

Teaching with Movies: A Guide for Parents and Educators

Developed by The F.I.L.M. Project

A Partnership of Heartland Truly Moving Pictures
and the National Collaboration for Youth



**NATIONAL
COLLABORATION
FOR YOUTH**
An Affinity Group of the
National Human Services Assembly



F.I.L.M.
Finding Inspiration in Literature & Movies

Introduction



Today's youth experience a media-saturated world, from television to movies, the Internet, music, magazines, video games and more. Technological advances in the digital realm have broadened access to programs from a variety of platforms, allowing youth to multitask with their media.

According to statistics from the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2005), youth ages 8-18 spend approximately 6.5 hours each day using media, an activity that far surpasses the time they spend with parents, doing homework or playing sports (p. 6). While television is the most popular media choice, averaging 3 hours 51 minutes a day, other media forms also play an important role. Youth in the age group daily spend approximately 1 hour 44 minutes listening to music, just over an hour using the computer, 49 minutes playing video games, 43 minutes reading and 25 minutes watching movies (Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2005). For movies, that equals 9,125 minutes or 152 hours per year!

This heavy media intake for a typical American kid may sound alarming, particularly when themes of sex and violence can be so common in media. However, quality media programs, particularly, quality movies, have the opportunity to provide youth with positive learning experiences. While countless movies incorporate positive themes, youth need guidance in selecting what to watch and making sense of the messages being conveyed. This guide will help you do that as well as provide an understanding of how youth can learn positive values, behavior and decision-making abilities from movies, whether they are in classroom or informal settings such as after-school programs or at home.

The F.I.L.M. Project (Finding Inspiration in Literature & Movies) has been crafting free activity and discussion guides around selected books and movies for several years to offer parents and leaders of youth a fun and insightful learning experience from watching a movie. This guide takes F.I.L.M. curriculum to a whole new level in offering the know-how to select movies with redeeming messages, and develop meaningful lessons and discussions for use with your group of youth. With this guide, the concept of F.I.L.M. is broadened to a greater breadth of movies, offering you a greater choice of movies and flexibility of lessons.

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MODULE ONE: Understanding the Influence of Movies on Youth



In this module you will be reminded of the powerful impact that movies can have on youth. You will also learn that **youth do not respond passively to media, but rather observe and retain messages that are conveyed over time.** Moreover, youth of different ages have distinct preferences and aspire to watch movies with higher ratings than may be deemed appropriate for their age. Therefore, it is important that adults help youth make sense of the messages they hear and see on screen.

Sections in this module include:

- 1: Movies as Storytellers
- 2: How Youth Learn From the Media
- 3: What Youth Want to Watch
- 4: Making Sense of Media Messages

MODULE ONE

Section 1: Movies as Storytellers



Movies are truly modern-day storytelling instruments. They have the power to reach massive audiences, which is why they should, and do, matter so much to society. Whether they are stories of afar or just everyday existence, good movies are a way for people, particularly youth, to understand and relate to the world in constructive ways.

Countless films generate buzz and top dollars at the box office due to dashing special effects, comic relief or sensational action sequences. However, the movies that have a lasting impact are often those that also make us think in a new way or expose us to a meaningful story, more so than merely entertain.

Movie Memories Exercise

Can you recall movies that you watched during your childhood or adolescence that touched your life in a meaningful way? You may have memories of seeing the movie for the first time, memories from the actual day or remember certain lines that have stuck with you over the years. List some movies that either exposed you to a new way of thinking or had plots and/or characters that you learned from:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why did each of these movies have an impact on my life?
2. Did I relate specifically to any of the characters in these movies? How so?
3. Did I have the opportunity to converse with family members, teachers or friends about these movies? If so, what did these conversations provide for me?
4. Were any of these movies based on books?
5. If I were to see, or have seen, any of these movies again as an adult, would/did they have the same effect?

These questions generate thinking and self-reflection, demonstrating the importance of delving below the surface of movies for important lessons. From recalling this type of information, you'll probably be surprised at how much these movies impacted you. Hopefully this demonstrates to you the influence movies can have on young people, and the importance of having those movies leave a positive lasting impression.

MODULE ONE

Section 2: How Youth Learn From the Media



As described in the introduction to this guide, youth spend an average of 6.5 hours each day with media. Therefore, it is important for adults to understand how youth process the messages being conveyed by the media.

Research has demonstrated that the media plays a significant role in the socialization of youth. Socialization refers to learning one's culture and how to live within it. Social cognitive theory of mass communication addresses concerns about the effects of increased viewership on human behavior (Bandura, 2002). Media content consumed by children is likely to shape their perceptions of the real world and the people operating within it.

Because people are exposed to television continuously throughout their lifetimes, they begin to experience overarching patterns, despite individual variety within programs. These patterns become normalized over time and affect children from a young age as they are exposed to television and other forms of media, such as movies.

The effects of the media on children can be profound, often establishing gender and racial stereotypes. For example, constant exposure to men with major roles may lead youth to believe that men are dominant in society. The prevalence of the way women are portrayed, be it physical or emotional, may lead youth to believe this is how females are to be. A lack of minority characters with lead roles in movies and television may reinforce white-centric sentiments. Instead of observing the actual diversity of life with regard to gender, race, culture, attitudes, etc., youth can be exposed to repetitive homogenous patterns in the media.

