

Movie Talk

2005



**Using Movies to Help Parents Talk to
Their Kids About Important Issues.**

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Introduction

Talking with your kids – letting them know how you feel about things – sharing your values – and hearing what they have to say. Most parents think that is a great idea. It can be hard to find a way to begin these conversations, but there are many ways to open the door to communication. You can listen to music together, or watch TV, or watch a movie together. Talking about the movie you have just seen gives you a chance to share your ideas and hear theirs.

The purpose of this guide is to suggest how you can use movie videos/DVDs as a way to start talking about important issues. It gives you some ideas about what subjects might relate to the story you have just seen. After you have used it, ideas for choosing and using other movies not listed here may come to you.

CHOOSING WHAT TO WATCH:

Many movies combine good ideas with messages we don't like. Scenes of sexual behavior or strong language are often added even when they are not needed to tell the story. Seeing these movies with your kids lets you explore both the things you like and those you don't. It is this kind of exploration that helps kids learn to solve problems for themselves.

Not all movie viewing has to be about serious topics. You can watch a funny movie together and share the enjoyment. And that can help when you want to move on to more difficult questions.

Some Specific Suggestions for Discussion:

- Begin with a general conversation about what each of you liked or didn't like about the film.
- You don't have to do a serious discussion of issues in the story. Let your children's reactions guide you.

- While there are ideas for discussion listed with each film, these are only suggestions. Feel free to use your own.
- Each person has a right to express his or her own beliefs and opinions. It may be even more important to stress this if siblings are present, since they may be in the habit of arguing with each other. A direct attack on someone's opinion is only likely to reinforce it.
- Your opinions and values are important, but they will be better heard if you say, "I believe...." rather than "You should...."
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage thoughts and opinions.
- Rather than asking what your child would do in a given situation, talk about how someone else might act, or how a character in the story might have done something differently.
- Be sensitive to the timing of the conversation and the presence of other people in the room in order to avoid embarrassing your child. Many people find that conversations in the car are a great way to learn what goes on in a child's mind.
- Remember that the ability to do abstract reasoning usually does not come until early adolescence. Young children tend to think in a concrete, yes/no, right/wrong fashion.
- Very young children may not be able to tell the difference between the story on the screen and reality. Use care with films containing frightening moments.
- Children need a sense of safety. When you talk with them about the story in a movie, you can adjust your expectations of their understanding to their age level and look for specific concerns or fears they may have.

Sharing a film, and talking about it, or just enjoying it together, should be a comfortable experience that builds bridges to future communication.

Bambi



- Not rated
- 70 minutes
- Young children at your discretion

Bambi, the 1942 movie that was one of the best animated films ever made, has been released on DVD, with its colors refreshed. You may remember the story: Bambi is the “prince,” born in the forest, with charming best friends Thumper the rabbit and Flower the skunk. Bambi’s mother is shot by hunters and the grief-stricken fawn is found and raised by his father. Then comes Spring and behold, he is full grown and in love with his childhood friend Faline. Then the hunters (note that the only humans in this movie are bad guys) manage to start a forest fire, Faline is almost killed and Bambi has to become as brave as his father to lead the animals to safety.

Many adults find the death of Bambi’s mother one of the saddest scenes on film. Many young children, however, handle it well. The movie lets you know that bad things happen, and that you can survive. It also shows the procession of life changes, including puberty and hormones. You know your children best, and can judge if you want them to see this film. (Note that it was made before a time when Iowa and other states were overrun with deer, and when car-deer collisions were not everyday events. This allowed the film to show the deer as the good guys and the hunters as the bad guys. Even so, if there are hunters in your family, be prepared for some backlash.)

FOR DISCUSSION

What did you like about this movie?

Would you like Thumper and Flower as friends? Why?

How did it make you feel when Bambi's mother died? (Note: He still had family to love and care for him.)

Bambi grew up in one year. How long does it take people to become grown-up?

Home on The Range

- PG (Brief mild rude humor)
- 76 minutes
- Ages 6+

This Disney animated movie, the last of that studio's traditional two-dimensional style, places its story on the Patch of Heaven Ranch, and takes its characters through an inventory of Wild West clichés: the cattle rustler, the saloon, the cattle drive, the sheriff, the mine shaft, the "wanted" poster, the railroad, etc. The story is carried along with country-western music. The sheriff has served a foreclosure on the Patch of Heaven ranch. Pearl, the owner, needs \$750 to save her place, but would have to sell her cows, and can't do it. They are family. The three cows, brash Maggie (Roseanne Barr), ladylike Mrs. Caloway (Judi Dench) and new-ager Grace (Jennifer Tilly) decide to raise the money and save the farm. Their search for the evil Alameda Slim (Randy Quaid) is complicated by Buck the martial-arts stallion (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) The action hardly ever pauses as our heroines do their stuff, and of course, save the day.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

What does "foreclosure" mean? Is our home safe?

