

# I Media Literacy for Children, Young People and Parents

How media literate are children and young people? This varies, of course, depending on the child's age, personality, interests, motivation, social relations and context, etc., and obviously to a great extent also on access to, use of, understanding of and own creation of media contents. Media literacy among the young therefore differs among individuals, groups and nations.

Ofcom, the independent regulator and competition authority for the U.K. communications industries, defines media literacy as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'. Without such skills, people's ability to participate effectively in the workplace and in society may be greatly diminished, Ofcom says (<http://www.ofcom.org.uk>).

In 2005, Ofcom published a review of research, mostly performed in the U.K., about children's media literacy (Buckingham 2005).

The report concludes, among other things, that in terms of *access*, the research literature suggests that children and young people in the U.K. possess quite high levels of *functional* literacy – that is, the skills and competencies needed to gain access to media content, using the available technologies and associated software.

Many findings in the review point to a growing media literacy by age. For example, older children are generally aware of regulatory mechanisms and systems of guidance, and take these into account in seeking to make their own decisions. The large majority of young people also show some awareness of risks relating to sexual dangers on the Internet, although they are less aware of potential economic risks.

The review adds that several studies regarding regulations and risk on the Internet conclude that education in media literacy may be a more effective strategy than blocking or filtering.

In a similar vein, children's *understanding* of television – e.g., children's awareness of areas such as television 'language', the difference between representation and reality, and the persuasive role of advertising – develops both as a function of their increasing knowledge of the world, and as a result of their broader cognitive and social development. When the children grow older, they also learn to cope with potentially unwanted or upsetting emotional responses, and to make critical judgments about areas such as television violence, by employing forms of media literacy.

For example, Andrea Millwood Hargrave (2003) found that children aged 9-13 could clearly distinguish between fictional violence and violence that is 'real' in the media. The children made judgements about the justified use of violence, and this could affect how 'violent' an image was perceived to be in the first place. Although this kind of result does not tell fully about influences of media violence, it implies that the meaning of a particular form of media content is not pre-given but actively constructed also by the reader or viewer (something that, in turn, is an important fact to take into account in research on media influences).

The review by Buckingham found considerably less research about how children and young people interpret, evaluate and respond to other media contents than on television.

By contrast, when it comes to *creativity*, there has been less academic research relating to 'older' media such as video and analogue radio than to new media, particularly the Internet. The review found research suggesting that there is considerable potential for media to be used as means of communication and self-expression, not least by socially disadvantaged groups; that creative involvement in media production (particularly in the context of education) can make an important contribution to the development of critical understanding; and that new media such as online gaming and mobile telephony provide possibilities for new forms of interaction.

In sum, the review shows that there are gaps in research about how media literate children and young people are. At the same time, it shows that media literacy is partly developing with increasing age.

This is not to say that adults are in all respects media literate or that they always are more media literate than young people – the contrary can also be the case. In another review of research on adults' media literacy in the U.K. for Ofcom (Livingstone, Van Couvering and Thumim 2005) the authors say that much research raises concerns that adult audiences lack the more complex skills for a sufficiently discerning or critical understanding to deal with the highly sophisticated construction of media messages. For example, the audience's trust of news is not always associated with good understanding or critical judgment, and many viewers are overwhelmed by multiple content sources that they find difficult to evaluate or compare. Studies also suggest that adults are often unaware of the provenance of information on the Internet and may lack the skills to take into account the point of view from which information is presented.

In May 2006, Ofcom released *Media Literacy Audit. Report on media literacy amongst children* (see [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/children.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/children.pdf)) (and a corresponding empirical report on adults). The aim of the child study was to assess the extent of media literacy amongst children aged 8-15 across the U.K. in order to provide stakeholders with a source of information about children's levels of such literacy. To a great extent this empirical investigation deals with 8- to 11- and 12- to 15-year-olds' uptake and usage of the media, but also their attitudes to media and towards

learning. In addition, there were questions to children's parents about the extent and type of rules in the home regarding the media platforms.