With the beginning of adolescence, youth begin to develop abstract thinking capabilities. As a result, they become more in-tune with social norms and more concerned with discovering an identity acceptable among their peers. Depictions in the media come to serve as learning guides through which social norms are internalized (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Therefore, it is critically important for parents, teachers and other adults working closely with young people to understand that youth do not passively experience media. Furthermore, adults can play a vital role in structuring activities and discussions around movies that contain thought-provoking material, particularly those films that go against certain Hollywood stereotypes. It is important that youth are able to find and assert an identity apart from negative or stereotypical media influence.

MODULE ONE

Section 3: What Youth Want to Watch



In addition to understanding how youth make sense of movies and other media forms, it is also important for adults to know what youth look for when they select what to watch. Youth will not enjoy a boring, slow-paced movie that lacks humor or action. The movies they choose will challenge their way of thinking because they are in the process of constructing their identity. They will often select movies that have characters that they can either identify with (age, race, gender, interests, etc.) or aspire to be like.

Research has revealed that preferences also change with age. In an investigation of how youth define the programs they watch, Davies, Buckingham and Kelley (2004) found that youth under the age of 10 are more likely to willingly accept the authority of their parents in the media selection process. Pre-school children in particular tend to watch programs specifically designed for their age range. However, around the age of 10, on the brink of adolescence, youth begin to aspire to a slightly older teen lifestyle. This is reflected in their selection of programs and movies to watch. Davies et al. (2004) conducted group interviews with older youth and found that “coolness” was associated with watching particular shows. This aspiration in the choice of media can be problematic for youth who may watch television shows and movies that depict older teens engaging in risky behaviors with no consequences because it’s “cool”.

A Kaiser Family Foundation Report (Federman, 2002) explained the “forbidden fruit effect” of the Motion Picture Association of America’s (MPAA) rating system, which may attract the audiences the ratings are hoping to deter. In a study where youth were told to select programs or movies that were randomly assigned ratings, youth ages 10-14 were especially attracted to PG-13 and R ratings and deterred from G ratings (Federman, 2002, p. 2). This finding substantiates the aspirational effect that Davis et al. described, and leads further to the need for adults to be involved in the selection process and the deciphering of the messages of what the youth see, age appropriate or not.

MODULE ONE

Section 4: Making Sense of Media Messages



Because youth do not respond passively to media, over time, messages from the media contribute to their overall social development. Moreover, youth select movies with specific attributes, namely due to their humor, excitement and ability to identify with characters. So, what role do parents and educators play in this selection process?

Beyond controlling the remote or putting limits on movies according to their ratings, adults can help youth make sense of what they are seeing, and at what age they should see it. Valuable educational lessons and developmental topics can be derived from movies with the help of parents and/or educators. Many media researchers have pointed to dialogue and social interactions as important components of making sense of messages in the media. David Buckingham (1996) explains that identity “is not something that is simply fixed or given: on the contrary, it is largely constructed through dialogue” (p. 58). Therefore, dialogue provides an opportunity for youth and adults to engage in constructive analysis of media images and messages.

Movies are engaging due to the visual and audio stimulation they provide. Regardless of who you are in relation to youth, you can enhance their viewing experience. While youth, especially those in middle school, may not be excited by academics, they are excited by their social lives and popular culture. Parents and educators must find a way to involve youth’s interests and value their voices. Furthermore, youth learn in different fashions, with movies giving visual learners an opportunity to thrive.

Some examples of using movies as teaching tools are as follows:

- Parents can lead their children in discussions and activities after viewing a movie together.
- English teachers can select a movie based on a piece of literature, using segments of the movie to engage their youth in conjunction with the book.
- Social studies teachers can find a movie that covers a historical period they are teaching.
- Out-of-school youth workers can use movies to teach important character education skills such as leadership, setting goals and becoming advocates for a particular cause.

As youth on average watch 25 minutes of movies per day, why not make this an enjoyable learning opportunity? It’s an opportunity to make so much more of it with learning and dialog than to be merely passing time with it.

MODULE TWO: Selecting Movies with Learning Potential



Youth enjoy movies with particular attributes, namely comedy and action. In addition, older youth will begin to select movies that are targeted to audiences slightly older than themselves, aspiring to be like the teenage characters. While youth should have some say in their selection of movies, it is important that adults provide some guidance and structure to avoid films devoid of positive messages.

Sections in this module include:

- 1: Movie Ratings
- 2: Movie Genres
- 3: Resources for Finding Quality Movies

MODULE TWO

Section 1: Movie Ratings



Parents and youth facilitators can find a balance between entertainment and appropriateness in their selection of movies to use as teaching tools. Research has proven that youth often strive for the “forbidden fruit” in their movie viewing. However, it is the adult’s job to show that even movies with lower MPAA ratings can be both educational and entertaining.

For the purpose of using movies to teach in a formal setting such as a school classroom or after-school center, it is especially important that educators and facilitators select movies that have ratings appropriate for their target audience. While movies rated G and PG will typically be met by little resistance, PG-13 may only be appropriate for late middle-school and high-school youth. Because the movie industry is a profit-driven business, producers will often try to get a lower rating to appeal to a broader audience. For example, be wary of adult content, in PG-13 movies that were edited to avoid the more restrictive R rating. Below is a breakdown of movies by rating to provide you with more information to help you make informed choices:

What Do the Ratings Mean?

