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## The Value of Parental Co-Viewing on Children and Families

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## Fun for the Whole Family: The Value of Parents and Children Watching Films Together

by Alison Work

When we think back to the early sixties, when movies were first becoming a popular form of home entertainment, we typically picture a family sitting around the television and experiencing a film together. Now it is common for parents to put on a movie for their child to watch while they focus on other tasks. In our modern, fast paced environment, with movies available to stream at all



times, the activity of watching a movie as a family has become increasingly rare. According to a study on family media habits by Douglas Gentile and David Walsh, "... 20% of 2- to 7-year-olds, 46% of 8- to 12-year olds, and 56% of teens have televisions in their bedrooms" (169), which results in a lack of parental monitoring of media. Consequently, films are not being utilized to their full potential. Films can

have a tremendous impact and provide numerous benefits not only to children, but also to families as a whole. With the aid of parental co-viewing and guidance, age appropriate films can be an effective way to facilitate communication within families, impart values, externalize and solve problems, and build a connection between parents and children.

The negative impact of media on children has been a widespread concern since the beginning of film itself. "Minds of children begin as unmarked slates, subsequently to be written upon by the movies" (Booker, xi). Children are exceptionally vulnerable, and their thoughts and behaviors can be molded by what they see on screen. According to Social Learning Theory, "children and adolescents learn by observing and imitating what they see on the screen, particularly when these behaviors seem realistic or are rewarded" (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein 761). Children tend to view their favorite movies repeatedly, so any values, positive or negative, may be reinforced and internalized.

Films can undoubtedly have a negative impact on children. Negative effects may include, but are not limited to, increased acts of violence, early sexual activity, and substance abuse (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein 758). If children frequently observe violence in films, they are likely to imitate these behaviors and act more aggressively among their peers (Witt 322-324). Similarly, if drinking or smoking are rewarded or made to seem attractive on screen,

children and adolescents may emulate these behaviors.

Stereotypical views on race or gender roles may be present in films as well, which children are then likely to perpetuate (Witt 322-324). Men are often rendered as dominant, powerful, and competitive, while women are passive, quiet, and sensitive. Additionally, women in film are frequently rewarded for being attractive, thin, and delicate. These portrayals can generate unrealistic standards and negatively impact a child's body image and self-esteem.

Although the harmful potential of movies is undoubtedly a concern, negativity bias is important to keep in mind. Negativity bias results in undesirable movie characteristics being more noticeable and powerful to viewers than positive characteristics. For example, violent or sexual scenes are typically more intense, causing viewers to perceive them as occurring frequently. In reality, positive themes or events, though usually softer and less intense, occur more often (Rufer 5). In a large meta-analysis of television viewing, performed by Marie-Louise Mares and Emory Woodard in 2005, results indicated that positive influences of film are just as powerful, if not more powerful, than any harmful influences. Children are more likely to be rewarded when they demonstrate prosocial or selfless behaviors, therefore, they are more likely to imitate prosocial behavior they see on screen (Rufer 5).

Parental co-viewing and guidance through a film is important to heighten the positive influences and mitigate any harmful effects (Gentile & Walsh 160). According to a study by Douglas Gentile and David Walsh, "[co-viewing] may provide an opportunity for parents to filter the values shown by different media, reinforcing some and rejecting others, and by teaching children to be educated media consumers" (160). By observing and talking about a film with their child rather than using it as a way to keep their kids occupied for a few hours, parents can utilize films to positively impact their child's development. Additionally, with the support of co-viewing, films can be a valuable tool to alleviate family troubles and improve familial relationships.

First and foremost, films have the ability to strengthen communication within families. They can provide an opportunity to jumpstart and facilitate difficult conversations. Narratives allude to a wide variety of challenging or controversial topics, including death and grieving, mental health, sexuality, race, gender roles, and nonconforming family representations. If a parent is unsure of how to bring up or discuss a certain topic or issue with their child, they can choose an age appropriate movie that depicts a similar situation.

