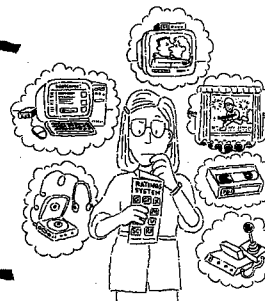


# The Ratings Game: CHOOSING YOUR CHILD'S ENTERTAINMENT



Even before reaching middle school age, your child will spend tens of thousands of hours watching television, movies, and videos; listening to the radio, CDs, and cassettes; playing video and computer games; and surfing the Internet. But TV, movies, music, games, and the Internet are much more than entertainment. They are a source of information, and they help teach our children about the world in which we live. As children have more and more entertainment options to choose from, it becomes even more important for parents to become involved in making choices.

To help parents make informed choices, many entertainment companies are now using *ratings systems*. Movies have used ratings for years, but ratings are now being given to TV programs, video and computer games, and music. Ratings are designed to give parents more information about the content of the program, movie, music, or game. The ratings are usually based on the amount of violence, sex, nudity, strong language, or drug use your child will see or hear.

## Why do we need ratings?

Ratings have become more common because research has shown how much children are influenced by what they see and hear, especially at very young ages. The effects don't seem to go away as the child gets older. One study of 8-year-old boys found that those who watched violent TV programs growing up were most likely to be involved in aggressive, violent behavior by age 18 and serious criminal behavior by age 30.

Young children who see violent acts in movies, shows, and games may not be able to tell the difference between "make-believe" and real life. They may not understand that *real* violence hurts and kills people. When the "good guys" or heroes use violence, children may learn that it is okay to use force to solve problems. Younger children may even become more afraid of the world around them.

Most entertainment companies are now providing ratings for their products. However, it is up to you to protect your child from the effects of exposure to violence, as well as sex, drug use, and even strong language. Look for ratings and warning labels. Use them to make smart decisions about what your child sees and hears. Ratings can be useful tools, but watch and listen *with* your child to discuss the content and meaning of the shows they watch, music they hear, or games they play.

## Movies

When you think of ratings systems, the one used by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) probably comes to mind. Though movie producers are not required to use the rating system, most movies that make it to the big screen have one of the following MPAA ratings:

**G GENERAL AUDIENCES** All Ages Admitted Contains very little violence; no nudity, sex, or drug use. May contain some tobacco or alcohol use.

**PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED** Some Material May Not Be Suitable for Children May contain adult themes, alcohol and tobacco use, some profanity, violence, or brief nudity.

**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 film, but not as much as an R. May contain drug use scenes.

**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 NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED** Children should not be admitted. Contains violence, sex, drug abuse, and other behavior that most parents would consider off-limits to children.

This is the oldest, most well-known, and widely used rating system for any form of media, but it is not perfect. For example, the ratings divide children into three age groups (under 13, 13 to 17, and over 17). However, a PG movie that contains some violence or nudity will have a much different effect on a 5-year-old child than it would a 12-year-old. Find out as much as you can about a movie before letting your child watch. Read reviews, check the Internet, talk to friends who have seen it. Choose carefully when considering movies with PG-13, PG, and sometimes even G ratings. If you aren't sure, see the movie first, and decide if it is appropriate for your child.

## Videos

Along with cable television, the use of VCRs and video-taped movies in the home has made it much more difficult to control your child's viewing. Children have easier access to R-rated movies than ever before. Most video stores have no way to prevent a child from renting or buying inappropriate material. Younger children are also more likely to watch the same movies many times. Just as a young child will sit and watch her favorite television show every day, she is just as likely to watch the same videotape over and over.

Movies from the video store are rated with the same system used for movies in the theater. Read the package and pay attention to the rating. Decide what movies are appropriate for your child depending on her age and maturity. Set rules and apply them at home, as well as at the theater. Talk to the manager of your local video store about setting stricter rules for renting videos rated anything more than G. For suggestions of quality children's videos, contact the Coalition for Quality Children's Media at 505/989-8076 or on the Web at <http://www.cqcm.org>.