G A G-rated motion picture contains nothing in theme, language, nudity, sex, violence or other matters that, in the view of the Rating Board, would offend parents whose younger children view the motion picture. The G rating is not a certificate of approval, nor does it signify a children’s motion picture. Some snippets of language may go beyond polite conversation but they are common, everyday expressions. No stronger words are present in G-rated motion pictures. Depictions of violence are minimal. No nudity, sex scenes or drug use are present in these motion pictures.

PG Parents should investigate a PG-rated motion picture before allowing younger children to view it. The PG rating indicates, in the view of the Rating Board, that parents may consider some material unsuitable for their children, and parents should make that decision.

The more mature themes in some PG-rated motion pictures may call for parental guidance. There may be some profanity and some depictions of violence or brief nudity. But these elements are not deemed so intense as to require that parents be strongly cautioned beyond the suggestion of parental guidance. There is no drug use content in a PG-rated motion picture.

PG-13 A PG-13 rating is a sterner warning by the Rating Board to parents to determine whether their children under age 13 should view the motion picture, as some material might not be suited for them. A PG-13 motion picture may go beyond the PG rating in theme, violence, nudity, sensuality, language, adult activities or other elements, but does not reach the restricted R category. The theme of the motion picture by itself will not result in a rating greater than PG-13, although depictions of activities related to a mature theme may result in a restricted rating for the motion picture. Any drug use will initially require at least a PG-13 rating. More than brief nudity will require at least a PG-13 rating, but such nudity in a PG-13-rated motion picture generally will not be sexually oriented. There may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, but generally not both realistic and extreme or persistent violence. A motion picture’s single use of one of the harsher sexually derived words, though only as an expletive, initially requires at least a PG-13 rating. More than one such expletive requires an R rating, as does even one of those words used in a sexual context. The Rating Board nevertheless may rate such a motion picture PG-13 if, based on a special vote by a two-thirds majority, the Raters feel that most American parents would believe that a PG-13 rating

MODULE TWO

Section 1: Movie Ratings (continued)



is appropriate because of the context or manner in which the words are used or because the use of those words in the motion picture is inconspicuous.

R An R-rated motion picture, in the view of the Rating Board, contains some adult material. An R-rated motion picture may include adult themes, adult activity, hard language, intense or persistent violence, sexually oriented nudity, drug abuse or other elements, so parents are counseled to take this rating very seriously. Children under 17 are not allowed to attend R-rated motion pictures unaccompanied by a parent or adult guardian. Parents are strongly urged to find out more about R-rated motion pictures in determining their suitability for their children. Generally, it is not appropriate for parents to bring young children with them to R-rated motion pictures.

NC-17 An NC-17-rated motion picture is one that, in the view of the Rating Board, most parents would consider patently too adult for children 17 and under. Therefore, no children will be admitted. NC-17 does not mean obscene or pornographic in the common or legal meaning of those words, and should not be construed as a negative judgment in any sense. The rating simply signals that the content is appropriate only for an adult audience. An NC-17 rating can be based on violence, sex, aberrational behavior, drug abuse or any other element that most parents would consider too strong and therefore off-limits for viewing by their children.

Information from www.mpa.org/FilmRat_Ratings.asp.

For more information on MPAA ratings and to check the rating of a particular movie, visit www.mpa.org/FilmRatings.asp.

MODULE TWO

Section 2: Movie Genres



In addition to understanding the ratings system, it is also a good idea to recognize the various movie genres that are most dominant. While the categories below are not mutually exclusive (many movies overlap with various genres), they will give you insight into which genres might be more appropriate for creating learning activities for youth.

Action (Disaster): Stories whose central struggle plays out mainly through a clash of physical forces.

Adventure: Stories whose central struggle plays out mainly through encounters with new “worlds.”

Comedy: Stories whose central struggle causes hilarious results.

Coming-of-Age Drama: Stories whose central struggle is about the hero finding his or her place in the world.

Crime: Stories whose central struggle is about catching a criminal.

Detective Story/Courtroom Drama: Stories whose central struggle is to find out what really happened to expose the truth.

Epic/Myth: Stories whose central struggle plays out in the midst of a clash of great forces or in the sweep of great historical change.

Fantasy: Stories that are animated, or whose central struggle plays out in two worlds — the “real” world and an imaginary world.

Gangster: Stories whose central struggle is between a criminal and society.

Horror: Stories whose central struggle focuses on escaping from and eventually defeating a monster (either human or non-human).

Love (Romance): Stories whose central struggle is between two people who each want to win or keep the love of the other.

Science Fiction: Stories whose central struggle is generated from the technology and tools of a scientifically imaginable world.

Social Drama: Stories whose central struggle is between a champion and a problem or injustice in society. Usually the champion has a personal stake in the outcome of the struggle.

Thriller: Stories whose central struggle pits an innocent hero against a lethal enemy who is out to kill him or her.

Information from www.createyourscreenplay.com/genrechart.htm.

