

Movie Talk

2006

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

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Introduction

Talking with your children, letting them know how you feel about things, sharing your values and hearing what they have to say, is important in any family. It can be difficult to find a way to start these conversations, but there are many ways to open the door to communication. One is to listen to music together, or watch TV together, or share a movie. Talking about what you have just seen or heard gives you a chance to hear their ideas and share yours.

The purpose of this guide is to suggest how you can use movies as a way to start talking about important concerns. It gives you some ideas about what subjects might relate to the story you have just seen. And ideas for choosing and using movies not listed here may come to you.

CHOOSING WHAT TO WATCH:

Many movies combine good ideas with messages or images we don't like. The level of violence, language and sexuality in PG-13 films has increased over the last few years. And since no self-respecting teenager would go to see a PG movie, scenes are often added to boost the rating to a more profitable PG-13. Seeing these movies with your children lets you explore the things you like and the things you don't. It is this kind of exploration that helps kids learn to solve problems for themselves.

For each movie, we have provided the industry rating in boldface; in parenthesis we have provided the reviewer's assessment of appropriate age and parental warnings as indicated.

Certainly, not all movie watching has to be serious. There are some very funny movies, and sharing them can be a bonding experience 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 enjoyed or disliked about the film.
- You don't have to do a serious discussion of issues in the story. Listen to your children's reactions and let them guide you.
- The ideas for discussion listed for each film are only suggestions to be used or not as you like.
- Each person has a right to express his or her own beliefs and opinions. It may be 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 own 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 might do in a given situation, talk about how someone else, or a character in the story, might act.
- Be sensitive to the timing of the conversation and the presence of other people in the room in order to keep from 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 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 a film, especially one containing threat or violence, you can look for specific concerns or fears they may have.

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

Millions

- **PG** (Ages 9 to adult)
- 98 Minutes

Based on the book of the same name by Frank Boyce.



Two English boys, Damien, age 7 and Anthony, age 9, have just lost their mother. They and their grieving father move to a newly built home in a new suburb, and attend a new school. Damien, who is obsessed with the lives of the saints and has occasional visits from them, uses packing boxes to build himself a hideaway next to some adjacent railroad tracks. One day a large bag of money falls from the sky and crashes into it. Damien, of course, assumes that it was sent by God, and, on the advice of St. Francis, that it should be given to “the poor.” Anthony is more practical, seeing the advantage of using it to purchase friendships at their new school. There are two major complications. One is that the British pound has only one week before all currency will be converted to Euros, rendering worthless any unconverted money. The other is that the bank thief who tossed the money off a train wants it back. “It isn’t the money’s fault it got stolen.” is Anthony’s practical response to the question of keeping it or not. This is an excellent, entertaining and well-acted film for children and adults alike and poses questions about our obsession with money and what we do with it.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you enjoy about this movie?*
2. *What kind of choices would we make if we won the lottery?*
3. *Is it easy to decide how to give money to help people? Are there other ways to help people than giving money?*

4. *What did you think about the way the boys got sympathy by mentioning their mother's death?*
5. *What did you think about the scene where Damien found his father in bed with his new girlfriend?*

Ice Princess



- **G** (Ages 7+ ... *Perfect for young teen girls*)
- 92 minutes

This is a story about two Type-A mothers and two daughters and the way in which the mothers try to live out their own dreams through their daughters' lives. Casey is a shy and brilliant high school student whose single mother has her future as a scholar planned out. Gen is a beautiful blond figure skater whose mother, Tina, missed out on the Olympics and wants her daughter to achieve what she could not. Casey needs a physics project for a Harvard scholarship application, and decides to analyze the dynamics of figure skating, looking for the perfect model for spins and jumps to help skaters improve their performance. When she starts serious skating lessons herself, her mother panics, telling her that a skating career has a "short shelf life." Gen, on the other hand, just wants a normal life free of the demanding discipline of daily workouts. Unlike the story in many movies that focus on "mean girl" dynamics, Gen befriends Casey as the two of them struggle with their own life choices and the pressures from their respective mothers.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you think about this movie? What did you enjoy?*
2. *What did you think about the ways in which the mothers acted with their daughters? Is that anything like our family?*
3. *There were no fathers in this story. Do you think that made a difference?*
4. *How does Casey decide what is the most important future for her?*
5. *Casey worked really hard to afford the lessons and then to put in the time and effort to practice. Is there anything that important to you?*