A main conclusion from the report is that although children's access to and usage of media technologies in the U.K. is widespread, children's levels of critical understanding and of creativity as regards the media are highly variable. So are steps taken to ensure online safety at home, as well as lessons about media at school.

A few examples of findings in the report that support this conclusion are:

- Some 78 per cent of children aged 12-15 feel that news programmes are true either 'always' or 'most of the time', and 76 per cent feel similarly about nature and wildlife programmes. Slightly more than half say this for current affairs programmes (with only 11% saying they are true 'all the time' compared to 35% saying this about news programmes). One third of 12-15-year-olds say that reality TV programmes are true 'all' or 'most of the time', although 20 per cent say they are 'never' true.
- Whilst two in three children aged 12-15 who use the Internet at home agree that they trust most of what they find on the Internet, 20 per cent disagree, and a further 13 per cent is unsure. Children from minority ethnic groups are more likely to disagree (at 30%) that they trust most of what they find on the Internet.
- One in five of 12-15-year-olds say they have set up their own website. Around half of this age group has either experience of or interest in setting up their own website or making a short film using a digital camcorder, and rather fewer are interested in making a short film using a mobile phone.
- Most parents say they have rules for the Internet, although only around half of all parents with Internet access say they have blocking systems in place to stop their children viewing certain types of websites, with no significant differences by the age of the child. Parents who do not have blocks in place give reasons for this largely relating to trusting their child, although around one in five of these parents say they do not have controls set because they are unsure how to do this or were not aware it was possible.
- Significant minorities of children are consuming media largely on their own, especially in the 12-15 age group.
- Around two-thirds (64%) of all children aged 8-11 say they have had any lessons at school that teach them about the Internet, and just one in ten in this age group (9%) say they have had any lessons that teach them about television or films.
- Among 12-15-year-olds, three quarters (74%) say they have learned about the Internet at school and some 40 per cent that they have had any lessons about television or films.

Although the above-mentioned research reports for Ofcom geographically represent only one corner of the world, there is no evidence that children's and young people's level of media literacy in other countries is higher. At the same time, much research tells that a great amount of children and young people run across offensive media contents, and that some children feel upset or disturbed about it. Other research deals with potentially harmful media contents – such as portrayals of physical media violence; underrepresentation and stereotypes of population groups, peoples or nations; hate and racism; violent and child pornography; cyber bullying; excessive marketing, etc. – which for some children and young people under certain circumstances may reinforce or contribute to biased ideas about other people and the world, and to fear, anxiety, depression and destructive aggression, rather than to pleasurable experiences, social relations and learning; self-expression and personal fulfillment; health; and communication and participation for change towards a better environment, democracy and peace.

A common argument, not least among commercial media professionals, is that it is the parents' responsibility to take care of and teach their children about the media.

Research gives evidence that parents can be of great importance in this regard:

- The parental example plays an essential role, that is, the way parents themselves use the media often makes a lasting impression on how their children use – and in the future will use – media.
- Children and young people who live in a harmonious social environment – have good relations to their parents, peers, other adults and in the school – are more seldom influenced by media contents in undesirable ways than children who live in tangled social environments.
- Parents can mediate children's media use with the aim of reinforcing desirable and counteracting undesirable influences of media contents by 1) using media together with their children (co-using), 2) talking about media contents with their child (active mediation), and 3) setting rules in relation to the child's media use (restrictive mediation). Research on only 'restrictive mediation' (setting rules) and only 'co-using' the media has produced somewhat inconsistent findings, whereas 'active mediation' (talking about the media and their contents) seems successful in a variety of domains. At the same time, different kinds of mediations, and combinations of them, are, naturally, more or less suitable for different ages (Nathanson and Cantor 2000).

On the other hand, research also points to the fact that children's and young people's media use cannot only be the responsibility of parents alone:

- Much research concludes that parents are not especially well informed about their children's media use, and that communication between children and parents about media use and media contents many times is lacking. Sev-

eral studies show that parents often overestimate their own engagement in children's media use (e.g., Larsson 2004), as well as their children's satisfaction with talking with them about the media (e.g., Casas, González and Figuer 2004).