MODULE TWO

Section 2: Movie Genres (continued)



While a movie appropriate for youth under the age of 17 (rated PG-13 or below) could potentially fit into any of the preceding genres, it is important to examine movies for their teaching potential. As a general rule of thumb, you should assess movies for their “teachable” content versus pure entertainment content. When entertainment outweighs the educational components, it can most likely be eliminated from the list. Of the genres previously listed, movies with positive themes will likely emerge from the following categories:

- Adventure
- Coming-of-Age
- Fantasy
- Science Fiction
- Social Drama
- Detective
- Epic/Myth

MODULE TWO

Section 3: Resources for Finding Quality Movies



Asking young people what they are interested in seeing is one way to compile a list of potential movies. Immersed in popular culture and media, young people are your best option for learning about the upcoming movies released on DVD or in theaters.

If you are especially interested in learning about upcoming movies as opposed to older, classic films, check out www.moviefone.com/coming-soon.

While the top-grossing box office movies may not necessarily represent quality storytelling, they are a decent starting point. Find lists (adjusted for inflation) of the top all-time grossing U.S. movies at www.filmsite.org/boxoffice.html.

In addition to looking at ratings and genres, the following are online resources that can help you find teachable movies for your target age group.

- Heartland Truly Moving Pictures: It's entire mission is built upon honoring films that explore the human journey, have uplifting messages and positive values. Films that are awarded the Truly Moving Picture Award are aligned with the organization's mission. On the website you can access their movie lists, which can be filtered according to certain criteria. Visit www.trulymovingpictures.org/the-list.aspx. By clicking on a title, you will receive information pertaining to the rating, genre, actors and production in addition to a short synopsis and a few talking points. Many of these movies also have downloadable discussion guides that you can use or reference. While not all Truly Moving Pictures are appropriate for youth, it can be a good starting place for narrowing the field.
- Finding Inspiration in Literature & Movies: F.I.L.M. creates youth development curricula around movies based primarily on books. On the Heartland Truly Moving Pictures movie list you can filter movies according to F.I.L.M. project selections; or visit the F.I.L.M. project website, www.youthFILMproject.org. There you will find a list of movies for kids, the majority of which have received the Truly Moving Picture Award and are based on books. The educator's curricula can be downloaded for free, too.

Movie Reviews and Parent-Monitored Websites

A number of parent-led websites provide detailed information pertaining to the appropriateness of movies for young people. Some of these also include reviews and synopses of movies. Check out the following websites:

- kids-in-mind.com - Objective analysis of movie content along a 10-point scale for sex/nudity, violence/gore and profanity. They compare their ratings to the food labeling system, allowing for parents and educators to make their own decisions based on what they see. The analyses do not critique for what is good or bad. On the website you can search for movies alphabetically or view lists by their ratings. By clicking on a title, you will receive a synopsis, discussion topics and detailed information pertaining to any objectionable material.

MODULE TWO

Section 3: Resources for Finding Quality Movies (continued)



- www.common sense media.org - Commonsense Media is dedicated to improving the media and entertainment lives of kids and families. On their website you can search for over 3,000 movie reviews alphabetically or by target age. In addition to noting any negative content, they also include positive aspects such as role models and messages, and pointers for topics families can talk about after viewing. They also categorize movies by in theaters and on DVD.
- www.imdb.com - The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) is a searchable database of nearly every movie. Special features include browsing the weekly top-grossing movies or top user-rated films by genre. By clicking on a title, you can receive detailed information pertaining to actors, production, reviews, message boards and more.

Movies Based on Books

To improve literacy skills and reading enjoyment among youth, it is recommended that you try to select a movie that was based on a book. This gives incentive not only to watch, but also to read. Below are websites that will help you determine if a particular movie is associated with literature.

- www.mcpl.lib.mo.us/readers/movies - A feature of the Mid-Continent Public Library, Based on the Book is a compilation of more than 1,250 books, novels, short stories and plays that have been made into motion pictures since 1980. You can search by movie title, book title, release year or book author. While the website does not offer reviews or synopses, this is a good starting point for future research. This is a good place to search for classic books that were made into movies, particularly for a language arts teacher.
- www.bookreporter.com/features/books2movies.asp - The Book Report Network provides thoughtful book reviews, in-depth author profiles and interviews, excerpts of the new releases, literary games and contests, and more each week. On the Books to Movies section of their website, they provide synopses of upcoming releases of books made into movies either for theatrical or DVD release.
- www.teenreads.com/features/books2movies.asp or www.kidsreads.com/features/books2movies.asp Both websites provide information and features to kids and teens about their favorite authors, books, series and characters. These sections of their website take a look at the latest books that were made into movies, which include synopses and links to reviews.

MODULE THREE: Steps for Identifying Teachable Themes in Movies



Once you have selected a movie that is both appropriate for your target age group and contains a high quantity of material with learning potential, your next step is to identify the specific teachable themes in the movie. You will use these themes to drive discussion questions and develop activities.

Sections in this module include:

- 1: Audience and Needs
- 2: Watch and Take Notes

MODULE THREE

Section 1: Audience and Needs



Following are the steps you should take in determining the positive themes to teach your child, classroom or youth group.