Keep in mind, *children under 17 years of age should not be allowed to view R-rated movies*. The rating states that children under 17 should not view these films without a parent or guardian; however, these films often contain graphic violence, drug use, sex, nudity, and inappropriate language. Even though the rating system seems to suggest a younger child may watch an R-rated movie when a parent is present, it is *not* recommended they watch at all. *No child 17 years of age or under should be allowed to watch a movie rated NC-17.*

## Television

The television industry has adopted a set of ratings called the TV Parental Guidelines to help parents select programs for their children. Channels that have agreed to use the ratings show them for 15 seconds at the start of a program. They may also be found in your local TV listings. The ratings apply to all TV programs, *except news and sports*. (Keep in mind that news programs

often contain violence that may be inappropriate for viewing by young children.) Instead of flipping through channels, use the following ratings to help you and your child choose TV shows:



**The program is suitable for all children.** Whether animated or live-action, it is designed for a young audience, including ages 2 to 6. The program is not expected to frighten younger children.



**The program is suitable for children aged 7 and older who can tell the difference between make-believe and reality.** The program may contain mild fantasy or comedic violence that could frighten children under 7.



**The program is suitable for children aged 7 and older who can tell the difference between make-believe and reality. The program contains fantasy violence more intense or combative than TV-Y7.** Violence is the central theme of the program and the fighting is presented in an exciting way. Violent acts are glorified, and violence is used as an acceptable, effective way to solve a problem. Programs can be cartoons, live-action, or a combination of both.



**General Audience.** Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. There is little or no violence, no strong language, and little or no sexual content.



**Parental guidance is suggested.** The program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children. It may have an inappropriate theme, and it may contain moderate violence (V), some sexual content (S), and strong language (L) or suggestive dialogue between characters (D).



**Parents are strongly cautioned.** The program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14. It contains intense violence (V), sexual content (S), and strong language (L) or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).



**Mature Audience.** The program may be unsuitable for children under age 17. It contains graphic violence (V), strong sexual content (S), and/or crude, indecent language (L).



Starting in 2000, all new television sets with screens 13 inches or larger will have a computer device called the *v-chip*. The *v-chip* allows parents to block programs from their televisions. TVs with screens smaller than 13 inches will not have the *v-chip*. If your child is allowed to watch TV alone, choose a set that is at least 13 inches so you can use the *v-chip* to block programs.

## TV for toddlers

The first two years of your child's life are especially important in the growth and development of your child's brain. During this time, children need good, positive interaction with other children and adults. Too much television can negatively affect early brain development. This is especially true at younger ages, when learning to talk and play with others is so important.

Until more research is done about the effects of TV on very young children, the American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend television for children aged 2 or younger. For older children, the Academy recommends no more than 1 to 2 hours per day of educational, non-violent programs.

## Computer games

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) assigns ratings\* to games for personal computers and home video systems. The ratings are as follows:



**Early Childhood.** Suitable for ages 3 and older. Does not contain inappropriate material.



**Everyone.** Suitable for ages 6 and older. May contain minimal violence, some comic mischief (such as slapstick comedy), or some crude language. (E is a new rating. Older games may still carry the rating K-A, Kids to Adults, which is also suitable for ages 6 and older.)



**Teen.** Suitable for ages 13 and older. May contain violence, mild or strong language, or suggestive themes.



**Mature.** Suitable for ages 17 and older. May contain more intense violence, language, or sexual themes.



**Adults Only.** Suitable only for adults. May contain graphic sex or violence. Not intended to be rented or sold to anyone under the age of 18.



**Rating Pending.** Game has not yet been rated.

On the back of the game package, the ESRB also includes a brief description of the content to give parents more information about the game. For example, an EC rating might come with the description "Edutainment," which means educational entertainment. Other content descriptors include the following:

- Informational
- Suggestive themes
- Comic mischief
- Mature sexual themes
- Mild violence
- Strong sexual content
- Violence
- Mild language
- Realistic violence
- Strong language
- Nudity
- Hate speech
- Use of tobacco and alcohol
- Strong hate speech

\* Please be advised that the ESRB rating icons, "EC," "K-A," "E," "T," "M," "AO," "RP" are copyrighted works and certification marks owned by the Interactive Digital Software Association and the Entertainment Software Rating Board and may only be used with their permission and authority. Under no circumstances may the rating icons be self-applied to any product that has not been rated by the ESRB. For information regarding whether a product has been rated by the ESRB, please call the ESRB at (212) 759-0700 or 1-800-771-3772.