How are the animals at the ranch like our family?

Why didn't Maggie and Mrs. Caloway get along at first?

Why don't we belch in public?



The Incredibles

- PG (Comic-book violence, including that aimed at children)
- 105 minutes
- Ages 8+

Note: An early scene shows a character attempting suicide by jumping from a building.

Super heroes and heroines who can save the world are welcome, until the general public starts filing lawsuits for the collateral damage that comes from fighting crime. The government then forces all these “supers” into a protection program, where they have to hide their true identity and pretend to be just like everyone else. Naturally, Mr. Incredible, used to doing mighty deeds, hates being an insurance clerk. His wife, Elastigirl, struggles at home with quarreling children that have super gifts of their own. There is a hyperactive son, Dash, and a teenage daughter, Violet, who can become invisible or create a force field. Mr. Incredible and his buddy Frozone, instead of going bowling, sneak out at night for a chance to be their old super selves again. But then Mr. Incredible is offered a job that uses his powers, is tricked and trapped, and the whole family is called to the rescue. There is plenty of action, and a warning by the mother to the children. Their enemies “won’t exercise restraint because you are children. They will kill you.” The peril to the children means that this film is not for very young viewers. Every member of the family has to exercise his or her gifts to the utmost to survive and to save one another. This film is a celebration of family, and of the beauty of being yourself and using your gifts, a picture of the destructive effects of pride, and, all in all, an excellent movie.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?



What kind of superpower would you like to have? What would your uniform look like?

What kind of skills or talents do you have right now? How are you using them?

What did the members of this family learn by the end of the story?

The movie states that “Your identity is your most important possession.” What do you think?

Elf



- PG (mild rude humor and language)
- 95 minutes
- Ages 7 and up

Elf is a formula film, with no heavy message, but one that is fun and silly and well acted, and probably would be enjoyed by both parents and children. Will Farrell plays Buddy, an orphan who was raised as one of Santa’s (Ed Asner) elves at the North Pole. (His elf father is played by Bob Newhart.) When he discovers he is human he takes off for New York City to find his real father (James Caan), who is a crabby publisher of children’s books and not thrilled with this enthusiastic overgrown boy in elf clothing. It is great fun seeing Buddy discover the city, revolving doors, escalators, and (yechh) gum wads on railings. Buddy gets to know his father’s new family (Mary Steenbergen as the wife and Daniel Tay as the little brother), has a romance with a girl in a department store (Zooey Deschanel), confronts an imposter Santa in the store Christmas display, and, of course, helps restore enough Christmas Spirit so that Santa’s sleigh will fly after crash-landing in Central Park.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

If you came here after 30 years at the North Pole, what would surprise you?

The Story of the Weeping Camel

- Not rated, but could be PG because of scenes of the camel struggling to give birth.
- 90 minutes
- Kindergarten +
- In Mongolian with English subtitles

This engaging “narrative documentary” chronicles the daily life of an extended family of Mongolian sheepherders in the Gobi desert. They live in yurts, use their camels for transportation and carrying burdens, and tend their sheep and goats as their forebears have done for centuries. One of their camels has a difficult, two-day struggle to give birth and rejects its newborn fuzzy white offspring. Attempts to change her mind, using encouragement and Buddhist prayers, fail. The two young sons in the family must ride their camels to the nearest town and find a musician who can accompany the music that will charm the mother camel into caring for her baby. The town has modern things – television, for instance – that are new to the boys. But the musician comes on his motorcycle, the song is played and sung, the camel weeps – a sign that she has accepted her baby - and the family and their guest can rejoice. Adults will enjoy this as much as their children. Be prepared for questions about why the mother camel would not take care of her baby, and whether this happens with human mothers as well.

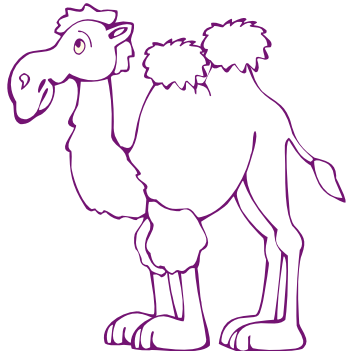
FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

What was the same about the way they lived and the way we live?