- In media-saturated countries, there are nowadays often many television sets and computers in the home, and great proportions of children and young people also have a television set and other media equipment in their own room. This means that the conditions of using media together, talking about media contents, and setting rules have radically changed – joint media use is in these countries becoming less common.
- There are always a great many parents who do not have time to engage in their children's media use, who do not know about or how to handle possible filtering methods, who do not care since they are in entangled situations themselves but instead rely on media as sitter-ins, or who do not think of extensive media use or certain media contents as anything to be concerned about.

The conclusion is that relying solely on parents is not an effective regulatory strategy in the media field (a conclusion also drawn by many others, e.g., Livingstone, Van Couvering and Thumim 2005).

However, this conclusion does not contradict the fact that parents need information and support to better interact with their children in relation to the media. Different awareness-raising efforts for parents are highly relevant – both in order to increase their own media literacy as adults and to make them realise the importance of their own role in helping children to become more competent, responsible and critical media users.

## 1. Television, Films, Videos/DVDs – What Is New?

We will here temporarily put media literacy as regards the Internet aside, since this is dealt with in a separate section further ahead. We will here also leave the creativity aspect away, since there is a special section on children's and young people's own media production later on.

Methods for increasing children's media literacy when it comes to television and films are more rarely addressed directly at children, especially young children, than to their parents. And, naturally, advice about using television and films in sensible ways has existed since these media were introduced. Nevertheless, the media landscape has basically changed in that national television channels today are accompanied by 'innumerable' transnational satellite channels that are outside national control, in that movies in the theatres are for rent and purchase in the form of videos and DVDs in private stores of many kinds, and that television and films are also currently finding their way onto the Internet.

Traditional means of awareness-raising as regards national media still exist in many countries, but they have been supplemented with new efforts at increasing information and media literacy among children and parents. Thus, traditional and new methods exist side by side.

Parents in many countries can find advice on how to mediate children's use of television and films in, for instance, the following ways:

- in parental magazines
- through campaigns of different kinds initiated by interest organisations or, sometimes, the government
- by participating in 'turn-off TV' weeks
- by watching television programmes on media literacy (e.g., the Swedish public educational television channel has produced special TV series on media literacy for children as well as for adults, series that are broadcast on ordinary television and also are available for use in schools)
- by watching so-called Public Service Announcements on TV use
- by paying attention to age recommendations/labellings associated with TV programmes and similar governmental rules for films
- by paying attention to programme schedules, reviews, possible content ratings/labellings, etc.
- by paying attention to the 'watershed' on television (meaning that programmes broadcast late in the evening are for adults)

- by complaining to authorities and (if possible) taking part in audience councils
- by joining associations with the objective of promoting a better television milieu
- by using blocking devices for television (the so-called V-chip in North America or set-top-boxes for digital television in several countries)
- by paying attention to acoustic or visual warnings shown on the TV screen or told by the programme presenters (in, e.g., Europe)
- by turning on the Internet to voluntary or interest organisations, consumer bodies, or to media authorities or taking part in parents' chat communities

The newer additions to traditional media literacy methods for children and parents in this list are apparently blocking devices for television, clear acoustic or visual warnings on national television channels, and the possibility to turn to different platforms on the Internet for getting advice about television and film contents.

Awareness-raising methods of the above-mentioned kinds have developed differently in different social, cultural and media contexts. Compare, for example, the V-chip in North America, and the acoustic and visual warnings on national television in Europe – methods, that for the rest, have turned out insufficient in that many parents do not use the V-chip and that 'warnings' sometimes get the function of 'forbidden fruit' for certain children and young people, thus, may be more tempting than deterrent.

Furthermore, the list of awareness-raising methods in the list above are, as a rule, more common in countries with much media. A tiny selection of examples in this section of what can be found on the Internet today for parents and children are therefore collected from voluntary and interest organisations in the media-rich North America.

