



Age-Appropriate Media: Can You Trust Parental Guidance Ratings?

By: Cori Cross, MD, FAAP

Have you ever found yourself thinking, *"Did they really just say that in a PG-rated movie?"* If so, you probably won't be surprised to hear that movie, TV, and video game ratings today aren't the same as when we were kids.

Studies show that government and industry movie ratings have become more lenient over time. More violent and sexually explicit content are allowed into films than there used to be. What these ratings mean and whether they can tell you what's appropriate for your child isn't always clear. Even movies with the same rating released in the same year can differ widely in the amount and type of potentially offensive content.



How to make healthy media choices for your family

We know that children are influenced by what they see and hear, especially at very young ages. Rating systems can be one tool your family uses to choose media that has positive influences—and avoid content with negative influences. Some tips:

Learn the ratings lingo

Raters often use quotas for scenes that have violence, sex and swearing. Once these quotas are reached, the movie is pushed into a higher rating bracket. Although this may make sense for filmmakers, it can be difficult for parents to navigate. For instance, you may not want your child exposed to certain content, such as vulgar language. For you, even one "f-word" may be too many.

Look for ratings and warning labels on media such as movies, TV shows, music, videos and video games. Look at the content information if it's available too. It's usually located in the same area as the rating. This will indicate details about why the raters gave the rating they did. It will also help you find age-appropriate content for your child.

Companies such as streaming services don't currently have to use parental guidance ratings at all. This means that the majority of online streaming videos are unrated. Use caution with online videos and products that don't have a rating. Be sure to find out more about them before you let your child play with, listen to or watch them.

Co-view media when possible

Keep in mind that while ratings can be helpful, they are only a guide. Nothing is better than you listening to and watching media with your kids. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends co-viewing media ([/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Keeping-Technology-in-Check.aspx](https://www.aap.org/en/family-life/Media/Pages/Keeping-Technology-in-Check.aspx)) with your children as often as you can. This gives you a chance to talk about what you're hearing or seeing and how it fits into your family's values.

Whatever media your child is using should be age appropriate. If possible, it should also reinforce your family's values. If you can, it's good to pre-screen what your child watches. That said, with the sheer amount of media kids are exposed to, it's unrealistic that you'll be able to pre-screen or co-view everything.

Use family-friendly resources

If co-viewing or listening isn't an option, you can refer to reputable, independent resources such as Common Sense Media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>) (CSM). These resources rate movies, television shows, video games, music, apps, websites and books.

The CSM website and app give in-depth reviews. This allows parents a better sense of what to expect. There are even suggestions for discussions parents may want to have with their children. The ratings have a 5-dot system and detailed summaries about what parents may want to know in these categories:

- Sex
- Language
- Consumerism (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/5-Unhealthy-Ways-Digital-Ads-May-Be-Targeting-Your-Child.aspx)
- Drinking, drugs and smoking (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-Cigarette-Advertisements-Influence-Teens.aspx)
- Violence (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx)
- Positive role models
- Diverse (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/diverse-and-inclusive-books-for-children.aspx) representations
- Positive messages

The CSM website and app offer age recommendations with each review. DISH Network and DIRECTV have partnered with CSM and include these age recommendations on their guide listings too.

Federal TV rating guidelines

The TV Parental Guidelines (*see chart below*) are usually included within local TV listings. Ratings aren't used for news programs. The AAP recommends keeping young children away from repetitive graphic images and sounds that may appear on news programs—especially after a major tragedy (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/talking-to-children-about-tragedies-and-other-news-events.aspx).

If you want older children to watch the news, record it ahead of time. That way, you can preview it before you sit down with them to watch it. Then, as you watch it together, you can pause and have a discussion when you need to.

All TVs 13 inches or larger made in the United States after 2000 are required by federal law to have a V-chip. This chip allows parents to block specific shows or groups of programs based on ratings, specific shows, or time slots. Visit the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) website (<https://www.fcc.gov/general/parents>) for more information.

