

Movie Talk



2003

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



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Introduction

As parents we want to help our children grow up to be good people, and we want to keep them safe until they are able to care for themselves.

How can we help our children build character? Some rules and limits are necessary, of course. But in addition we can talk about our beliefs, about our sense of right and wrong. Everyday life gives us many chances to start this conversation. Shared experiences, such as watching a movie together, can be a natural and comfortable approach to communication. We don't just sit down for the dreaded "talk." Rather, we share our thoughts and opinions about what we have just experienced together. And we listen to theirs as well. This process of listening to each other and sharing opinions is a vital one. It helps them exercise and strengthen their "moral muscles."

So, how do we go about choosing and using movies? Ask yourself, is the film appropriate for our home and our family values? Some people are reluctant to have their children face the "monsters" in our world. And yet fantasy and play and imaginary monsters are a way for children to feel some kind of control over the scary things out there. One of the reasons that the Harry Potter books have been so wildly successful is that the hero battles real evil, and does so by making one choice after another that makes him stronger and better. In each succeeding book the crises and the choices become more serious, as the hero gets older – and this is how it is in real life.

And what about sexual behavior or violence? Where do we draw the line between what is OK to watch, as long as we talk about it afterward, and what is not OK at all? We have our own personal limits that govern whether a movie is fit for our children to watch.

But your home is probably not the only place your children will see movies. You may choose what comes into your own home, but they will watch them with friends or see them on TV. It is far better to make them "media-smart." Help them learn to spot attempts to influence their spending or behavior. Help them have some clear guidelines about appropriate language or sexual behavior. Help them learn that, in real life, violence has consequences. Help them recognize when men or women or people from various ethnic or social groups are shown only as stereotypes. Help them get in the habit of reflecting on what they see, and do this by reflecting with them.

Some Specific Suggestions for Discussion

- Start 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 the issues in the story. Let your children's reactions guide you.
- While there are ideas for discussion listed with each film, they are only suggestions. Feel free to use your own.
- Each person has a right to express his or her own beliefs and opinions, without attack. (*This may be even more important if brothers or sisters 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.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage thought 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 behaved differently.



- Your opinions and values are important, but they will be better heard if you say “I believe...” rather than “You should...”
- Be sensitive to the timing of the conversation and to 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 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. *(Many Disney movies have some really frightening moments. Think back to the wicked stepmother in Snow White, or Bambi’s mother.)*
- Children need a sense of safety. When you talk with them about the story told 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.

About a Boy

- PG-13 (Suicide attempt, sexual situations, strong language)
- 100 minutes
- Ages 14 and up

The story focuses on Marcus, whose depressed mother attempts suicide and is unable to be a parent to him because she is so sunk in her own misery. If suicide is a sensitive question for your family, you might want to preview this before seeing it with your child.

Will (Hugh Grant) is a 38-year-old bachelor with a private income, whose only purpose in life is to have the latest in style and audiovisual equipment, and to date women without having to make any commitment. He thinks that if he dates single mothers they will be less demanding and easier to dump, and joins a single parent group so that he can meet available women. But in the process of dating one of them, he meets Marcus (wonderfully played by Nicholas Hoult), the child of another group member. Marcus, a round-faced 12 year old who has a totally unfashionable haircut, is laughed at and bullied by his school-mates. His mother is depressed, weeping uncontrollably at breakfast, and he comes home to find her passed out on the couch after a suicide attempt. Marcus is a boy who really needs an adult in his life, and he attaches himself to Will, who slowly finds that he is developing a genuine feeling of caring for the boy and tries to help him fit into his school environment as a normal kid. Each of them needs the other, in fact; Marcus to have a caring adult in his life, and Will to have an incentive to become an emotional adult.

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

How do you think Marcus felt about having to care for his mother, rather than having her be responsible for him?

How did you feel about Will's lying in order to get women to like him and date him?

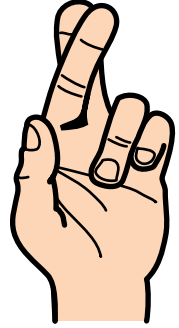


Were the school bullies shown realistically, in your opinion? How does your school handle bullies?