● **Don't Buy it – Get Media Smart!, U.S.A.,** <http://www.pbskids.org/dontbuyit>

This organisation is addressing children and young people – as well as parents and teachers – about commercial messages/consumerism.

By teaching media literacy skills young people are supposed to be encouraged to think critically about media and become smart consumers. The aim of the organisation is to provide the user with skills to question, analyse, interpret and evaluate media messages. For instance, young people can learn how to discover advertising tricks (e.g., food advertising tricks), how to be a smart buyer, and how to react on or report something seen or heard in the media. The site also provides links to other similar organisations and media education sites and gives tips on literature.

Get Media Smart is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) is a nonprofit organisation created by the U.S. Congress and funded by American taxpayers. CPB provides funds to develop educational television, radio and online projects. It also funds more than 1,000 local public radio and television stations. The Public Broadcasting Service is a nonprofit organisation with PBS mem-



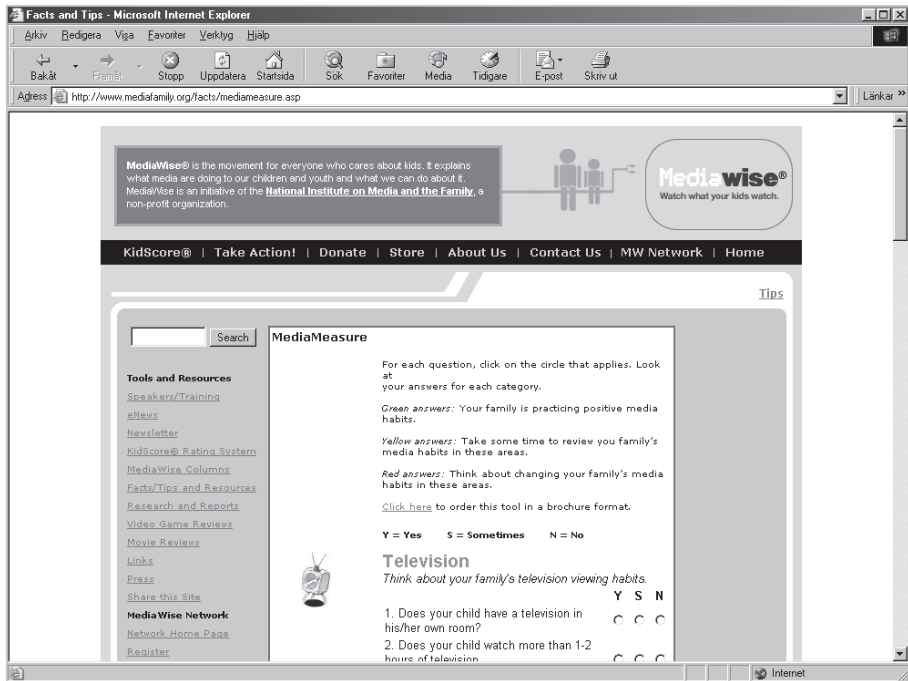
ber television stations in all 50 states. PBS gets its funding from PBS member stations, CPB, grants, video sales, royalties, license fees and investment income.

● **National Institute on Media and the Family, U.S.A**, <http://www.mediafamily.org>

The National Institute on Media and the Family is 'a research-based organisation on the positive and harmful effects of media on children and youth'. The organisation declares itself to be independent, nonpartisan, nonsectarian and nonprofit. Its 'MediaWise movement' aims to help families make wiser media choices and encourage parents to 'Watch What their Kids Watch'. The mission is to maximise the benefits and minimise the harm of media on children and families through research, education, and advocacy.

The website further says: 'We do not advocate censorship of any kind. We are committed to partnering with parents and other caregivers, organizations, and corporations in using the power of the free market to create healthier media choices for families, so that we have healthier, less violent communities. We seek to educate and inform the public, and to encourage practices and policies that promote positive change in the production and use of mass media.'