Death, for example, is a topic that is commonly avoided by parents. Their own fear of death is typically the foundation for this barrier, which may have been caused by the way their own parents spoke to them about it. If parents don't effectively discuss death with their child, it could lead to an endless cycle of defective communication (Cox, Garrett, & Graham 279). Most children don't

understand the inevitability of death before the age of five. When they do recognize the concept of death, they often believe it happens solely to adults. By observing the way characters' experience and react to death, movies can help guide this conversation between parents and children. As Cox, Garret, & Graham suggest, "parents can watch Disney films with their children and verbally walk them through a death scene, deconstructing aspects that may be unrealistic and clarifying points that are exaggerated or confusing" (279).

An example of this dynamic can be seen in Walt Disney Animation Studio's *Big Hero 6* (2014), directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams. *Big Hero 6* begins by illustrating the strong relationship between Hiro Hamada and his older brother Tadashi. Early on in the film, Tadashi is killed in a fire, and Hiro becomes reasonably depressed. He ends up unintentionally activating Tadashi's robot,



*Hiro fondly remembering Tadashi in Big Hero 6.*

Baymax, who attempts to heal and comfort Hiro. Baymax ultimately symbolizes the spirit of Tadashi, becoming one of Hiro's closest friends and helping him to overcome his grief. This film brings up a number of different talking points about death. For one, Hiro demonstrates standard grieving emotions – overwhelming sadness, anger, self-blame, etc. The film shows children that it is normal and appropriate to express these emotions. Hiro is later able to accept his brother's death and find happiness again, which shows that the feelings of sadness, anger, and guilt are not

permanent sensations and will fade with time. Secondly, that fact that Tadashi is a young and likable character teaches children that death is not solely the fate of elders or "villains" as depicted in many movies. This is an important fact of life that children must understand. Finally, the bond between Hiro and Baymax shows that loved ones will remain present in some way or another, even after death. Tadashi's death was permanent, but through his creation of Baymax, his spirit stayed with Hiro.

Discussions about movies in general can help parents to connect with their child. Parents often have a difficult time finding common ground with their young children, and especially with adolescents. "Discussions about movies – as opposed to asking yes or no questions, or "how was school today?" – are more likely to fulfill this fundamental need" (Rufer 16). Teenagers are at a stage in which they look elsewhere for direction on how to behave, as opposed to looking towards their family; therefore, they learn a lot from the movies. Teenagers tend to be more comfortable talking to their parents about characters in movies rather than their own personal lives. Studies show that adolescents are less likely to

engage in sexual activity if they discuss what they see in the media with their parents (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein 761).

If family members are already dealing with a certain issue, movies can be used as a coping mechanism. The therapeutic benefits of films are powerful, and are often used as a tool by family therapists. A term known as *narrative transportation* is defined as “becoming engaged or ‘lost’ in a movie [which] generally results in a favorable review of that film experience” (Rufer 10). In other words, it means to immerse oneself into the story, or to identify strongly with one of the characters. As Michael Brody explains, “Children may identify with the media’s stars. Those who may feel slow and awkward talk endlessly about Gilligan. Those who are angry and frustrated, Donald Duck” (357).

*Cinematherapy*, or “the use of film as an intervention” (Dermer & Hutchings 163), is a therapeutic technique of viewing movies. This approach can be used to evaluate and solve certain difficulties that arise within families. Cinematherapy involves “using films to facilitate self-understanding, introduce options for action plans, and to seed future therapeutic interventions” (Dermer & Hutchings 163). By viewing a movie that presents the same issue a family or child is dealing with, problems can be externalized and dealt with at a safe distance. Shannon Dermer and Jennifer Hutchings stress that viewers maintain a proper distance from a film. Under distancing leads to an inability to objectively look at the problem at hand, while over distancing results in the viewer not being impacted or influenced by the film at all (165).

Furthermore, movies have a profound way of helping children and adolescents to become more empathetic. *Neurocinematics* is defined as “research



Patrick Renna as  
Hamilton “Ham” Porter  
in *The Sandlot*.

integrating cognitive neuroscience with the study of movies” (Rufer 12). Studies in neurocinematics have shown that mirror neurons in the viewer’s brain fire in the same areas as the character performing an action on screen. According to Linda Jones Rufer, MD, “while observing... a baseball pitcher, the observer’s motor cortex lights up in the area of the neurons coding for the arm’s motor function” (12), resulting in a deeper experience of the narrative. Consequently, when a character develops and grows after undergoing some sort of difficult situation or tragedy, a viewer can similarly benefit (Rufer 12).

