a little too old" ("The Chase"). With this initial greeting, both characters recognize that, regardless of age, neither has authority over the other. Their status as equals is then established as they offer each other advice. Before parting, Iroh reminds Toph, who is resistant to her friends offers of assistance, "there is nothing wrong with letting people who love you help you" ("The Chase"). As she turns away, Toph suggests to Iroh, who is fighting with his nephew, "maybe you should tell him that you need him, too" ("The Chase"). Neither dominates the conversation; both contribute equivalent wisdom after listening to the other's problem. This shared power is a direct byproduct of kinship model constructions of childhood. Childhood isn't presented as being superior or inferior to adulthood. By allowing power to flow between characters of all ages, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* promotes connection and understanding between generations.

Kinship and Popularity

Throughout this article, I have characterized *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s success as largely "unparalleled." With its decades long fan following, continued cultural relevance, and expansion into projects like sequel series, adaptations, novels, comics, and even a division of Nickelodeon Animation Studio called Avatar Studios, I stand by this claim. However, the extraordinary multigenerational popularity of *Bluey* (2018-present), a children's animated series about a family of Australian cattle dogs and their day-to-day life, offers a compelling point of comparison. Nielsen named *Bluey* the most-streamed television series in 2024, and the show's massive success has not slowed. Bluey is the only children's program to top Nielsen's streaming charts since the rankings began in 2020, earning the title of most streamed series in 2024 and the first half of 2025.[5] Like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Bluey* has attracted a significant multigenerational audience and fandom. In 2025, the Adult Bluey Fans Facebook group has more than 720,000 members. The r/bluey Reddit page, which has a tagline reading "The only cartoon show you're willing to watch with your kids," has nearly 250,000 members. In an echo of sentiments expressed about *Avatar: The Last*

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Airbender, critic Kathryn VanArendonk claims, "Almost no children's television in the history of that genre has managed to do the thing that Bluey does…It is just as entertaining, accessible and emotionally meaningful for adults as it is for kids." Looking at *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Bluey* together, adult viewership undoubtedly correlates with a higher level of popularity and success for these children's television series.

Notably, *Bluey* shares with *Avatar: The Last Airbender* many qualities that align with a kinship model construction of childhood. The series explores age intersections as characters engage with ideas and qualities associated with generations outside of their own, like when the youngest characters, Bingo and Bluey, pretend to be elderly women in "Grannies," or when their father, Bandit, pretends he is an infant in "Born Yesterday." Throughout the series, children are depicted alongside well-developed adult characters, often parents and grandparents, who confront issues ranging from physical decline to parental burn out. Similarly to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Bluey* emphasizes connections between generations and creates opportunities for anyone of any age to relate to its characters. These two series and their extreme popularity are in many ways anomalies, yet their shared traits––kinship constructions of childhood, significant adult viewership, and uncommon popularity––suggest that children's television shows that emphasize intergenerational connection and kinship-based models of childhood tend to resonate across age groups, resulting in greater levels of popularity.

Avatar: The Last Airbender and *Bluey* both challenge dominant norms in Western children's television that position childhood as inherently different from or opposed to adulthood. Instead, both series demonstrate an interconnectedness between children and adults, create space within their stories for complex intergenerational relationships, shared authority, and emotional resonance across age groups. As a result of these kinship model constructions, the series invite a broader demographic of viewers to see themselves reflected in their narratives, creating necessary conditions for genuine multigenerational engagement. As these two series demonstrate, works that resist rigid generational binaries and instead affirm multigenerational connection may be especially well-positioned to achieve uncommon levels of popularity and success.

Crucially, recognizing *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as a children's series rather than reclassifying it due to its adult following as some might suggest, allows for a clearer understanding of the series' critical intervention within the genre. When the series is approached as a work of children's television, its deviations from genre norms can be considered factors in its uncommon success. Positioning *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s within children's media, therefore, enables a recognition of how its kinship model constructions of childhood distinguish the series and contribute to its legacy as one of the most enduring and multi-generationally beloved works in contemporary children's television.

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Notes

1. From Peabody: "The series is distinguished by multi-dimensional characters, unusually complicated personal relationships for a cartoon serial, and a healthy respect for the consequences of warfare. Though it's aimed at 8 and 9 year olds, it has been embraced by fantasy-mythology lovers of all ages" (Peabody).
2. Although *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was created in a Western cultural context for Western viewers, The Fire Nation, Earth Kingdom, Air Nomads, and Water Tribe are inspired by Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, and Inuit cultures, respectively. To ensure authenticity, American creators Brian Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino worked with specialists like martial arts masters, calligraphers, and South Korean animation studios. Asian American TV producer Edwin Zane served as the main cultural consultant for the series (LooseWorld).
3. The original series' continued popularity has led to several sequels and spin-offs, including a series of graphic novels, a (critically panned) movie, a TV series called *The Legend of Korra*, and most recently, a live-action reimagining of the original show. The series continues to be a Nickelodeon/Paramount property. In 2021, Nickelodeon announced Avatar Studios, a division of the Nickelodeon Animation Studio that will focus on creating content related to the Avatar universe.
4. The other series on Netflix's list of longest Top Ten streak at the time include: *Ozark, Outer Banks, Tiger King, All American, Love is Blind, Space Force, Dead to Me, 13 Reasons Why, and Money Heist*. Eight of these series are rated TV-MA (for mature audiences only), and one, *All American*, is rated TV-14.
5. Other series named the most streamed by Nielsen include *Suits* (2011-2019), *Stranger Things* (2016-present), *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), and the American version of *The Office* (2005-2013), all with older target audiences and ratings of TV-14 or higher.

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