What was different?

Would you like to ride a camel?



Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

- PG (Scary creatures)
- 10+
- 141 minutes

Children today know that the world contains evil as well as good, and they often find reassurance in stories like this series. As in the Lord of the Rings, children (or Hobbits) can overcome evil if they have faithful friends and trustworthy adults around them. In this third movie of the series, Harry is getting older and stronger, feeling things more deeply, and angry about the loss of his parents. His friends Hermione and Ron are also growing in years and skill. The students at Hogwarts are threatened by the escape of a dangerous wizard from Azkaban prison, and word is out that he is coming for Harry. The school is guarded by terrifying creatures called Dementors, which can take advantage of your fears to destroy you. Professor Lupin, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, shows Harry and the others how to transform their worst nightmares and then expel them by seeing the humor in them. This is very helpful for Harry, who has a full load of fearful memories. Harry copes with his reckless pattern of rule-breaking, learns to face his fears and learns about adults who may or may not be trustworthy.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

Do you think it is true that “The ones we love never leave us?”

Is it hard to face our fears? How can we keep them from controlling us?

“The challenge is to become familiar with one’s fears and not to let them take over in times of trouble.”

Draco Malfoy and the other “bad guys” were prejudiced against “mudbloods.” Can you think of other names or labels we give to groups of people we don’t like? What does it say about us when we do this?

Ella Enchanted

- PG (Some mildly crude humor)
- 100 minutes
- 8+

Anne Hathaway plays the Cinderella character in this funny variation on the classic story and does a charming job. She is cursed at birth by a fairy who gives her the gift of obedience – a curse because she has to do what she is told. When her mother dies and her father remarries, her stepsisters make her life miserable. The evil ruler of the kingdom, Edgar, Prince Charmont’s uncle, has condemned all the non-human creatures – the elves, giants and ogres – to leave the city and live in the forest. The other girls of the kingdom are Prince Charmont groupies, screaming and chasing after him whenever he appears. Ella’s adventures as she searches for the fairy to reverse the spell, meets with the elves, giants and ogres, and saves the prince from his uncle, are delightful. The music and dancing and special effects are excellent. The film was taken from the book of the same name by Gail Carson Levine. It centers on “a heroine whose search for her true self is animated by a deep yearning for justice in a kingdom where outsiders are treated as second-class citizens.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

What made it possible for Ella to break the curse?

What creates prejudice? How can we overcome it?

When Ella was given a command, she took the words literally, as when she was told to “Stay there.”

Can words we hear sometimes mean something different than the speaker intended?



SpiderMan 2

- PG-13 (Comic-book violence)
- 110 minutes
- 11+

Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst are back in a really good comic-book movie that improves on its predecessor. Poor Spidey is in a bad way. As Peter Parker, he can't keep a job, is behind on his rent, in danger of failing his science courses at college, and can't keep his girlfriend happy because he has to keep turning into Spiderman. He can't even save Aunt May from losing her home to foreclosure. Nothing is going right. He is alone and misunderstood. So he gives up being Spiderman, tosses the suit, and tries just being himself, but the world, and the people he loves, still need him as a hero. Doc Ock, the villain, has a human side, and in the end Spidey saves the city from destruction not just with his powers, but also by encouraging Doc to struggle against the forces that have taken over his body and mind.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

Why do we need heroes?

Why did Peter Parker want to stop being Spiderman?

How do we know when we need to make sacrifices for other people?

Do you think we all have a hero inside us?

What happens when we keep strong feelings to ourselves?



Lord of the Rings

- PG-13 (Lots of violent battle scenes and scary creatures)
- Running times for each of three sections: 208, 179 and 200 minutes
- Ages 12+, not for objectionable content, but for the complexity of the story



This saga of the struggle between good and evil in Middle Earth

(represented by a stunning New Zealand) pits Hobbits, Men, Elves, Dwarves and a Wizard, along with other creatures, against the emergence of an evil force that will destroy or enslave them all. The Ring of Power, that enslaves the mind and emotions of anyone who touches it, even honorable and wise people, must be destroyed. The only creature in Middle Earth that can be trusted to carry it to the Mount of Doom and cast it into the volcano's heart is Frodo Baggins, a small, furry-footed Hobbit who lives a peaceful life in the Shire. The story follows the various characters involved with this heroic effort. It centers on loyalty and courage, showing that even Hobbits can do great things when supported by friends. These movies are long and involved. Reviews by young viewers showed a great range of reactions. "This is the most boring movie I have ever seen!!" Or, "I really liked the story. Some kids don't want to watch movies they have to think about." You might want to consider your own children and their personalities before deciding to watch these together. And, of course, given their length, you will be seeing them one at a time.



FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this story?

Do you agree with the statement that “Even the smallest person can change the course of the earth?”

If you were going to form a group for a grand adventure, who would be in it?

Gollum is a creature that lives within himself the war between good and evil. Why was it important that Frodo call him by his old name? Where else did you see the contrast between good and evil? What did you think of the Steward, who sent his son out to lead men into a losing battle, while he eats a banquet in his palace?

Why do you think Frodo resisted the power of the Ring better than anyone else?

Why do you think Frodo and Sam made different choices about their lives after the Ring was destroyed? Do we know anyone who, for instance, has had experience of war and come back changed?

What would you say to the King who said, “Why should we ride to the aid of those who did not come to ours?”

Who surprised you by doing more than you thought they could?

Mean Girls

- PG-13 (Sexual content, language, teen partying)
- 93 minutes
- Ages 14+

Lindsay Lohan plays Cady, a bright girl who was home-schooled in Africa by her zoologist parents, and now must cope with high school in Evanston, Illinois – her first experience with public schools and the masses of adolescents who form rigid social networks. She makes friends with a couple of kids who are comfortable not fitting in, but finds herself drawn into the world of “The Plastics,” a group of three girls led by Regina, a girl who dominates her trio and as much of the rest of the student body as possible by being competitive and malicious. (Regina is so much in control that when her shirt is sabotaged by painting large spots that go over her breasts, the other girls in school simply adopt this as a fad.) The Plastics specialize in social climbing, gossip, lying and betrayal. Regina’s mother is a “cool mom” whose breast implants make a hug painful, and who is despised by her daughter.

Cady is caught between her desire to keep her first friends, to be liked by a boy in her class, and to fit in with Regina and her group. The story portrays some real cruelty in the way Regina – and at times, Cady – treat others. There is both comedy and drama as these tensions play themselves out and Cady finally finds her real self in the midst of this emotional and moral chaos.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you think about this movie?

Why didn't Cady protest when Regina was cruel to others?

What makes a person a real friend?

Can you make yourself feel more important by making other people feel unimportant?

What did you think about Regina's mother?

13 Going on 30

- PG-13 (sexual content and brief drug use)
- 97 minutes
- Ages 13+

Jenna is turning 13, and desperately wishing to be cool and accepted by the “in crowd” at her school. The morning after her disastrous and humiliating 13th birthday party, at which she chooses mean-spirited popularity and acceptance over her best friend, she wakes up in a New York City apartment, now 30 and beautiful, but still with a 13 year old mind and no memory of how she got there. She is shocked to find a naked man in her bathroom. (“Gross!”) Jennifer Garner does a great job of putting the 13 year old psyche into a sophisticated adult body. The adult Jenna, an editor at a fashion magazine, has been heartless, selfish and vindictive. The 13 year old, still unspoiled Jenna slowly discovers exactly what her life has been like, while bringing some freshness and sweetness to the part. The geeky neighbor boy who had loved her when she was 13 is now a successful and attractive adult, and engaged to be married to someone else. In the end, of course, she is back to her 13-year-old self with a new appreciation of what is really important.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you like about this movie?

When a 13 year old imagines being an adult, do you think their view is realistic?

Is it OK to make mistakes if we learn from them?

Do people in your school act like the kids in this movie?

What makes someone a true friend?

Friday Night Lights

- PG-13 (Thematic issues, sexual content, language, teen drinking, rough sports action)
- 117 minutes
- 13 +

(Note that this film contains scenes of an alcoholic father abusing his son. If this kind of abuse is an issue in your family, preview the film before sharing it with your children.)

This excellent movie is based on a book of the same name, and on real life. The entire emotional life of the little town of Odessa, Texas, revolves around the success of the high school football team. The opening scene tracks down a dusty, brown and gray Texas highway and into the little town, and then finds the one bright spot of green grass and gleaming paint – the high school stadium. The story follows Coach, (Billy Bob Thornton in a wonderful performance) and his team through a season. We watch the relentless pressure put on the coach and the players by the obsessed community. Going to the state championship is expected to be the high point of their lives, and for many it might be all downhill from there. One player has an alcoholic father who played on the team before him, still wears his championship ring, and berates and abuses his son in an effort to see him follow in the same footsteps. One player, with a real talent and a massive ego, poor academic skills, recruiters watching him and Mercedes brochures in his locker, loses his place on the team to a knee injury and watches his future fade away. The curse of having the expectations of the entire community focused on you is almost more than the 17 year old players should have to bear. The film

does not downplay the physical impact of the game; when bodies collide on the field, you hear the impact.