1. Understand your audience

Once you have selected a movie with a rating and content appropriate for the age of your youth there are other considerations, such as other demographic areas of importance including racial and ethnic composition and gender distribution. Because research shows that youth want to watch movies with characters they can identify with or aspire to be like, it is important to look for movies with diversity in character representation, especially if you are working with a diverse group of boys and girls.

Unfortunately, Hollywood and other media outlets do not always represent the actual diversity of the U.S. on screen. Minorities are often given minor roles and girls/women are often depicted in a stereotypical fashion. Even if only a few minor characters in the movie you selected represent a minority racial or ethnic group, you should be prepared to “play them up” so youth recognize their significance to the story. This lack of on-screen diversity and stereotyping can further be used to trigger discussions around racial and gender equity.

2. Understanding needs and interests

In addition to basic demographical information, choose themes that will benefit or supplement the education of your youth in some fashion. Some questions you might ask yourself, depending on your role in their life, include:

Out-of-School Facilitator:

- What character or emotional skill sets do youth at this age need to develop?
- Do I already lead a workshop on a particular topic that can be bolstered by a movie?
- What are some shared interests of my group (sports, music, art, friendships, etc.)?

Teacher:

- Which of my lesson plans could use some added spark via a movie?
- What academic skills could a majority of my youth improve upon?
- What themes from the literature we are reading or will read can be enhanced by the visual representation of a movie?

Parent:

- What are my child’s current interests?
- What skills do I hope my child will gain in the coming year?
- What are my child’s problem areas at home or school?

Also consider the special circumstances of your youth or community. Is there a topic area that has not been covered in the classroom? Is there a bullying problem in your schools? Do students have an awareness of disabilities and certain illnesses that may affect their fellow peers? Is there a particular environmental or health-related topic that affects your community?

MODULE THREE

Section 1: Audience and Needs (continued)



Following is a list of positive assets that promote youth development from *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002), edited by Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman:

Personal and Social Assets That Facilitate Positive Youth Development:

Physical development

- Good health habits
- Good health risk management skills

Intellectual development

- Knowledge of essential life skills
- Knowledge of essential vocational skills
- School success
- Rational habits of mind—critical thinking and reasoning skills
- In-depth knowledge of more than one culture
- Good decision-making skills
- Knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts

Psychological and emotional development

- Good mental health including positive self-regard
- Good emotional self-regulation skills
- Good coping skills
- Good conflict resolution skills
- Mastery motivation and positive achievement motivation
- Confidence in one's personal efficacy
- "Planfulness"—planning for the future and future life events
- Sense of personal autonomy/responsibility for self
- Optimism coupled with realism
- Coherent and positive personal and social identity
- Prosocial and culturally sensitive values
- Spirituality or a sense of a larger purpose in life
- Strong moral character
- A commitment to good use of time

Social development

- Connectedness—perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers and other adults
- Sense of social place/integration—being connected and valued by larger social networks
- Attachment to prosocial/conventional institutions, such as school, church, nonschool youth programs
- Ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts
- Commitment to civic engagement

To learn more about youth development, you can access this entire book for free online. Visit books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=10022&page=R1.

To learn more about academic standards, visit www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml.

MODULE THREE

Section 2: Watch and Take Notes



After determining the needs and interests of your target audience, it is time to get started by taking the following steps:

1. Watch the movie(s) on your list

Keeping the age, gender and racial make-up of your youth in mind, along with their interests and needs, preview the movie(s). While you are watching, keep a notepad and pen handy. Take notes on the following aspects of the movie:

- Examine the setting of the movie – especially if you are a language arts or social studies teacher, you will want to look at the historical context, location and time period.
- Examine the main characters – take notes on family and peer relationships, their cultural or ethnic backgrounds, obstacles, decision-making, conflicts and resolutions, etc.

2. Reflect on the overall movie

After viewing, reflect on the overall storyline and characters. Take notes on any central themes that span the movie (setting and achieving goals, environmental activism, coping with grief, Civil Rights, becoming a leader, etc.). Some themes will be easy to detect. For example, if the movie is about a sports team, athletics could be an obvious choice. Other themes will be harder to detect, lurking below the visual content. Pay close attention to youth development themes that are beneficial for your age group. Even if a particular theme is not central to the storyline, you can still incorporate it, especially if it targets an area of need for your group.

3. Select the themes

While you may have an initial list of 10 plus themes, it is recommended that you choose 3-5 central themes that are the most appropriate and needed for your group.

4. Organize your notes

These 3-5 central themes will become the building blocks for your discussion questions and/or activities. Within each category, organize your viewing notes with specific examples from the storyline that illustrate the themes. You can even create sub-themes within each theme that touch on different aspects of the storyline. Be careful to pick themes that can be supported by scenes and quotes from the movie. Use this example from a F.I.L.M. guide to help you organize your thinking:

- Main Theme: The Importance of Love and Home
 - o Sub-theme: Different Types of Love
 - o Sub-theme: Celebrating Siblings
 - o Sub-theme: Pain and Healing
 - o Sub-theme: Finding Home

5. Use F.I.L.M. as a resource

Visit the F.I.L.M. website, www.youthFILMproject.org, to download curricula. Even if you choose a movie that is not featured here, you can use the guides as a framework for crafting your own discussions and activities. The table of contents in the guides is a good model for observing how themes and sub-themes are distributed.

