

BMB

Bundesministerium
für Bildung

Austrian Board of Media Classification
(ABMC)

Recommendations
on films and similar image carriers
for children and youths

[jMk]

JugendMedienKommission

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Preface

Audiovisual media are a key part of our culture today; the use of media is an inevitable part of everyday life for all age groups.

Film is a fascinating and variegated medium. Film offers entertainment, disseminates knowledge and can facilitate and guide the individual's search for an identity.

Universally valid assessments and thus findings on the effect of movies on children and youths, however, are unfeasible since such an effect is always singular and dependent on the context, especially when considering that the concrete sphere of life and previous media experience varies between individual children and youths.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and youths are entitled to media products of a high quality. Young people want to watch good movies that offer exciting, realistic and varied entertainment, are associated with their everyday worlds and present their own perspective. Children and youths need to be given serious consideration in their reality, their wishes, desires and fears in line with the stage of their development. Respecting them thus means that neither too much nor too little must be asked of them in a challenging movie.

Recommendations of movies by the Austrian Board of Media Classification (ABMC) are always given in the form of a risk balance. They are developed based on the content and with due regard to aspects of development psychology and social policy that may be enhanced or weakened by the formal design of the movie.

The members of the Jugendmedienkommission or ABMC are experts experienced in the field of youth media protection. While accounting for the subjective character of opinions expressed by individual members, the decisions on recommendations are taken by the ABMC committees upon exhaustive discussions and by majority voting.

This obviously implies that other assessments varying from the Panel's opinions may exist on given movies or videos.

Principles for recommendation

When issuing recommendations, the aesthetic quality (i.e. the content-narrative and formal-media language dimension) must be considered in a development psychology and social policy context.

Recommendations are given for two-year increments from age 4 and they contain a short characterisation (e.g. “recommended as a film for discussion”).

Recommendations may also make reference to age segments (e.g. “recommended for 8- to 10-year-olds”) and/or target groups (e.g. “recommended specifically for girls”).

No recommendation is made for children below the age of 4 due to their inadequate media experience.

The following recommendations are given:

Highly recommended

is a movie that meets **many** of the criteria listed below and that in its entirety justifies special emphasis.

Recommended

is a movie that meets **several** of the criteria listed below.

Acceptable

is a movie that at least meets **some** of the criteria listed below.

If no recommendation is given, this means that the movie meets none of the criteria listed below or that the negative criteria prevail. It does not mean that the ABMC advises against watching the movie.

1.) Development psychology context

The point of departure is provided by the ABMC's criteria for age recommendations as they describe the individuals' ability to intellectually cope with the movie, broken down by age groups.

Recommended movies offer contents that tie in with the children's and youths' (cognitive and emotional) development status in a suitable form.

Cognitive development

In our media-focused times, today's children and youth have more media experience than their peers did only a few decades ago. Initially, children cannot distinguish between reality and fiction. They cling to "magical thinking" and the "I" is fluently defined. Handling the concreteness of images and their reference character needs to be learned.

Emotional development

Movies are about entertainment, boredom, excitement, bewitchment, etc. – emotions that arise when children and youths are confronted with a movie. Their reception when watching a movie is an active process involving a new experience and empathy. This shows, especially through responses of the autonomic nervous system (red cheeks, red ears, moist hands, goose pimples). Young children in particular express such feelings mainly through the body (jumping up, running about, fidgeting, etc.). Emotions are also expressed by laughing, crying, anger, sadness, etc.

When a movie allows children and youths to confront previously unknown situations, discover new things and gain answers and sudden insights through their senses and from the safe position of a cinema seat then it merits a positive assessment.

Fear

Distressful contents offer an important part for children and youths in learning to be afraid and handling fears. Coping with fear needs to be learned individually, and movies may help in many ways, depending on the child's age.

Children below the age of 6 strongly identify with what happens in a movie and are thus left without protection when confronted with tense situations and threats on the screen. They need to see fraught-filled scenes resolved quickly and fully and they require positive solutions, especially with regard to their fear of loss.

From about age 8, children learn to distinguish between reality and fiction. They develop distancing mechanisms in order to better protect themselves against distressful situations.

Some 11- to 14-year-olds develop a "love of fear". They easily handle horror scenarios and even expect a greater intensity of excitation. Even younger children may develop such a "love of fear". In order to experience the feeling, they need to voluntarily expose themselves to a fearful situation and they need role models with whom to get through the situation. Furthermore, the safety of a happy ending is necessary.

2.) Social policy context

In assessing movies, the social and political dimension should not be excluded.

Movies show interpersonal relations and behaviour patterns, gender roles, identity patterns, social problems in a multicultural society and of marginal groups (integration), etc.

Recommendations should be given to movies that offer help in deciding everyday situations, that serve interpersonal togetherness, promote basic democratic values, highlight the value of family and peer groups, deal with the social reality in a differentiated way. Also to be included are movies that enable children and youths to question and see through constructed realities and design tools and that make commercial manipulation transparent.