Why do you think people might try to take their own life? How might you know when someone is likely to do this? Where could you go to get help for that person?

Big Fat Liar

- PG
- 88 Minutes
- Children 8 and above



Jason (Frankie Muniz) is a 14 year old who would rather do a really creative lie than put in the effort to do his homework. When he is faced with doing an essay by a deadline or spending time in summer school, he buckles down and writes about what he knows best. His essay is called “Big Fat Liar.” However, as we suspend disbelief, his essay is stolen by a Hollywood producer who has given him a ride in a limo. His parents have no sympathy for such a story. When the producer actually produces a movie using the essay and the title, Jason and his friend Kaylee (Amanda Byrnes of Nickelodeon) decide to go to Hollywood and convince the producer to fess up to Jason’s father. The producer has treated a number of employees badly, and they plot together to force a confession.

The action is fast and funny, but the plotters are having so much fun that the moral – honesty is the best policy – almost gets lost. By the end of the movie, of course, Jason’s parents have learned the truth.

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

Do you know people like Jason? Why do you think they act that way?

Can you think of a situation in which it might be hard to be honest?

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

- PG
- 152 minutes
- Good for children 7 and older: It may be a little overwhelming for younger viewers, unless they have already read and loved the book.

This movie is faithful to the book, and does not avoid the dark and dangerous side of the story. Harry Potter, an orphan, is rescued from his awful relatives and sent to Hogwarts Academy to learn to be a wizard. His friendships, his enemies, the school itself, the game of Quidditch, his adventures, the adult characters, all are true in story and style to the book. Anything else would have disappointed the vast army of faithful readers. The story centers on values like loyalty and honor and friendship and courage. It draws on the vivid imagination of childhood to create a world in which real evil as well as real good exist and confront each other.



Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

Would you like to have a life like Harry's?

How did you feel about how Harry's uncle, aunt and cousin treated him?

*How do you feel about "cliques" at school?
Does your school have "cliques"?*

Ice Age

- PG
- 75 minutes
- Ages 3-6: The death of a baby's mother may be an issue, but the rest of the action is familiar cartoon-style stuff.
- Ages 7-10: Children this age are more able to think about the central themes: friendship, loyalty, sacrifice.

Manfred the Mammoth and Sid the Sloth are separated from their respective herds as the on-coming ice age chases all the creatures South. As in similar films like "Shrek" and "Monsters, Inc." there is a large, good-hearted creature paired with a small nervous motor-mouth. This pair save a human baby placed in their care by a drowning mother, and determine to return him to his "herd." Complications come from the difficulties of caring for a human baby (food and diapers figure here), and the fact that the leader of the Sabre-tooth tigers wants the baby for lunch. Or dinner. Diego, a tiger, joins the pair with the agenda of connecting the baby and the tiger pack. But, of course, his heart softens and he joins this unusual herd to protect the baby and track down its human relatives, risking his life to do so.

There are some marginal characters along the way; a squirrel that badly wants to bury its acorn in the hard ice, some Dodo birds and a couple of really crabby rhinos. But the central focus is about altruism, sacrifice and loyalty.

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

Why do you think Diego changed his mind about saving the baby?

The Mammoth, the Sloth and the Tiger were all very different creatures. What did they have in common that made it possible for them to be part of the same family?

Are there friends you have that are really different from you in some way? How does it make your friendship special?

Like Mike



- PG
- 100 Minutes
- Ages 9 and up should enjoy it.
- Ages 6-8 might have a few problems with how the orphans are treated.

Calvin, age 13, Murph and friends live in an orphanage where they are periodically displayed to potential parents (“like puppies. They only want the cute ones.”) Calvin is given a pair of cast-off sneakers with the initials “MJ” inside. He is sure that they belonged to Michael Jordan, and lo and behold, when he wears them he can shoot, dribble and jump with the best of them. He is picked for a half-time show, going one on one with Tracy, a member of the lackluster Los Angeles Knights basketball team, and so impresses the manager that he is hired for the team. The story is predictable fantasy, but fun for younger kids. Parents want to adopt Calvin because he is now famous and rich. While the team is on the road he rooms with Tracy, which creates conflict. The administrator of the orphanage plots to make money off the situation. And, of course, all that Calvin and Murph and the rest of the orphans want is real parents. And, of course, Calvin and Murph wind up being adopted.