MODULE FOUR: Teaching Movie Themes



Once you have an outline for the themes you wish to teach, you can begin supporting these themes with discussion questions and/or engaging activities. Typically, a F.I.L.M. guide incorporates both discussion questions and activities to provide variation. However, depending on your time and resources, you may decide to just focus on discussion questions or, conversely, just utilize activities.

Sections in this module include:

- 1: Determine Your Time and Resources
- 2: How to Devise Discussion Questions
- 3: How to Develop Activities
- 4: Inspire Service-Learning

MODULE FOUR

Section 1: Determine Your Time and Resources



How much time are you willing to devote to teaching from a movie? The experience could be as simple as screening a movie and following with themed discussion questions in a one-time event. Or your classroom or after-school program could spend weeks on the program, engaging in a different activity each meeting. Before delving into the writing of a complex, long activity or discussion guide, figure out the length of your program and plan accordingly.

With regard to resources, it is important to plan for low-cost activities that do not require the purchase of abundant materials. F.I.L.M. has discovered that effective activities and discussions do not require fancy resources. However, you should take note of certain space-related resources. Some questions to ask yourself:

- Will we be screening the movie on DVD?
- If so, do we have access to a DVD player/TV or computer/projector?
- Do we have a large enough space for youth to split into small groups for certain activities?
- Will we be able to provide paper, pens/pencils, scissors and basic art supplies for activities?

MODULE FOUR

Section 2: How to Devise Discussion Questions



The themes you selected should provide opportunities for instigating self-reflection and conversation. Organize your questions by theme. It is always a good idea to start off asking questions that directly relate to characters in the movie. For example:

Theme: Avoiding Judgement

- Why are some of the people who surround Kit so quick to make assumptions based on outward appearance?
- Why is Kit embarrassed by her family opening their home to boarders and selling eggs?

Then you can begin to make connections between the characters in the movie and experiences of the actual youth participants. For example:

- What would you have done if someone bullied you based on assumptions?
- Would you be embarrassed if you found yourself in Kit's situation?

Finally, you should ask questions that solely focus on youth experiences, drawing heavily on the theme at hand. For example:

- Have you ever been the victim of wrong assumptions or judgement? If so, how did you react?
- What did you learn from the experience?

Some questions can trigger sensitive memories or topic areas. Participation during these conversations should always be voluntary, especially if personal experiences are shared. Not all youth will have experienced each topic, but it is important that they hear from and respect others. Varying the format of these discussion questions is a good idea. Sometimes the youth can get into pairs or small groups to share their answers. Other times, especially for the more sensitive topics such as loss or family relationships, youth can reflect on the questions individually.

MODULE FOUR

Section 3: How to Develop Activities



Probably the most challenging component of this entire process is coming up with theme-based activities that are fun, creative, educational and inexpensive to produce. Following are some tips to help you get started.

- Start with an objective that you wish to address.
- Be careful to devise activities that are age appropriate. Younger youth will enjoy filling in charts or creating artwork that pertains to a given theme, while older youth will be more responsive to discussions and debates.
- Some ideas for activities:
 - Character webs or charts (for example, youth can fill in the goal-setting process of movie characters and then fill in their own personal goals)
 - Cooking activity based on a specific food or culture from the movie
 - Role-play using pieces of the movie script
 - Write alternative endings to scenes or the movie
 - Write letters to particular characters addressing a specific topic area
 - Word search or crossword using key terms from the movie
 - Readings highlighting information about the movie (or associated book) followed by discussion questions
 - Excerpts from an interview with someone on the production crew
 - Storyboard exercise – draw alternative scenes from the movie
 - Debate over controversial topic in the movie
 - Timeline – if the movie is embedded in a significant historical period, youth can research important events and create a timeline
 - Interview a community member or family member to learn more about the theme at hand
- In the process of developing activities, state your learning objectives and list any materials that may be needed for the activity.
- Whenever possible, find background information pertaining to the story or movie. Youth enjoy getting the inside scoop on production!
- Incorporate quotes or examples from the movie during the introduction of an activity to highlight connections. This may require some patience, returning to the movie to pause and record quotations. However, you can download many movie scripts for free here:
 - www.imsdb.com
 - www.simplyscripts.com
 - www.script-o-rama.com
 - www.awesomefilm.com
 - www.dailyscript.com
- If you are devising an activity guide that will span multiple sessions, be sure to use variation so youth do not become restless or bored.
- Make sure that your activities give room for youth to take the lead and infuse their voice.

Check out these websites for more activity ideas and tips on developing activities:

- www.thirteen.org/edonline/afterschool/activities/tips_dev_act.html
- www.afterschool.gov
- fun.familyeducation.com/recreational-programs/outdoor-games/33126.html
- home.howstuffworks.com/after-school-activities.htm

MODULE FOUR

Section 4: Inspire Service-Learning



In addition to providing opportunities for informal learning, movie themes can also serve as stepping stones for service-learning projects. Each F.I.L.M. guide incorporates ideas for service projects. Sometimes ideas for service projects come naturally after seeing a movie (environmental project ideas for *Happy Feet* or *Hoot*, movies that have a clear environmental messages). However, sometimes project ideas will emerge through more subtle pathways. For example, after seeing *The Secret Life of Bees*, a movie that celebrates femininity and sisterhood, youth could invite their female relatives to a women’s banquet, with proceeds and donations going to a women’s shelter.