**A word about...the Internet**

The rapid growth of the Internet has placed knowledge and information at your child's fingertips. However, not all information on the Internet is appropriate for children. Anyone can set up a Web site and post information on any topic. You might be surprised how easy it is for your child to locate information that contains graphic sex, violence, or drug use.

Internet companies are still in the process of creating a universal ratings system for material posted on the Net. Until a system is created, there are many options available to parents. The Recreational Software Advisory Council on the Internet (RSAC) offers a system to Web site developers on a voluntary basis. Most Internet browsers are already set up to use RSAC. For more information, visit the Web site at <http://www.rsac.org>. The Entertainment Software Rating Board offers a rating system as well. Visit <http://www.esrb.org> to find out more.

There also are many services and software products available that allow parents to block or filter inappropriate Web sites and material. Ask your Internet service provider about site blocking, restrictions on e-mail, and other controls for parents.

It is very important that your child have your help and supervision when using the Internet. Even if your child is an experienced computer user, he needs your involvement and your supervision.

Computer game companies rate their games voluntarily, but most now use the ESRB system. Some games may also carry a rating by the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC). Their system assigns a score based on a scale of 0 to 4 in the categories of Violence, Sex, Nudity, and Language. The rating score appears on the front of the game package.

**Coin-operated video games**

All new coin-operated video games are labeled with a Parental Advisory Disclosure Message that appears in the artwork of the game or on a color sticker on the machine. The labels come in the following colors:

**Green** — Suitable for all ages

**Yellow** — Mild

**Red** — Strong

Yellow and red stickers indicate content in one of the following four categories:

- Animated violence
- Life Like violence
- Sexual content
- Language

For example, a yellow sticker with the description "Sexual Content Mild" means the game contains sexually suggestive references or material. A red sticker that reads "Life Like Violence Strong" means the game contains scenes involving human-like characters in combat situations that may result in pain, injury, or death to one or many characters.

**SEXUAL  
CONTENT  
MILD**

**LIFE LIKE  
VIOLENCE  
STRONG**

**Music**

The Recording Industry Association of America has a Parental Advisory Program that is also voluntary. Each record company uses its own guidelines to determine which recordings will be labeled with a parental advisory.

If a record company decides to use the advisory, it is required to use a standard black and white logo reading



The logo is smaller than 1-inch square and should be located on the front of the CD, cassette, album, or videocassette.

If you have any doubt about the content of lyrics in the music your child chooses, listen to the music before allowing your child to buy it. Many music stores will allow you to listen to CDs before buying. Check out the Internet too. Most record companies and recording artists have their own Web sites where you may be able to read song lyrics or even hear samples of recent recordings.

**Protect your child**

Your child will be exposed to all forms of entertainment and media at a very young age. By helping your child develop the skills to question what they see and hear in the media, you can protect your child from the many negative messages in movies, television, music, and games. Follow these guidelines:

1. **Use the ratings.** Help children and teens choose movies, shows, videos, music, Web sites, and computer and video games that are appropriate for their ages and interests. Get into the habit of checking the content ratings and parental advisories for all media. Use the ratings as a guide, but watching and listening yourself are the best ways to decide which movies, shows, games, or CDs are suitable for your child. *Keep in mind that companies do not have to use ratings. Beware of products that have no ratings, and find out more about them before letting your child watch, play, or listen.*
2. **Set time limits.** Limit your child's total screen time to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day. This includes TV, movies, video and computer games, and surfing the Internet. Consider using a timer to enforce the rule.
3. **Watch with your child.** Whenever possible, participate in your child's TV, video game, music, or computer time, and discuss what she sees and hears. When you share your child's experiences, you can talk to her about the messages she is receiving. Discuss how the messages compare with the values you are teaching your child.
4. **Keep TV sets, VCRs, video games, and computers out of your child's bedroom.** Instead, put them where you can be involved and monitor the activity. Do not let your child watch TV while doing homework or eating meals.
5. **Know how much is too much.** It is easy to overlook the messages children are getting from media. There are signs that TV, movies, or games may be having too much of an impact on your child's behavior. If your child has a problem with any of the following behaviors, talk to your pediatrician, and take a look at how much TV, movies, or computer games may be affecting him:
  - Poor school performance
  - Hitting or pushing other kids often
  - Aggressively talking back to adults
  - Frequent nightmares
  - Increased eating of unhealthy foods
  - Smoking, drinking, or other drug use