Warning: The film shows Calvin climbing out on a tree limb in a lightening storm to get the magic shoes down off a power line, where they have been thrown by the orphanage bully. Children should know how risky this is.

Discussion:

How did you like this movie?

Have you ever imagined yourself being a star? Being famous?

If Calvin did not have his magic shoes, would he still be a valuable person?

What did you think about the orphanage? What happens today to children in this country who lose their parents? How does adoption happen?

*Do we know anyone who has been adopted? From this country?
From another country?*

Little Secrets

- PG
- 103 minutes
- Girls aged 5-11

Emily, a budding violinist, lives in a very nice suburb. When not in school or practicing her music, she runs a “secrets” stand in her back yard. For 50 cents the neighborhood children can tell her a secret, which is written or collected, placed in a sack, and locked away in a chest. Secrets can range from a broken family treasure to a kitten smuggled into the house. Emily dispenses advice, and never breaks a confidence. But there are complications. A new family moves in next door with two cute teenage boys. And Emily has a secret and a problem of her own. Her mother is pregnant – for the first time, since Emily was adopted. And the new neighbors soon have a secret of their own. The point of the film, of course, is that keeping secrets is usually a bad idea. (Note that the subjects of adoption and drunken driving fatalities are touched on in this story.)

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

Do your friends have secrets like the ones in the movie?

Is it hard to keep a secret?

When is a secret serious?

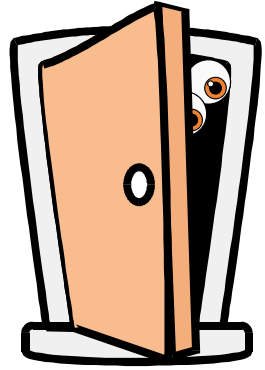
Why do you think Emily didn't want people to know she was adopted?

Do you think it is normal to be jealous of a new child in the family?

What should somebody do if they find themselves in a car with a driver who has been drinking or using drugs?



Monsters, Inc.



- G
- 88 Minutes
- Good for ages 3-6, fun even for older children.

I can remember a time as a young child when a monster lived under my bed. I never saw it, but I knew in my bones that I had to get my feet from the bed to the rug without letting them touch the bare floor, or it would reach out and grab me. The presence of scary beings is an almost universal experience of childhood. *Monsters, Inc.* takes this experience and stands it on its head by showing us a parallel universe populated by monsters and powered by the screams of children. (We even see a training session for new monsters, taking notes at a demonstration.) But kids are not as easy to frighten as they used to be, which poses a problem for the power supply. Sullivan (voiced by John Goodman) is a big furry blue and purple monster who is the champion scream producer. His talkative assistant, Mike, (voiced by Billy Crystal) is a green ball with legs, arms and one large eye. They work in the giant Monstropolis plant, entering bedrooms through closet doors. One child not only refuses to scream, but follows them back into their universe, which causes major problems. Human children, or even objects from their world, are contaminants on the Monster side of the closet door. The action follows efforts of Sullivan and Mike to get “Boo,” the little girl, back home, and it is fast and funny. In the end, they find that children’s laughter is just as effective as fear in powering their world.

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

Have you ever been scared of monsters? Do you think they really exist? What did you do about the scary feelings?

Have you ever thought that someone was really scary and then found out that they are really nice?

What made you laugh in this movie? Why?

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

- PG
- 95 minutes
- Children under 10 could find this boring.

Toula is a 30 year old woman who works in her family's restaurant, "Dancing Zorba." Her father, a patriarch and fanatic on Greek culture, wants her to marry a nice Greek boy. She feels trapped and frumpy, until she sees Ian, a WASP high school English teacher, who stops by for lunch. She starts college classes, does her hair, gets more attractive clothing, and, with her new computer skills, wangles a job in a cousin's travel agency. The romance develops, along with the expected complications from her father and the rest of the family. "Nobody in my family has ever even dated somebody who wasn't Greek." There is plenty of room on both sides for culture shock. Ian is vegetarian. The big Greek dinner to introduce his parents to Toula's family overwhelms them. Of course, the movie ends with a "big fat Greek wedding." The nice thing about this movie is that the people seem real. Toula is not fashion-model-skinny. Her family comes in all shapes and sizes, as do the bridesmaids in their truly awful dresses. And in spite of her frustration, you can understand Toula's love for her Greek clan.