Various fact sheets are available on the website as well as tips to parents about how to use media and suggestions for how to talk to children about certain media



contents, for example, about war and terrorism. 'MediaMeasure' is a 'self test' with questions about the family's media habits and suggestions for improving them. There are also quizzes and practical tips about different activities for children and parents, together or separately, to raise awareness about media contents and their impact. Moreover, the organisation offers a newsletter, research reports, and reviews of video games and movies.

### ● **Parents Television Council, U.S.A.,** <http://www.parentstv.org>

Parents Television Council (PTC) is a grassroots, non-governmental organisation funded by donations from interested individuals and based in the United States. The mission of the PTC is to promote and restore responsibility and decency in American entertainment industry and to promote 'family friendly' television programming. The organisation was founded in 1995 to ensure that children are not constantly assaulted by sex, violence and profanity on television and in other media. The PTC uses a content-based rating system for 'informed viewing decisions'. On the website a traffic light is used as symbol for the classification of different TV series. The series are evaluated on basis of their suitability to viewers of all ages (and not on artistic merits). Time of transmission is also taken into account. A team of entertainment analysts screen the programmes and enter their results in a database for producing the 'Family Guide to Prime Time Television'. Among the organisation's actions are calls to file complaints or

comments to advertisers, television networks, and the Federal Communications Commission about unsuitable television content. The organisation also presents reviews of movies and video games and a guide to Internet safety.

### ● **Control Your TV, U.S.A.**, <http://www.controlyourtv.org>

The cable industry in the United States – through National Cable and Telecommunications Association and 'Cable in the Classroom' (CIC) – supports this website. 'Cable in the Classroom' ([www.ciconline.org](http://www.ciconline.org)) is the U.S. cable industry's education foundation. Its expressed mission is to foster the use of cable content and technology to expand and enhance learning for children and youth nationwide. CIC is mainly addressing teachers, giving tips and examples of its educational programming.

Control your TV, on the other hand, is addressing parents' concerns about what their children view on television. The approach to address violence and indecency on television is 'Choice', 'Control' and 'Education'. Under the heading 'Control' instructions are given for how to use the set-top-box to block unwanted programmes or channels and/or how to use the V-chip installed in the TV set. The V-chip utilises the ratings of TV-programmes made by the industry. 'Choice' describes how to find 'programs suitable for the family'. 'Education' gives links and tips about where to find information on media literacy for the family and other resources to get media smart and be able to 'navigate in the children's media landscape'. By transmitting Public Service Announcements on cable networks the cable industry also tries to educate their customers and viewers how to make responsible viewing decisions in the family.

### ● **American Academy of Pediatrics, U.S.A.**, <http://www.aap.org>

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is a non-profit professional organisation of pediatrics in the United States established to meet the needs of information and education of its about 60,000 members. The main focus of the organisation is children's health issues in general – but it is also engaged in children and the media. The website offers practical advice to medical doctors to meet the questions and worries of parents regarding their children's media use and the possible health effects – and includes direct advice to parents, as well. There are many articles, guidelines and tips addressing parents about, e.g., television's impact on children, using television wisely, and rules for Internet use.

In 1997, the AAP initiated a project called Media Matters – a national public education campaign on awareness of influence on the health of children and young people of the media to help pediatricians, parents and children. Through the campaign the AAP advocates media education to mitigate problems with harmful contents, such as media violence. 'Everyday Media Education Ideas' and 'Media Education Basics' are examples of tips and guidelines to parents. There is also a letter-writing campaign which encourages parents to send letters to movie theatres, video stores, etc., about the importance of: following ratings, being concerned and aware of the reasons behind these ratings, and informing the media staff about them.

Now, which media guidelines from the AAP will a parent find? The AAP says on its website under 'Media Guidelines for Parents':

Just as a print-literate child learns to be critical of the things he reads, he should also be able to do the same with moving pictures and sounds. Your child can learn to understand both the obvious and hidden messages in all media. Once children learn media education skills, they will begin to ask questions and think about the media messages they watch, read and hear. And they usually will enjoy doing it.