Empathy is defined as “identifying and understanding others’ mental or subjective states” (Rufer 10). By experiencing what the characters’ experience, a viewer puts him or herself into the character’s shoes and is able to recognize a different point of

view. This connection with the character allows viewers to connect with diverse groups of people – people the viewer may not usually connect with in real life (Rufer 10).

Lastly, films often contain themes that correspond with the values parents want to instill in their children. By viewing the movie with their children, these values can be reinforced. For example, the term *elevation* is defined as “as an uplifting emotion that people feel when they observe a person helping another person ... in turn, the observer feels the motivation to do good themselves” (Rufer 5). Cinematic elevation signifies a movie’s ability to generate this uplifting emotion, while cinematic admiration signifies a movie’s ability to generate a feeling of motivation and need for self-improvement (Rufer 6). When a viewer admires certain traits of a character on screen, they often feel inspired to acquire these traits as well.

Parents will not always agree with certain themes or ideas presented in movies. Once again, it is important that parents act as mediators while viewing the movie with their children. Parents can then reinforce certain themes they agree with and discuss themes they do not agree with. In discussing controversial themes, parents can present various alternatives to the particular issue. For example, parents can use questions such as “how would the story be different if...” or “why do you think it was wrong for the character to act that way?” (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund 355).

So, what exactly qualifies as a “family friendly” or “age appropriate” film? A child’s understanding of a film may differ depending on his or her cognitive capacity (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein 761). According to Nell Minow, “... age based development matters above all else, even intelligence, in a child’s comprehension of the messages of movies and television” (31). Even if a three-year-old child is very intelligent compared to her peers, it does not mean she’s ready to watch a movie for ages five and up.

The younger the child, the more difficulty he or she has in distinguishing fantasy from reality, and the more likely he or she is to mimic the characters’ behaviors. Furthermore, children have difficulty following fast paced action and quick cuts, thereby hindering their understanding of the narrative and central themes of the film. In one study, a clip of aggressive media content was shown to a group of kindergarteners, second, fifth, and eighth graders. After being asked to describe their understanding of the clip, eighth graders were able to note the motives of the characters and the consequences of their actions. Kindergarteners only recounted the aggressive actions, without any mention of motives or consequences (Minow 32). “With underdeveloped ability to see the relevant painful consequences or reasoned motives, children get a distorted impression of what actions mean in the real world,” (Minow 32). Children have a very limited knowledge of the world on which they must draw from in order to comprehend

the narrative of a film. Due to this inexperience, children are more prone to an inaccurate understanding of the film (Minow 32).

The Motion Picture Association of America evaluates the language, violence, sex, and drug use within a film and uses these portrayals as a basis for their rating system (Rufer 17). G rated movies are appropriate for all ages. These movies, however, are not necessarily “kid’s movies.” All the G rating means is that profanity, nudity, sex, and drug use are absent from the film, and violence is minimal. PG rated movies may contain some material that could be inappropriate for young children. This may include profanity or some depictions of violence. PG-13 movies contain material that may be inappropriate for children under thirteen. These movies may contain harsher profanity use, more intense depictions of violence (although not very realistic or extreme), or adult activities. Brief, but non-sexually oriented nudity may be included. R rated movies are considered inappropriate for children and adolescents under the age of seventeen. They may contain persistent violence, hard language, drug abuse, adult activities, and nudity (Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.). It is important to note that these ratings are only to be used as a guide. Since they are formulaic and do not take into account situational aspects of a film, they do not necessarily determine whether a film is age appropriate or not.

A parent should be aware of the plot developments in a film and consider how it may affect their child before showing it. For example, when the parents get back together at the end of *The Parent Trap* (1998), children who are dealing with a divorce in their own families may be upset by it, or may be given a false sense of hope. Another example is *Cinderella* (1950). If a child is dealing with a divorce, he or she may be frightened by the evil stepmother and believe that all step mothers and step siblings are evil (Minow 7).