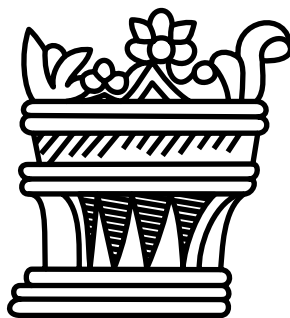
Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

What is the history of our family? Where did we come from? Are there things we do, or foods we eat, because of our background?

How many ethnic groups can you name that are represented in your school?

What did you think about Toula's father and the way he tried to control the lives of his family? Why do you think he acted that way?

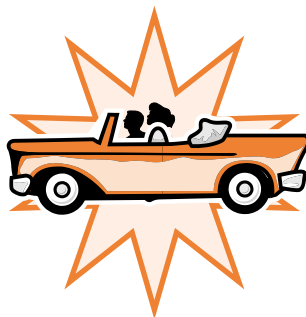


Riding in Cars with Boys

- PG-13
- 132 minutes
- Probably not for children under age 11, better for those 14 and over.

The story starts in the 1960s. Beverly (Drew Barrymore) is a 15 year old in a family in which the parents, while loving, simply don't spend a lot of time preparing their daughter for adolescence and romance. One night in a car with Ray and she becomes pregnant. At the wedding party her father thanks the guests for coming "under the circumstances." Ray is sweet and loving, but not very bright and overly dependent on chemical substances. When the baby is born, Beverly's father tells him: "Your mother is 15. Your father is an idiot." Beverly is bright and keeps struggling for enough education to get her out of the trap she is in.

At one point, with her son Jason wearing on her nerves, she tells her best friend that, while she loves him, there are times when she would like to be free of the responsibility he brings. "Good people don't think like that," Beverly says. Jason, under stress, tells her "You're supposed to be the mother and I'm supposed to be the kid." At the end of the movie Jason is 20 and Beverly has written a book about her life: *Riding in Cars with Boys*. She still is the center of her emotional universe, but mature enough to send Jason off to the love of his life. The story is one about real people – not all good and not all bad, who react to what life brings them in realistic ways.



Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

What might Beverly's parents have said to her that might have made a difference in her life when she was younger?

Do you think her parents thought it was important for her to be smart and good at writing?

What did you think about the way people acted at her wedding?

Is teenage pregnancy such a shameful issue today? Do you think that getting married because of a pregnancy is a good thing?

Do you think parents might sometimes feel overwhelmed by having to take care of a child? Or more than one child? What do you think a mother or father might do about this feeling?

Sweet Home Alabama



- PG-13 (Profanity, drunken behavior)
- 103 minutes
- OK for children 10 and over

This comedy, starring Reese Witherspoon, is the kind of movie that will play on TV for the next several years. It tells the story of Melanie, a New York fashion designer who is just beginning to make herself known. She has a rich and handsome boyfriend (rich enough to rent Tiffany's for his marriage proposal) who happens to be the son of the woman mayor of New York City, played to the hilt by Candice Bergen. The problem is that Melanie, who has passed herself off as one of the Alabama plantation-owning Carmichaels, is really a good old girl from Pigeon Creek Alabama, and still married to the childhood sweetheart she left behind. She goes home to get the divorce papers signed, complications pile up, her real identity is revealed, and at the end she has to choose: New York or Alabama. Since this is a formula movie, you know how it turns out. Most of the characters are stereotypes. New Yorkers are snooty and power-mad. The old plantation home has a crazy grandfather who is still shelling the Yankees from the family back yard.

(Warning: There is a scene at the Pigeon Creek Roadhouse in which Melanie gets drunk and spiteful.)

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

What did you think about the scene in the bar, where Melanie got drunk and started insulting her friends?

If you had to choose between Andrew from New York or Jake from Alabama, which one would you choose? Why?