Following are basic media education points your child should know:

**People create media messages.** Any media message, whether it's a magazine article or a TV talk show, is created by a team of people. Those people write it, decide what pictures to use and what to leave out. All of these things give the message a purpose. Each media form uses its own language. For example, newspapers make headlines large to attract readers to certain stories.

**Media with sound may use music to make people feel a range of emotions.** When children learn about these techniques, they are able to understand how a message is delivered instead of only being affected by it. No two people experience the same media message in exactly the same way. How a person interprets a message depends on things unique to that person's life. These can include age, values, memories and education.

**Media messages have their own values and points of view.** These are built into the message itself. Children should compare the promoted values against their own values. It is important for children to learn that they have a choice in whether to accept the values that are being promoted in any media message.

You can use these lessons as part of your everyday life. Besides asking how and why media messages are created, children of various ages can do everyday activities with you or other adults to help build media education skills.

After that the AAP suggests parents to make educational games for their children out of advertising, movies, music videos, etc. – for full information, see AAP's website.

The AAP also underlines the importance of good viewing habits early and in the home, such as:

- Making a media plan.
- Setting media time limits. (The AAP recommends no more than one to two hours of quality TV and videos a day for older children and no screen time for children under the age of 2.)
- Setting family guidelines for media content.
- Being clear and consistent with children about media rules.
- Keeping TV sets, VCRs, video games and computers out of children's bedrooms.
- Making media a family activity.
- 'Talking back', or asking questions about media messages, something which builds the lifelong skills the child's needs to be a critical media consumer.

- Looking for media 'side effects' (of, e.g., violence, sex or graphic language), such as poor school performance, hitting or pushing other kids often, aggressively talking back to adults, frequent nightmares, increased eating of unhealthy foods, and smoking, drinking or drug use.

(For more complete information under each recommendation, please, see the AAP's website.)

Furthermore, the organisation has the following recommendations for parents (we refer again to the website for full information):

1. Set limits as regards your child's use of TV, movies and computer games to no more than one or two hours per day.
2. Plan your child's viewing
3. Watch TV with your child
4. Find the right message (Some television programs may portray people as stereotypes. Talk with your child about the real-life roles of women, the elderly and people of other races that may not be shown on television.)
5. Help your child resist commercials
6. Look for quality children's videos and DVDs
7. Give other options (than watching TV)
8. Set a good example (You are the most important role model in your child's life. Limiting your own TV viewing and choosing programs carefully will help your child do the same.)
9. Express your views
10. Get more information (through your pediatrician, public service groups, parent organisations or just talking to other parents)

● **Media Awareness Network, Canada**, <http://www.media-awareness.ca>

The Media Awareness Network in Canada are mainly addressing teachers but has a special section for parents, as well.

The following text is an example of what parents can read about television on the website of Media Awareness Network:

*Instead of two or three stations we now have hundreds, with shows for every taste and interest. This increased selection means that there are fewer opportunities for the whole family to sit down and enjoy a show together. Watching television has become a more solitary activity and less shared time means that parents are less able to monitor what their kids are watching.*

The parent can then click on the following headings for getting further advice:

**The Good Things About Television**

Kids can learn a lot from television, if parents are involved in their kids' viewing habits.

### Television's Impact on Kids

A look at the issues of concern to parents: age-inappropriate content, violence, and the "too much TV" dilemma.

### Special Issues for Young Children

How young is too young to watch TV? Managing superhero play and helping young children to distinguish fantasy from reality.

### Special Issues for Teens

Sexual content in prime time is on the rise, and parents worry that values absorbed from TV can be at odds with family values.

### Understanding Television Rating Systems and Codes

Learn what the TV ratings mean and the guidelines Canadian TV broadcasters have to follow.

### Managing Television in the Home

Take control of your family's viewing habits with these strategies for different ages.

### Talking to Your Kids About Television

Use TV to help your kids learn to think critically. This section contains tip sheets on talking to kids about everything from stereotypes and violence to TV news.