March of the Penguins

- **G** (6 to adult)
- 80 minutes

Each year the Emperor Penguins make an annual 70 mile trek, walking and sliding across ice and snow, to the spot where they breed the next generation. They survive temperatures of 85 degrees below zero and hundred mile-an-hour winds to produce and hatch their one offspring. When the egg is hatched the female passes it carefully to the male, who shelters it on his feet under a fold of skin, and waits for two months without eating while his mate travels the 70 miles back to the sea and eats and returns to trade places. In the water, penguins are swift and graceful swimmers and hunters. On land they are anything but graceful. Warning: Eggs drop to the ice and freeze. Hatchlings are caught and eaten by predatory birds. Sea lions prey on them in the ocean. Not all birds survive the trip back and forth to the sea. Baby penguins are really appealing, and the way in which their parents nurture them is impressive to watch. There is a tendency to attribute human emotions to these remarkable birds, as we often do with animals we admire. However, they are admirable in their own right, following behavior that has worked for them for thousands of years.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What parts of this movie struck you? What did you like? Was there anything that upset you?*
2. *The penguin parents took good care of their babies. Do we have a nurturing instinct when it comes to our own children?*



Because of Winn-Dixie

- **PG** (Ages 8 through pre-teens. It deals with the desertion of a parent.)
- 85 minutes



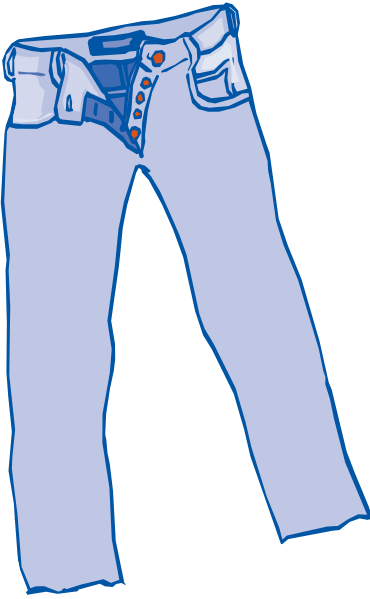
This movie was made from a book of the same name.

Opal has just moved to a small Florida town with her preacher father, whose Open Arms Baptist Church congregation sits on folding chairs in an empty convenience store. They both grieve the absence of her mother, who left them when Opal was 3. She describes her father as a turtle inside his shell. Opal is lonely and the local children don't appear to be very friendly. But one day, on an errand to the supermarket, she watches the havoc caused by a stray dog, and claims him for her own to save him from the pound, naming him after the store. (The casting director must have searched far and wide for the right dog, because he certainly found one with personality.) On their exploration of the town, the dog leads Opal to meet new people and as she listens to their stories, or pours her heart out to them, her world opens up. She develops the confidence to ask her father about her mother and the maturity to hear the answers. Eva Marie Saint, Cicely Tyson and musician Dave Matthews play important parts.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you think about this movie?*
2. *Opal was afraid that she was responsible for her mother's departure. Do you think that children have this fear when their parents separate? What would you tell them?*
3. *Are there people who listen to you the way Opal listened to Miss Franny and Gloria Dump? How does it feel to have someone really listen when you talk?*
4. *Would you like a dog like Winn-Dixie?*

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants



- **PG** (Ages 11+; *The mother of one girl commits suicide. Another young girl dies from leukemia.*)
- 119 Minutes

This movie was taken from the book of the same name by Ann Brashare.

Four teenage girls have been lifelong friends. On a shopping trip just before they part for the summer, they discover a pair of jeans that magically fits each

of them. They agree to pass the jeans along as the summer continues, along with letters about their lives. Carmen is a plump Puerto Rican girl who is looking forward to spending time with her father, long divorced from her mother. She arrives at his new suburban home to find that he is engaged to a very thin, blond woman who has two teenaged children, and that they are busy making plans for an upcoming wedding. She feels hurt and angry at being an outsider. Bridget is a tall beauty who still grieves the death of her mother, a suicide. She summers at a soccer camp in Mexico, playing ferociously on the field and attempting to connect with a coach. Their sexual encounter, her first, ends in sadness rather than joy. Lena is a shy girl who spends the summer in Greece with her grandparents. She meets and overcomes her fears to fall in love with a local boy. Tibby, who spends the summer working at a discount store and babysitting her little sister, is full of anger and boredom. She decides to make a documentary about the meaningless lives around her, but meets a 12 year old girl, living with leukemia, who breaks through Tibby's defenses to

become her friend. Their friendship and shared stories helps them all as they move on with their lives.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you like about this movie?*
2. *How do you think the death of a parent affects the rest of the family?*
3. *Is it hard to share a parent with a new husband or wife, and other children?*
4. *Why do you think Bridget wanted to have sex with the coach?*
5. *What are the reasons someone would have sex for the first time?*
6. *Do you have friends that would support you when you are sad or angry?*
7. *Is it possible to be angry with someone and still love them?*
8. *What was about Tibby's experience that helped her mature?*