This can be viewed as a traditional sports movie, watching the teams play, but it is also a very good movie even if you don't care about football, because it is primarily about the people involved.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What did you think about this movie?

What do you think it felt like to know that your performance was so important to so many people?

What did it mean when people thought that a championship football season would be the high point of your life? Did that mean that adulthood held no chances for success or achievement?

What does success mean to our family? Our school? Our friends?

What is the difference between winning and losing?

Why did the girl at the party “only want to be with a ballplayer?”



The Lost Boys of Sudan

- Not rated, but contains no sexual or violent behavior that would call for age limits
- 87 minutes
- Ages 12+

This documentary follows teenage refugees from Sudan as they leave their camp in Kenya and come to this country. Their families were killed in the Sudan, and they escaped, some as young as four years old, depending on each other to survive the long trip through enemy territory, attacks by wild animals, and incredible hardships to reach safety in Kenya. They were called the “Lost Boys” because they had no parents, but together they made up a close family of brothers who cared for each other. A few of them had the chance to come to the U.S. and start a new life, never having lived in anything but the African village culture. Communal living and thinking helped them survive in Africa. In this country they struggle with low-wage jobs, culture shock, loneliness, and pressure from family back in Africa that expects them to share what money they earn here. Iowa has many Sudanese people living here – some families with children, and some orphans like these young men. Many of them are hoping to return to their home country, using there what education and skills they have gained here.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What struck you about the people in this movie?

Are there Sudanese refugees in our community or school?

What kind of “culture shock” do you think we would have if we moved to Africa and lived as they did? What about privacy, food, etc.?

What did you think about Peter saying he felt like a poor person living with rich people who knew more than he did?

What can Iowans do to make refugees less lonely? Note: At least one Des Moines church has services in Dinka each week.

Resources

In Print:

Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture

Juliet B. Schor, Scribner, 2004 This book gives a close look at the power of advertising in our children's lives.

Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children about Sex and Character by Pepper Schwartz, PhD and Dominic Capello: New York, Hyperion, 2000. There is an excellent chapter about talking about TV, music and movies.

On the Web - Reviews:

The basic source of information about almost any movie, actor or topic is: The Internet Movie Data Base, <http://www.imdb.com>. You can get information about a movie, and access a variety of reviews.

The best source of information on newer media (movies, TV, games, web sites, books, etc.) for families with children is Common Sense Media, at <http://www.common sense media.org>. They use a balanced approach in their reviews, commenting favorably or unfavorably, and explaining why. They not only do their own reviewing, but post reviews from other adults and children who have seen the film in question.

Another review site that looks at content, issues and values is The Movie Mom at <http://www.moviemom.com>.

On the Web – Information:

Advocates for Youth has a wealth of information available for parents and children about communication, growing up, sexuality, etc. Go to <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org> and click on the Parents tab.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, www.kff.org, has studied the effects of media on children. A recent title is *The Effects of Electronic Media on Children Ages Zero to Six: A History of Research*, dated January 2005 and available from their web site. In addition, they have a wealth of other useful information. Click on “Youth and HIV/STDs on the left side of the page, and then search the right hand column on that page for publications on children, risk-taking, decision-making, etc.

When disasters, such as the recent tsunami, or local tornadoes or floods, occur, children may have many questions about what happens to people who are affected by them, or imagine what would happen to themselves and their family in similar circumstances. FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, has a helpful web site to help answer spoken or unspoken concerns children have. Go to <http://www.fema.gov/kids/feel/htm>.

The Talking With Kids Campaign, <http://www.talkingwithkids.org> has guidelines and ideas on parent-child communication about everything from war and terrorism to drugs to other difficult issues.

For a peek into one commercial organization that studies children with marketing in mind, go to Teen Research Unlimited, <http://www.teenresearch.com> and check out their website.



Family Planning Council of Iowa

108 – 3rd Street, Suite 220

Des Moines, IA 50309

515-288-9028

Fax. 515-288-4048

e-mail. fpci@fpcouncil.com

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