Positive criteria to be considered in this connection are:

Moral principle and reflexivity

Positively assessed movies contain a moral principle by distinguishing between the morally good and the bad. The moral judgment itself is examined for its underlying moral principles, and its assignment to real facts and persons is critically illuminated.

Movies should enable comparisons and highlight proper and wrong alternatives. In addition, they should contribute to a review of the viewer's own positions.

Help to decide value clashes

Positively assessed movies present values as competing against other values rather than in an abstract manner. The movie helps in deciding the resulting clashes between values.

Improving the capacity to argue out and handle conflicts

Positively assessed movies show how conflicts arise and how they can be solved. They promote the capacity to identify the best arguments in the competition between opinions and on this basis negotiate compromises for the remaining divergences between interests. They show up the problems of (rather than overally reject) violent forms of conflict resolution. They prefer peaceful, democratic and practicable ways of conflict handling. The older the children and youths, the more conflict situations can be handled by the movie in emotional and mental terms.

Highlighting non-trivial ways of problem solution

Positively assessed movies contribute to the solution of problems in life and/or society beyond cliché schemes. Fear of the alien should give way to meeting and positively confronting the alien. Bias, stereotypes and clichés are countered. Breaking habitual moulds of thinking is enabled.

Discursive connections

The opinions shown in the movie and the underlying positions can be linked to relevant societal subjects and the related discourse, and in this sense constitute a relevant expression of opinion.

3.) Aesthetic quality

The aesthetic quality of a movie is made up of a content-narrative dimension and a formal-media language dimension. In order to be recommended, the narrated story should be relevant, original and suitable for children and youths, as well as have a formal design that meets non-trivial requirements which can be handled by children and youths.

Movies for children and youths should start out from their everyday reality by offering a credible and empathic story and narrative style: movies where they find their own world and can pursue their own dreams and longings, or movies that encourage them to make up utopias of their own are to be recommended.

The narrative perspective should wherever possible be that of children and youths. The dramatic art, characterisation and development of the roles is aligned to the thinking of children and youths.

Topics

Topics that concern children and youths and that address their everyday reality are, especially, family, friendship, love, identity, animals, nature and environmental protection.

Topics added at a later age are detachment from the parental home, challenges, the search for recognition and sociopolitical issues.

Serious, problematic and sad contents in movies that narrate fictitious or true stories, e.g. parental separation, illness, death, war and violence, etc. may indicate approaches to solving difficult situations and are also important topics. Movies may point beyond the experience obtained by children and youths and offer new perspectives and creative solutions.

Positive assessment is given to movies that offer information on everyday life in an entertaining and understandable form and provide knowledge about art and culture, history, politics, sciences, etc., as well as to movies that satisfy childish or youthful curiosity and stimulate them to become active themselves. Stories that are narrated without pedagogical pretension are to be preferred.

Children are entitled to good entertainment of a high standard, so that movies are judged not just for their educational value.

Role models

An important factor in giving a recommendation is the representation of child or youth role models who are shown to straighten out their lives.

Child and youth figures should wherever possible be cast as positive heroes/heroines and thus act as role models.

Particular attention should be given to the representation of victims, because empathy with victims releases the strongest emotions.

(Happy) end

An open ending needs to be evaluated depending on the age. A younger audience will be disconcerted by such a conclusion, as young children require an unequivocal albeit not too foreseeable happy end. Older children and youths may even prefer an open ending, as it might get them to think. Yet for them too, there should be at least the hope of a good ending to the story.

A movie is a complex structure. A good story by itself is not sufficient to make a good movie, it needs to be well rendered. The making of images and sounds requires many technical tools. The cameramen shoot images, the cutter edits them and the composer and sound engineers supply the score and soundtrack.

The way a movie is rendered has a major impact on its reception. Film has a language of its own, aesthetic rules of its own and a certain sequence that is ruled by script units. Many aspects of filmmaking are perceived in the subconscious only. Personal habits of media usage and learning from experience play a role. The way children and youths perceive a movie thus also depends on their socialisation and everyday experience, i.e. their individual life and learning history and media experience.

Design elements / media language tools

- image (shooting angles, camera point of view, light, colour, etc.)
- cutting (abrupt/soft, black-and-white fades, pacing, dynamics, etc.)
- sound (silence, language, atmosphere, sound effects, music, etc.)

Added to this is the décor and setting (scenery, sets, costumes, props) and the staging (direction of actors/actresses, camera arrangement, lights, etc.).

Design tools that make it possible to view a story from the children's or youths' perspective, e.g. by shooting angles, are to be given a positive assessment.

Good cinema craftsmanship by itself is not sufficient to get the movie a recommendation!

In issuing a recommendation, attention must be given to the potential impact of the movie on children and youths and the unity of content and form.

If a movie offers sociopolitical contents that are rendered in good or excellent formal terms based on the cognitive and emotional state of development of children/youths, this will be the best possible reason for a recommendation!

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