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Getting a new line on your child's entertainment

By VALERIE FINHOLM
Courant Staff Writer

ORIGINAL FRONT PAGE

Your 9-year-old begs you to allow him to go to the movie theater with a neighbor to see "Jack," the story of a child who ages four times faster than normal.

"It's PG-13," he pleads.

You hesitate. You're uneasy with that rating. Your son starts to whine.

"Everyone else is allowed to go!"

Who do you call?

The National Institute on Media and The Family.

The new nonprofit organization will provide information — via a "Children's Impact Statement" — on media products and their suitability for children.

"Parents feel so overwhelmed, so overmatched," said David Walsh, executive director of the Minneapolis-based organization and author of the highly acclaimed "Selling Out America's Children: How America Puts Profits Before Values and What Parents Can Do."

The evaluations — compiled by parents and experts such as TV's Bob Keeshan ("Captain Kangaroo") — will provide more detailed recommendations than standard rating systems. Information on movies and other media offerings will be available in a newsletter by paid subscription and, in the future, via telephone and computer.

"We plan to evaluate the full range of media products — from television programs to movies, advertisements, videos, video and computer games, to interactive programs and Internet sites," Walsh said.

In the case of "Jack," the experts urge "caution" for ages 8 through 12.

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Parents getting a new line on children's entertainment

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For children under that age, the summary says: "This movie contains some vulgar language and sexually explicit behavior which would not be advised for viewing by small children."

The statements also rate violence, language, sexual content and character traits.

Nancy DeSalvo, a children's librarian at Farmington Library, said she liked the idea.

"Parents are so busy now that they want to get help with any kind of evaluation of materials or things children are going to look at or go to," she said.

The present system of ratings can be "very misleading," she said. "Parents are for all the help they can get."

Walsh, a psychologist and expert on the effect of media on children, said he got the idea for the Children's Impact Statement while writing the book.

"At that point I suggested the government should do it," he said. "But then I had to rethink that. We don't need government to do that, we need parents to do that."

"The alternative is just unacceptable — we just let things keep going the way they're going. We have to reclaim our kids," he said.

Walsh was in New York Thursday making the rounds of network television programs and child-care magazines. He seemed stunned by the response to the creation of the institute.

"The response has been phenomenal," he said. "I have gotten calls from the media and from parents all over the country wanting information. It clearly has struck a nerve."

Parents can make a difference, Walsh said.

"Public outrage over Calvin Klein's ads last year are an excellent example of the energy that can fuel change in the advertising business," he said.

The new organization does not endorse censorship of any kind, Walsh said, but simply seeks to educate parents with the information they need to make appropriate choices for their children.

"We hope to be able to give them a voice," he said. "When we get comments, we're going to pass them along to sponsors. [For instance], 'We thought you might want to know that thousands of parents are telling us they object to your latest ad.'"

The institute will also issue media buying guides for advertisers and corporations, based on the Children's Impact Statements.

"We also hope our work will help raise the standard of television programming, as well as that of moviemaking [and] electronic gamemaking," Walsh said.

To encourage that, Walsh said, the organization plans to produce an annual awards program to honor "outstanding positive entertainment."

"We hope it becomes as prestigious as the Emmys," he said.

Walsh said the recent announcement by television heads that they were going to develop a rating system is not enough.

"They rate their own products!" he said. "The rating system will have the same shortcomings that the movie rating system has now — it is difficult for parents to get an idea of appropriateness based on a one-letter or one-number rating."

A recent survey by the American Medical Association found widespread dissatisfaction about current rating systems for movies, TV programs and video games.

A national survey started by the media and family institute found that 62 percent of parents think that movie ratings do not provide them with enough information to make good decisions, Walsh said.

In addition to Keeshan, the institute's board of directors includes Dr. Marjorie J. Hogan, spokeswoman for the American Academy of Pediatrics; and Ken Wales, executive producer of the critically acclaimed, award-winning CBS television series "Christy."

For more information on The National Institute on Media and The Family call toll-free (888) 672-5437.

CONFIRMATION OF NEED
FOR
CHILDREN'S IMPACT STATEMENTS ™

by

David Walsh, Ph.D

The long-awaited "new" televison rating system proposed by the TV industry last month was virtually a carbon copy of the age-based movie rating system created twenty-eight years ago by some of the very same people. It was received with some support back then, because it was the first step by the movie industry to give parents an indication of the appropriateness of individual films for their children. Today, after nearly thirty years of increasingly more graphic violence, sexual content and inappropriate language in movies, television and now, video and computer games, parents and child development experts across the nation are crying out for the second step.

Recent national surveys conducted by groups such as the National Institute on Media and the Family, the American Medical Association and the National PTA indicate that the majority of America's parents are dissatisfied with an antiquated rating system that provides inadequate information. They no longer want a rating system that simply gives a thumbs up or down, depending solely upon the age of the child. Surveys of parents in 1996 reveal that:

* 74% of parents are frustrated by the limited amount of information TV displays in its warnings
* 62% feel that the current G, PG, PG-13, and R movie rating system does NOT provide enough information for them to make good decisions
* 88% would like to see detailed evaluations that would provide more information on violence, sexual content and positive character traits.

In order for parents to take responsibility for what their children watch on television and in the movies, they must have access to sound, reliable information. The only way to insure reliability is to employ scientifically-based methods of measurement. Absent this, the validity of the results cannot be established. The quality of the methods that the industry uses to rate their own products is suspect. Entertainment executives have failed to establish any standards or structured protocols for those who rate their products. There is also no provision for ensuring that the rating process include the specific factors that have been proven harmful to children and teens, i.e., graphic violence and sexual behavior and inappropriate language.

The importance of knowing the actual content, especially the violent content, in the media products our kids are exposed to is underscored by the results cited in over *3000* studies which establish a clear-cut link between violent entertainment and violent behavior. In fact, 75% of *children* polled in a recent study reported that they are convinced that violence in the media has increased the incidence of violence among their peers. Kids mimic what they see.

Finally, the fact that this newly announced television rating system is industry-generated is of crucial importance to this discussion. In this case, where the industry that produces the product is the same industry that rates the product, a clear case of conflict of interest exists. How can the people who make hundreds of millions of dollars from these products be objective when

rating them? An unbiased, unrelated third party evaluation, using a scientifically-valid questionnaire, is the best way to create an objective opinion and to avoid conflict of interest. The industry has indicated no interest in using such a method.

In large numbers, parents are saying that they are tired of this situation. They want to take the decision-making power away from the entertainment industry and bring it back to their own families. A content-based rating system will help them to do just that.

(Invited op/ed column, 1/20/97)