### Taking Action

Voicing your opinion to the TV industry, promoting parent education through your school council, and organizing a TV Turnoff Week in your home or community.

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window displaying the 'Talking to Kids about Media Violence' tip sheet. The browser's address bar shows the URL: [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip\\_sheets/media\\_violence\\_tip.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip_sheets/media_violence_tip.cfm). The page header includes the 'MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK' logo and a search bar. The main content area features a 'TIP SHEET' section with a 'printable version' and 'email a friend' link. The title of the tip sheet is 'Talking to Kids about Media Violence'. The text explains that talking to kids about violence in media (television, movies, video games, music, and the Internet) can help them understand and question its use. It includes two main discussion points: 'Ask kids: what is violence?' and 'Discuss how violence is used in different media.' The 'Ask kids' section suggests asking children to define violence, consider its physical and emotional impacts, and discuss how it is used in different media. The 'Discuss how violence is used' section suggests examining the context of violence in media, such as whether it is gratuitous, humorous, or a lesson, and whether it is the only solution to a situation.

**Talking to Kids about Media Violence**

Talking to kids about violence in the media they consume – television, movies, video games, music and the Internet – can help them put media violence into perspective and perhaps diffuse some of its power. The following "discussion starters" are designed to help kids develop the critical thinking skills they need to understand and question the use of violence in media.

- Ask kids: what is violence?**  
 Once kids understand what violence is, they can then start to put media violence into context. Ask them to consider both physical and emotional acts of violence in their definition. Can emotional violence be as harmful as physical violence? Yelling, put-downs, name-calling and threats are what kids are most likely to experience in the school yard. Talk about how these kinds of acts can begin a cycle that leads to physical violence. How do they feel when someone call them names or threatens them?
- Discuss how violence is used in different media.**  
 With a definition of violence in mind, kids can start to examine its use in the media they enjoy. Is violence used gratuitously or is it integral to the plot? Is it used in a humorous way and does the humour make it less harmful? Is it there to teach a lesson? Is violence shown to be the only possible solution to a situation which the audience expects?

## 2. Video and Computer Games

Video and computer games used on a large-scale can be regarded as an even newer medium than satellite television. Many organisations, associations and networks give recommendations about how to use video and computer games wisely – through media such as magazines and the Internet.

Yet, the most obvious media literacy method regarding digital games are rating and labelling. Below are brief descriptions of these methods in Europe, U.S.A. and Australia. Besides the rating/labelling systems, the websites mentioned here contain several other kinds of consumer information.

### ● **The PEGI system, Europe,** <http://www.pegi.info/pegi/index.do>

The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) age rating system was established in 2003 to help European parents make informed decisions on buying interactive games. Designed to ensure that minors are not exposed to games that are unsuitable for their particular age group, the system is supported by the major console manufacturers, including PlayStation, Xbox and Nintendo, as well as by publishers and developers of interactive games throughout Europe.

The PEGI system was developed and based on existing systems in Europe. In the drafting of the PEGI assessment form and the shaping of the system organisation, society representatives such as consumers, parents and religious groups have been involved.

The age rating system comprises two separate but complementary elements. The first is an age rating, similar to some existing rating systems. The PEGI age bands are 3+, 7+, 12+, 16+, 18+. The second element is a number of game descriptors. These are icons, displayed on the back of the game box that describe the type of content to be found in the game. Depending on the type of game, there may be up to six such descriptors. The intensity of the content is appropriate to the age rating of the game. The content types/game descriptors are: bad language, discrimination, drugs, fear, sex, and violence, respectively – see below in the same order:



The PEGI system is a voluntary system in which the ratings are carried out by members of the game industry itself. This takes place by means of a self assessment form. Rat-

ings proposed by publishers are then checked by NICAM the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audio-visual Media. A few single variations of symbols and agents exist. In the U.K., for example, The British Board of Film Classification (<http://www.bbfc.co.uk>), an independent, non-governmental body, is previewing digital games and functions as an agent for NICAM.