Additionally, if a movie contains adult situations such as sex or alcohol use, parents should be aware of how these elements are being portrayed. There is a difference between drinking alcohol with family and a character reaching for a drink when he or she is stressed. The consequences the characters’ have to deal with should be noted as well. If they have casual or unprotected sex, do they face any consequences or do they go on with their lives as if the action was insignificant? Parents should strongly consider how their child may react, and either choose to forgo the film or figure out a way to mediate it and turn it into a lesson (Minow 8).

Pixar Animation Studio’s *Finding Nemo* (2003) demonstrates numerous ways in which it may have a positive impact on a family. *Finding Nemo* introduces two clownfish, Marlin and his son Nemo. Marlin is an anxiety-ridden father, distraught by the death of his wife and constantly worried about Nemo’s safety – Nemo’s underdeveloped fin leaves him unable to swim as well as the others. Nemo attempts to rebel against his dad by swimming to a hazardous area

of the ocean, and is consequently captured by scuba divers. Marlin sets off to rescue his son and is soon joined by a fish named Dory, who suffers from short-term memory loss. Marlin and Nemo are reunited at the conclusion of the film, and Dory is welcomed as part of their family.

To begin, each character in *Finding Nemo* is extraordinarily diverse in regards to appearance, personality, and mannerisms (Millett), yet all of the



*Nemo heads to school in Finding Nemo.*

characters accept one another for who they are. This is beneficial for parents to point out to their children. Likewise, Nemo, Dory, and Marlin, though all acquiring some sort of disability, are presented as strong, resilient, and just as adequate as the other characters. Nemo's small fin

does not hold him back in finding his father; his

intelligence and courageousness rise above. In the end, Nemo's fin essentially helps him by serving as a unique marking and making him more identifiable to those who are searching for him. Dory's memory loss, while presenting various challenges throughout the film, does not limit her ability to help Marlin find his son. Her strengths of being able to read English, communicate with whales, and instinctively know what to do to overpower any hindrance that her short-term memory loss causes. Marlin lives a life of anxiety, scared of anything and everything. He is able to overcome his fears and mental roadblocks by the immense love he has for his son, and by simply asking for help along the way (Millett).

Many parents can relate to Marlin's overprotective nature, while many children can relate to Nemo's feeling of anger and rebellion towards his father. This situation can bring up a talking point between parents and children, especially if they are dealing with the same issue. The consequences of Marlin and Nemo's actions can be discussed. For example, how were Marlin and Nemo affected by Marlin's overprotection and Nemo's act of rebellion? What could the characters have done differently to prevent these negative events from occurring?

Death is acknowledged in the beginning of the film when Marlin's wife is killed by a barracuda. This can help guide a discussion between a parent and child on the reality of death, and how it can happen unexpectedly. Although it was difficult for Marlin, he eventually was able to overcome his heartache and grow from the tragedy.

Finally, although not traditionally related, Dory is still considered to be

part of the family by the end of the film due to the strength of her friendship with Marlin. Children with atypical family representations may find this comforting or relatable. By viewing this film at a safe distance, children and parents who are experiencing some of the same problems in real life can empathize or relate to the characters and externalize some of their own frustrations.

Watching movies as a family can be tremendously beneficial. “Family Friendly”, or age appropriate films have the power to positively impact a child’s development and effectively strengthen family relationships. It is crucial to note, however, that parental guidance and co-viewing of films is necessary in order to bring out the advantageous aspects of film and diminish any potential harm. No one is immune to the negative effects of media, just as everyone is capable of being influenced by the positive effects. Movies are often the first experience of the world that children have outside of their family. “Movies have characters confront moral dilemmas, evaluate risk, establish priorities, adapt to change, learn important lessons, overcome loss and fear, grapple with responsibility, face consequences, solve problems, find redemption, and in doing so, they teach your child how to do those things as well” (Minow, 28). By using films to their advantage, parents can connect with their children, impart certain morals and values they feel are important, help them to overcome their problems, and encourage them to “just keep swimming”.

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