The movie story implies that Melanie had to choose between her career and Jake. Do you think that would have to happen in real life?

Tuck Everlasting

- PG
- 90 Minutes
- Better for children ages 7 and up

This movie is based on a novel for Middle School students. The Tuck family drank from a spring at the base of a giant oak in the wood, and became frozen in time – never getting older than the age they were then. The parents have lived in the woods ever since, while their two sons Jesse and Miles go off to live in the cities, but come back to visit from time to time. The movie is set in the early 1900s. Winnie is the daughter of rich and socially strict parents, who is laced into a corset and into the social system with equal severity. In her first trip into the woods she stumbles onto Jesse and is taken to the Tuck homestead. Ordinarily they would have killed her to protect their secret, but Jesse falls in love with her and courts her. She then learns the family secret and must decide – drink from the spring and spend a long lifetime with Jesse, always teenagers, or stay behind and live out a normal life span. Angus Tuck, the father, gives her some perspective on immortality. Normal life is an ever-changing journey. Staying the same forever is like being a rock at the side of the stream of life. Their secret is discovered and the family put at risk, but in the end they escape with Winnie’s help while she stays behind, and grows up. The moral of the story is: “Do not fear death, but rather the un-lived life.” (The quality cast includes William Hurt, Sissy Spacek, Jonathan Jackson, Ben Kingsley and Alexis Bledel of “The Gilmore Girls.”)

Discussion:

What did you like about this movie?

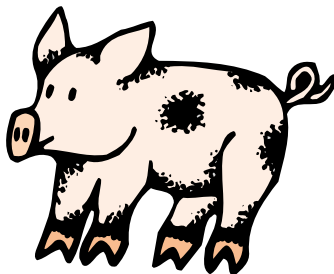
Do you think you would like to be immortal and stay your age forever?

Spirited Away

- PG
- 124 minutes
- Some children 7 –10 will enjoy this story. Those 10 and over will probably appreciate it more.

This beautifully animated story from Japan begins with a whiny young girl, Chihiro, and her parents, traveling to their new home. At first things will be familiar for U.S. viewers. The sulky child, a highway with exit signs like ours, a 4-wheel drive vehicle, a father who won't ask for directions. But the family becomes lost in what seems to them to be an abandoned theme park, and the parents, eating from an array of enchanted food, turn themselves into pigs. Literally. Chihiro finds herself in a strange world full of spirits and spells and winds up working as a cleaner in a bathhouse that operates only at night, when the creatures of darkness can come out. The creatures even include the disgustingly filthy spirit of the river, who comes in to bathe away the garbage that has been tossed into the water over the years (even tossing up a bicycle.)

To save her parents she has to escape back into the human world, which means being brave, working hard, and taking risks. At the end, going to a



new home and new school don't seem so scary any more. Even if you don't have a background in Japanese mythology, you will enjoy the movie for its imagination and wonderful animation.

Discussion:

What did you think about this movie?

What in the story reminded you of our own country?

What was unfamiliar?

What did you think about the spirit who runs the bathhouse?

How did you like her big, spoiled baby?

Were there other creatures that you liked? Didn't like?

Did Chihiro, being whiny about having to go to a new school, remind you of anyone we know?

The Rabbit-Proof Fence

- PG (Scenes of children being kidnapped)
- 95 minutes
- Ages 10 and up

The story is set in 1931 Australia, where the government had a policy of removing Aboriginal children of mixed race from their parents and raising them in special schools, believing them to be an inferior race that was dying out. They were required to speak only English, and trained to be servants or farm workers for White Australians. This policy only ended in 1970, and those children were known as "The Stolen Generation." The movie is based on the book written by the daughter of one such child. Molly is 14, her sister Daisy is 8, and their cousin Grace is 10 when the story begins. They live with their families at an outpost on the Rabbit-Proof Fence, and their fathers were white workers, now gone, who came to work on this national project to save farms and crops from swarming rabbits. (The Fence spans the entire length of Australia.) The authorities discover

the existence of these children and tear them away from their parents, taking them 1,200 miles away to a Native Settlement where they can be trained to forget their origins.