TV Parental Guidelines Rating System		
Rating	Guideline	Program Description
TV-Y	All Children	Appropriate for all children. Not expected to frighten younger children.
TV-Y7	Directed to Older Children	For children 7 years and older. Themes and elements may include mild fantasy or comedic violence or may frighten children younger than 7.
TV-Y7-FV	Directed to Older Children— Fantasy Violence	Same as TV-Y7, but programs may be more intense than TV-Y7.
TV-G	General Audience	Most parents may find this program suitable for all ages. Contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.
TV-PG	Parental Guidance Suggested	Parents may find material unsuitable for younger children. Contains one or more of the following moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L) or some suggestive dialogue (D).

TV-14	Parents Strongly Cautioned	Parents may find some material unsuitable for children younger than 14. Contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L) or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).
TV-MA	Mature Audience Only	Designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children younger than 17. Contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S) or crude indecent language (L).

Industry movie rating guidelines

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has a voluntary rating system for the movie industry. These ratings give general guidelines to parents about the level of content they might find inappropriate for their children.

The MPAA's Classification & Ratings Administration (<https://www.filmratings.com/History>) (CARA) has a board of independent raters who are required to be parents themselves. They view each film for potentially offensive content, such as violence, sex, drug use and language. Then they assign ratings based on what they believe most American parents would consider the film's appropriate rating.

Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) Rating System	
Rating	Description
G	General Audiences. All Ages Admitted. Contains very little violence and no nudity, sex or drug use.
PG	Parental Guidance Suggested. Some Material May Not Be Suitable for Children. May contain some profanity, violence, or brief nudity. Does not contain drug use. Parental guidance suggested for more mature themes.
PG-13	Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13. Contains more intense themes, violence, nudity, sex, or language than a PG movie but not as much as an R movie. May contain drug use.
R	Restricted. Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian. Contains adult material. May include graphic language, violence, sex, nudity and drug use.
NC-17	Adults Only. No One 17 and Under Admitted. Contains violence, sex, drug abuse and other behavior that most parents would consider off-limits to children.

Video game and app rating guidelines

The Electronic Software Ratings Board (<https://www.esrb.org/ratings-guide/>) (ESRB) gives ratings to video games and apps. These are like movie ratings—they serve as a guide to help you make informed choices. Nearly all video games sold in the United States and Canada have ratings.

Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB) Rating System

Rating	Description	Back to Top
E (Everyone)	Content is generally suitable for all ages. May contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.	
E 10+ (Everyone 10+)	Content is generally suitable for ages 10 and up. May contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.	
T (Teen)	Content is generally suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language.	
M (Mature 17+)	Content is generally suitable for ages 17 and up. May contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.	
AO (Adults Only 18+)	Content suitable only for adults ages 18 and up. May include prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content and/or gambling with real currency.	
RP (Rating Pending)	Not yet assigned a final ESRB rating. Appears only in advertising, marketing and promotional materials related to a physical (e.g., boxed) video game that is expected to carry an ESRB rating, and should be replaced by a game's rating once it has been assigned.	

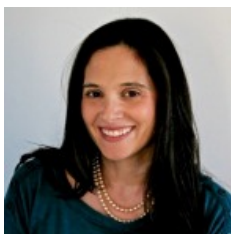
Remember

Official government or industry ratings offer you some general guidance on which shows, movies, and other media may be appropriate for your child's age. But for most families, they don't replace sitting down with your children and watching what they're watching—or, when that's not possible, getting a heads-up from reputable, parent-friendly resources about what they'll see.

More information

- Why to Limit Your Child's Media Use (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/The-Benefits-of-Limiting-TV.aspx)
- How Virtual Violence Impacts Children's Behavior: Steps for Parents (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Childrens-Behavior.aspx)
- How to Make a Family Media Use Plan (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx)
- Video Games: Establish Your Family's Own Rating System (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx)
- FCC (<https://www.fcc.gov/general/parents>) (The Federal Communications Commission)
- Common Sense Media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>)

About Dr. Cross:



Cori Cross, MD, FAAP is a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Within the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), she is a former executive board member of the Council on Communications and Media and is an official AAP spokesperson. Dr. Cross is also a co-author of the AAP technical report, *Children and Adolescents and Digital Media* (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/10/19/peds.2016-2593>). Follow her on Twitter @drcoricross (<https://twitter.com/drcoricross?lang=en>).

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[Back to Top](#)