The Phantom of the Opera

- **PG-13** (Ages 12 and up)
- 143 minutes



This big romantic spectacle of a film, an opera, uses Andrew Lloyd Webber's music to tell the story of a beautiful young singer caught between the romantic love of her childhood friend and the obsessive love of the Phantom. Emmy Rossum is an excellent heroine as Christine. The music and the scenery are wonderful and many people are passionate fans of this film, or have seen it on stage.

If you want to see a really scary Phantom, go to the 1929 film with Lon Chaney, Jr.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you enjoy about this movie?*
2. *What is "obsession?" What would it be like to have someone obsessed with you?*

Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit

- **G** (Ages 8 and up)
- 85 minutes

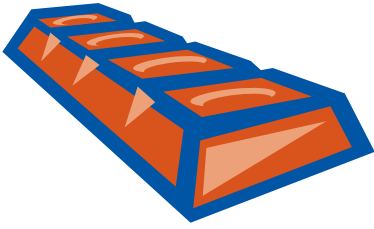
This feature-length claymation film starring Wallace the inventor and Gromit, his faithful dog, is a joy to watch. It is packed full of British humor, some of which may escape younger viewers, but there is enough for everybody. Wallace and Gromit run the Anti-Pesto service that humanely captures the rabbits that threaten to gnaw their way through the annual Giant Vegetable Competition, held by Lady Tottington at Tottington Hall. Her would-be fiancé, Victor Quartermaine, is a gun-happy hunter who would gladly shoot all the bunnies. Wallace seeks an invention that will change the bunny appetite from vegetables to his favorite, cheese, and, as usual, something goes wrong and we get The Were-Rabbit. (How do you kill a were-rabbit? With gold bullets, of course. 24 carat.) Hints of everything from horror films to King Kong fill the rest of the movie in non-stop action as Gromit, as usual, saves the day. Helena Bonham Carter does Lady Tottington perfectly, and Ralph Fiennes is marvelous as the villain.

FOR DISCUSSION:

Just talk about what you enjoyed. If you want something to nibble on, try serving cheese.



Charlie and the Chocolate Factory



- **PG** (Ages 8+)
- 115 minutes

This movie of the Roald Dahl story looks at the importance of family, and, along the way, disposes of

some very nasty children in appropriate fashion. (This is a darker version of the story, compared to the earlier “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.”) Charlie Bucket and his parents and two sets of grandparents live in an impossibly rickety house, surviving mostly on cabbage soup. Willy Wonka has a local chocolate factory, which once hired local workers, but replaced them with Oompa Loompas and now is closed to the rest of the world. One day a contest is announced. There are five golden tickets hidden in Wonka chocolate bars that will give the lucky winners a tour of the factory by Willy Wonka himself. One of them will win a special prize. The five lucky winners, accompanied by a family member, arrive on the appointed day. Four of them are truly obnoxious children with truly obnoxious parents, and meet their fitting punishment along the way. Charlie has won the prize – the role as the next owner of the factory – but refuses to give up his family in order to take it. In the end, Willy resolves the childhood traumas imposed by his dentist father, and Charlie’s family prospers.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you enjoy about this movie?*
2. *How was Charlie’s family different from the families of the other children?*
3. *Charlie was self-confident and generous. How did he get this way?*
4. *How did the other children – greedy, spoiled, and self-centered – get the way they were?*
5. *Are dentist visits a major issue in your home?*

Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*



- **PG** (Ages 10+)
- 74 minutes

This stop-motion animation of an old Russian fairy tale tells the story of Victor, the son of a rich fish merchant and Victoria, the daughter of an

impoverished noble family. Their marriage has been arranged as a way to give the fish merchant some class and the noble family some money. They meet for the first time on the eve of the wedding and fall in love. Poor Victor has a hard time memorizing his lines for the wedding, and, practicing in the forest, slips the ring on what he thinks is a twig. It is, however, the skeletal finger of the Corpse Bride, who is thrilled to be married at last. Victor finds himself in the underworld, populated with skeletons and other people in various stages of decay. Victor even finds his dead pet dog Sparky. The underworld is a lot livelier and more colorful and a whole lot more fun than the “live” world above. Victor, voiced by Johnny Depp, the Corpse Bride, voiced by Helena Bonham Carter and Victoria, by Emily Watson, must work out the problem of their relationships. There are various musical numbers, from skeletons doing jazz to spiders doing Gilbert and Sullivan as they mend Victor’s clothing. A talking maggot has a major role, giving romantic advice. In the end, love is shown as life’s most precious treasure. Adults as well as children can enjoy this story.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you enjoy about this movie?*
2. *What did you think of the parents using their children for their own ends?*
3. *Could Victor have done anything differently that would have avoided hurting either Victoria’s or the Corpse Bride’s feelings?*

Rent

- **PG-13** (Ages 14+; drugs, sexuality and strong language)
- 135 minutes

This is a faithful movie adaptation of the stage production of a musical based on La Boheme, with most of the original cast. In 19th Century Paris, impoverished bohemians died of consumption. In this 1989 version, a “family of choice,” a circle of belonging, lives with AIDS and heroin. Their story is told through song. One loving couple consists of two gay men, one a transvestite. Mimi struggles with heroin addiction and AIDS, and the specter of AIDS hangs over the other characters as well. The AIDS support group asks: “Will I lose my dignity? Will I die alone?” In spite of all their problems, this story is based on idealism, friendship, compassion, grief and joy. It also looks at the issue of class conflict. Drug use is shown, but not romanticized. The stage show and the film have a faithful following who love the music.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you enjoy about this movie?*
2. *The friends formed a “family of choice.” Do you think their “families of origin” would have welcomed them?*
3. *Why do you think Mimi was unable to stop using heroin?*
4. *How would you describe the relationship between Tom and Angel? Do you think they give a role model for other kinds of relationships in terms of love and loyalty?*
5. *When couples quarrel, what attitude helps them make up?*

Cinderella Man

- **Pg-13** (12+; *realistic depiction of boxing*)
- 145 minutes



Jim Braddock, played by Russell Crowe, was a successful boxer in the 1920s. The beginning of the depression coincided with the end of his boxing career. The movie shows his comeback in which he defeated the champion, Max Baer, whose blows in the ring had killed two prior opponents. But the real center of the story is the way in which this man and his wife and three children responded to the horrors of the depression. Work was so scarce that hundreds of men would line up to compete for 5 or 10 available day jobs. Families struggled to survive without income to pay for heat or power, or even food. In a world that defines manhood by your ability to provide for your family, the emotional pressures often tore families apart. The desperation of this proud man is shown in one scene where he begs money from the boxing establishment so that he can get his power back on and allow his children to return home to their basement apartment.

DISCUSSION:

1. *What did you think about this story?*
2. *What is a “depression?” Is there anyone among our family or friends who can tell stories about what the depression was like for them? Is it hard to understand this in our time? (If you want to explore the depression further, one place to start is *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, by Studs Terkel.)*
3. *Why do you think it was so important to the people of that time to have a hero? Who are the heroes today?*
4. *Do you know why the tent camp of homeless people was called “Hooverville?”*
5. *“Relief” was one of the first government attempts at what we now call “Welfare.” Why do you think he paid them back when he finally earned some money? What do you know about people today who receive “welfare?”*

RESOURCES

In Print:

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 resource for film information is **The Internet Movie Data Base**, <http://www.imdb.com>. You can search for films by title, actor or topic, and access information that includes a variety of reviews. This is always a good place to start when considering using a film

Common Sense Media, <http://www.common sense media.org> takes a family-friendly approach to their reviews, giving reasons for their comments. They also post reviews from other adults and children who have seen the film in question.

A value-centered site is **Spirituality and Health**, <http://www.spiritualityhealth.com>.

The reviewers search films for values such as love and loyalty, etc.

On the Web: Information

Advocates for Youth, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>, has a wealth of information for parents and children. Click on the parents tab and search the contents. Note one resource titled “What To Do When They Just Won’t Talk.”

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.

When disasters happen, 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. **The Federal Emergency Management Agency** has a site for children to help answer these questions. Go to <http://www.fema.gov/kids/feel/htm> for a way to talk with younger children.