The children are homesick, and, like many others, attempt to escape. But, unlike the many others who are caught, they make their way for three months through forest, field and desert, seeking food and water where they can find it, and using the Fence to guide them. The story centers on Molly as she uses all her knowledge of the land, courage and intelligence to outwit their pursuers and encourage the others. Molly and Daisy make it home. At the end we are introduced to the real Molly and Daisy, still alive today.

Discussion:

What did you think about this movie?

Why did you think Mr. Neville was so anxious to take these children away from their parents?

How would you feel if you were one of those children?

Do you think this could happen in our own country? (One good internet site can be found by searching for “Native American Education: Documents from the 19th Century, Duke University.” Some of the words quoted there remind one of Mr. Neville, the man in charge of Aboriginal children in Australia.)

The Majestic

- PG
- 143 Minutes
- For children 12 and older
- (This is a film with a current social theme, not an “action” picture.)

The story takes place in 1951. Peter, (Jim Carrey), a shallow Hollywood screenwriter, has been accused by the House Un-American Activities Committee of being a Communist, and his girl-friend drops him like a hot

potato. Upset, he gets into his car and drives up the California coast, only to be swept off a bridge by a flooding river. He winds up on a beach, with no memory of who or what he is. The small town nearby, which lost 62 young men in World War II, takes him in and Harry Trimble, the proprietor of the now-closed Majestic Theater, thinks this is his son Luke, who was reported killed and awarded the Medal of Honor. Most of the town reacts with enthusiasm, and Peter gradually fits into his “Luke” role, including Luke’s fiancé. The Majestic re-opens. However, he gradually recovers his memory, the FBI shows up with a subpoena and he has to appear before the Committee. His sole Communist connection was to attend one meeting of a group in order to pick up to a girl. Now he is being asked to “name” others and confess his shame. He has to decide if he will go along with the Committee’s charade or stand up for the American values of personal freedom, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Discussion:

What did you think about this movie?

Why do you think that Luke’s father was so sure this was Luke?

*What American rights were being violated by the House Committee?
Where can we find those rights?*

Why do you think more people didn’t stand up to the Committee?

Do we know anyone who was alive during that time and remembers what it was like?



Some Resources for Parents

In Print:

Among the many good books available in libraries and bookstores is one that uses the approach recommended in this booklet: *Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Sex and Character*, by Pepper Schwartz, PhD and Dominic Cappello: New York, Hyperion, 2000. There is an excellent chapter about talking about TV, music and movies.

Many faith communities do movie reviews in their membership publications.

On the WEB: Evaluating Films

The internet gives us both the best and the worst of the information universe. Here are some options to consider. Note that their criteria for suitability for children may vary. You still need to apply your own judgment.

The Internet Movie Data Base: <http://www.imdb.com>, lets you look up almost any film ever made by title, actor, subject, etc., and check ratings and reviews. It will not give you direct recommendations about viewer age. (For instance, if you wanted to view a film on a child with Tourette's Syndrome, you could type Tourette's into the search field, get four choices, and wind up with "The Tic Code," rated R for language, but still good on surviving with a handicap.)

The New York Times Family Movie Guide:

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/parents/movieguide/index.html>

Free registration required

This site recommends appropriate viewing ages and links to the regular reviews.

continued on next page

The Movie Mom

<http://www.moviemom.com>

Gives help in deciding about content, issues and values.

Kids-in-mind

<http://www.kids-in-mind.com>

Gives reviews and points out details of sexual behavior, violence and profanity and states the central message. *Beware annoying ads.*

The National Institute for Media and the Family

<http://www.mediaandthefamily.org>

Has “Kidscore” for evaluating films. They are very careful and conservative about their recommendations.

On the WEB: Background for parents and children

SIECUS

130 W 42nd St, Suite 350, New York NY 10036-7802, 212-819-9770

<http://www.siecus.org>

Has great print resources for parents and annotated bibliographies including one on *Sexuality Education in the Home*. Their site has many useful links.

Advocates for Youth

1025 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 200, Washington DC 20005, 202-347-5700

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>

Has good materials listed in their publications catalog, some free.

There is a booklet on *Talking about TV*.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

<http://www.kff.org>

A vast internet resource on health issues and links to:

Talking with Kids Campaign

<http://www.talkingwithkids.org>.