Some other service examples that can be connected to themes in movies include:

- Teach recreational skills to youth with mental disabilities
- Mentor at-risk youth from youth organizations or elementary schools on health issues
- Produce guides to parks, recreational areas and other local attractions
- Work with local humane societies, zoos or nature centers to care for injured and healthy animals

Through service, youth not only address a need in their community, but also gain valuable skills and knowledge in the process of planning the project. It is really important that youth take the lead in the design and implementation of the projects, guided by the support of trusted adults. Visit www.youthfilmproject.org/resources.htm to download the separate service-learning guide. More project ideas are included in this resource.

MODULE FIVE: Connecting Books and Movies



Media literacy is a powerful tool, and by connecting students' love of movies to literacy, their learning is expanded. Not only do youth learn from the content, but they also learn about being media literate.

By definition, media literacy is the process of understanding and using the mass media in an assertive way. This includes an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques. By learning from movies based on books, youth gain a critical understanding of two media forms.

Sections in this module include:

1: Reading Materials

2: From Book to Film

MODULE FIVE

Section 1: Reading Materials



Teachers often struggle with the notion that movies will distract from learning or take away from the creative imagination that comes with reading. However, most teachers will find students begging to watch the movie version of literature being read in class. Rather than fighting this situation, teachers can use movies as a springboard for subsequent literary analysis of characters, setting, plot, etc. Moreover, watching movies in conjunction with reading books enables comparative analysis between the two. As described in Module Two, there are many online resources that can help parents and educators match quality literature with movie versions. Here they are again:

- www.mcpl.lib.mo.us/readers/movies
- www.bookreporter.com/features/books2movies.asp
- www.teenreads.com/features/books2movies.asp
- www.kidsreads.com/features/books2movies.asp

Educators should make a special effort to find movies based on classic literature. Some examples of classic books are listed on the following websites:

- www.kidsreads.com/lists/int-classic.asp (ages 8-10)
- www.kidsreads.com/lists/adv-classic.asp (ages 10-12)
- www.neh.gov/projects/summertimefavorites.html (lists for all ages)
- info.infosoup.org/lists/ClassicsForTeens.asp (teens)

In spite of efforts to look for movies that are based on books, a great number of quality movies stem from original screenplays. However, other literary material can be used to enhance your activities, particularly in an educational setting.

Examples:

- If your movie is set in a particular historical context or geographic location, you can look for newspaper articles in print or via the Internet that provide more information/first-hand accounts regarding the time period and setting.
- Is there a topic or historical character that stands out in the movie? Assemble articles based on the topic or interviews with the real-life character.

MODULE FIVE

Section 2: From Book to Film



While developing discussion questions and activities pertaining to the movie you selected, also re-read the book associated with it. Use sticky notes to take note of places in the book that differ dramatically from the movie, scenes that are absent from the movie, or descriptions/quotes that would enhance the discussions or activities. Integrate comparative discussion questions and charts throughout your guide. Youth will take pleasure in comparing and contrasting the written and visual versions. In doing so they will explore the artistic process of adapting books to movies and improve their literacy skills. Some suggestions for helping youth compare the book and movie:

- Make a chart where youth can compare characters in the book versus the movie
- Write questions where youth can compare how their perceptions of the characters and settings from the book changed after seeing the movie
- Include descriptive quotes from the book. Have youth illustrate versions of what they read, comparing their drawings to the set and characters in the movie.
- Make a chart where youth can play detective and take note of important distinctions between the book and movie. Follow up with questions directed at why they think the changes were made from book to screen.

Explain to youth that adapting a book to the screen is tough work. Most movies are less than 2.5 hours. However, the majority of books cannot be broken down line-by-line and scene-by-scene, and be adapted into a film that is less than 3 hours. This means screenplay writers have to alter the story by cutting, combining, and adding scenes and lines. Moreover, characters are often switched around, changed or even removed to fit the limited time and become more visually appealing. Therefore, screenplay writers have a difficult time honoring the book and making an engaging movie out of it.

MODULE SIX: Making it Happen



You have selected a movie (and book or reading materials), determined the positive themes that are appropriate and beneficial for your youth, and crafted discussion questions and/or activities. You are now ready to teach with movies! Be sure to photocopy any worksheets that youth will need to fill out, and make sure you have materials needed for your activities.

Depending on the size of the group you will be leading, you may need to acquire some funding for movies, books or service projects.

Here are some websites that offer grants and awards:

- www.kent.k12.wa.us/curriculum/grants - grants for K-12 educators
- www.firstbook.org - provides new books to needy children
- foundationcenter.org/pnd/rfp - Requests for Proposals (RFP) and notices of awards
- ysa.org/AwardsGrants/tabid/58/Default.aspx - Youth Service America (YSA) awards and grants

Low Cost Movie Screening Opportunities

While screening a DVD for a group of youth may be the most inexpensive option, there are discounted or free opportunities to bring youth to movie theaters. Some possibilities for making this happen are below:

- F.I.L.M. occasionally distributes free screening passes for upcoming F.I.L.M. movie selections. Visit the F.I.L.M. website, www.youthFILMproject.org, to sign up for the newsletter and receive updates about events, giveaways, movies and more.
- www.amctheatres.com/smc - AMC Summer Movie Camp (\$1 movies for kids)
- www.cinemark.com/summermovieclubhouse - Cinemark Summer Movie Clubhouse; 10 movies for \$5.
- www.gofobo.com - Search for free movie screenings in your area via zip code. Sign up to receive updates on screenings, sweepstakes and new releases.
- Check with your local library for screenings of movies.

Moving Forward

Whether you are a teacher or out-of-school youth facilitator, you can create an ongoing program that uses movies to teach valuable lessons. Unless kids are required to attend (i.e., classroom setting), you can decide how to market the program to attract a steady group of youth. Your youth group or after-school center can start a "Book to Film" club that meets regularly for viewing, reading, discussions, activities and related service projects. Whether you decide to use the F.I.L.M. curricula or create your own, youth will be so engaged with the movies and activities that they won't even realize they are learning in the process!

Beyond using movies as an educational tool, larger numbers of people seeing positive movies gives Hollywood a financial incentive to develop more quality productions. Furthermore, exposure to quality movies may also have a long-term effect of inspiring youth to get involved in filmmaking themselves.



Resources

- Heartland resources (www.trulymovingpictures.org)
 - Movie lists (www.trulymovingpictures.org/the-list.aspx)
 - F.I.L.M. curricula (www.youthfilmproject.org)
 - TMP discussion guides (www.trulymovingpictures.org/featured-films.aspx)
- Movie studio resources for teaching material:
 - Walt Disney Pictures (disney.go.com/disneypictures)
 - Walden Media (www.walden.com/walden/index.php)
- Media literacy resources:
 - Big Picture Alliance (www.bigpicturealliance.org)
 - A partnership of filmmakers, teachers and business professionals, this non profit youth program works with teens in urban communities to create their own digital films and media.
 - Campaign for Real Beauty (www.campaignforrealbeauty.com)
 - How a model is transformed into a female beauty icon. Sponsored by the Dove (soap) Self-Esteem Fund.
 - Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org)
 - This is a comprehensive site for educators and parents to help all children gain access to media. The site provides scores of suggested books and articles, spanning age groups and media genres. No pop-up advertisements.
 - Children's Media Project (www.childrensmediaproject.org/index.asp)
 - This arts and education organization promotes both content creation and critical viewing, and produces DROP TV, "a magazine-style series of half-hour episodes packed with high-energy segments made for youth, by youth."
 - Digital literacy: Skills for the 21st century (cct2.edc.org/dig_lit/web)
 - EDC's Center for Children and Technology developed this site to help schools implement advanced media literacy curricula.
 - Digital media and learning (www.digitallearning.macfound.org)
 - The MacArthur Foundation launched its five-year, \$50 million digital media and learning initiative in late 2006 to help determine how digital technologies are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize and participate in civic life.
 - Just Think Foundation (www.justthink.org)
 - Its mission is to help young people to understand/utilize media. Its audience is high school teachers and students, with the site offering curricular ideas for educators and some information for high school youth. No pop-up advertisements.
 - Kids Internet Radio Project (www.projectkir.org/irp/public)
 - A free "sandbox" for helping children learn to produce, broadcast and podcast Internet radio. Founder and director David Crusoe is '05 graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Education.
 - Media Literacy Clearinghouse (www.frankwbaker.com/default1.htm)
 - Curriculum units and media resources for K-12 teachers. Written and compiled by South Carolina educators.
 - Media Literacy Online Project (interact.uoregon.edu/medialit/mlr/home)
 - This site provides complete links to many other pages on media literacy. It is a site geared toward



- educators, teachers, students and researchers — quite academic in nature.
- o Media That Matters Film Festival (www.mediathatmattersfest.org)
 - This juried festival presents the work of a diverse group of independent filmmakers, many of whom are under 21. Films include documentaries, music videos, animations and experimental work.
 - o My Pop Studio (www.mypopstudio.com)
 - Designed by Renee Hobbs, this site allows young people to play with magazine, television, music and digital tools to strengthen media literacy skills, promote positive development and increase knowledge about health issues.
 - o Netsmartz (www.netsmartz.org/index.aspx)
 - Emphasizes helping children and teenagers use the Internet safely. Sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
 - o New Media Literacies Project at MIT (newmedialiteracies.org)
 - A portal for the NML project based at MIT's department of Comparative Media Studies (led by Henry Jenkins) and funded by the MacArthur Foundation.
 - o New Mexico Media Literacy Project (www.nmmlp.org)
 - Outstanding example of a state curriculum resource. Check out "Deconstruct this!" for the analysis of advertising.
 - o TV Boss (www.thetvboss.org)
 - Part of the Media Management campaign sponsored by the Ad Council and entertainment companies. Designed to "give parents the information and tools they need to guide their child's television consumption."
 - o Young People's Media Network (ypmn.blogspot.com)
 - Blog featuring news and views concerning youth media in Europe, Central Asia and elsewhere.
 - o Youth Radio (www.youthradio.org)
 - This Berkeley-based organization trains young people to produce radio reports that meet high journalistic standards. Youth Radio stories are regularly featured on National Public Radio programs.

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