### ● **Entertainment Software Rating Board, U.S.A.**, <http://www.esrb.org>

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is a self-regulatory body established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) in the U.S.A. ESRB applies and enforces ratings, advertising guidelines, and online privacy principles adopted by the industry.

ESRB ratings have two equal parts: Rating symbols (on the front of the game box) suggest age appropriateness for the game and content descriptors (on the back) indicate elements in a game that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern.

#### ESRB age rating symbols



**EARLY CHILDHOOD** Titles rated **EC (Early Childhood)** have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate..



**EVERYONE** Titles rated **E (Everyone)** have content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language..



**EVERYONE 10+** Titles rated **E10+ (Everyone 10 and older)** have content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.



**TEEN** Titles rated **T (Teen)** have content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language. .



**MATURE** Titles rated **M (Mature)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.



**ADULTS ONLY** Titles rated **AO (Adults Only)** have content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.



**RATING PENDING** Titles listed as **RP (Rating Pending)** have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating. (This symbol appears only in advertising prior to a game's release.)

### ESRB content descriptors

- **Alcohol Reference** – Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages
- **Animated Blood** – Discolored and/or unrealistic depictions of blood
- **Blood** – Depictions of blood
- **Blood and Gore** – Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts
- **Cartoon Violence** – Violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted
- **Comic Mischief** – Depictions or dialogue involving slapstick or suggestive humor
- **Crude Humor** – Depictions or dialogue involving vulgar antics, including 'bathroom' humor
- **Drug Reference** – Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs
- **Edutainment** – Content of product provides user with specific skills development or reinforcement learning within an entertainment setting. Skill development is an integral part of product
- **Fantasy Violence** – Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life
- **Informational** – Overall content of product contains data, facts, resource information, reference materials or instructional text
- **Intense Violence** – Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death

- **Language** – Mild to moderate use of profanity
- **Lyrics** – Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use in music
- **Mature Humor** – Depictions or dialogue involving 'adult' humor, including sexual references
- **Mild Violence** – Mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and/or violent situations
- **Nudity** – Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity
- **Partial Nudity** – Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity
- **Real Gambling** – Player can gamble, including betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Sexual Themes** – Mild to moderate sexual references and/or depictions. May include partial nudity
- **Sexual Violence** – Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts
- **Simulated Gambling** – Player can gamble without betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Some Adult Assistance May Be Needed** – Intended for very young ages
- **Strong Language** – Explicit and/or frequent use of profanity
- **Strong Lyrics** – Explicit and/or frequent references to profanity, sex, violence, alcohol or drug use in music
- **Strong Sexual Content** – Graphic references to and/or depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity
- **Suggestive Themes** – Mild provocative references or materials
- **Tobacco Reference** – Reference to and/or images of tobacco products
- **Use of Drugs** – The consumption or use of illegal drugs
- **Use of Alcohol** – The consumption of alcoholic beverages
- **Use of Tobacco** – The consumption of tobacco products
- **Violence** – Scenes involving aggressive conflict

### Online rating notice

Online games that include user-generated content (e.g., chat, maps, skins) carry the notice 'Game Experience May Change During Online Play' to warn consumers that content created by players of the game has not been rated by the ESRB.

### ● **Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification, Australia, <http://www.oflc.gov.au>**

In Australia, video and computer games – as well as all kinds of films – are classified in the same way by the governmental body Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification. The classifications are: G (General), PG (Parental Guidance recom-

mended), M (recommended for Mature audiences) or MA 15+ (Not suitable for people under 15 – under 15s must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian).

Films can also be classified R 18+ or X 18+ (both meaning Restricted to 18 and over). R 18+ and X 18+ are not classifications for computer games.

There are, thus, two types of classification – advisory (G, PG and M) and restricted (MA 15+, R 18+ and X 18+).

In most circumstances, there is also a space next to this coloured symbol that contains brief consumer advice, specific to the film or computer game that has been classified and designed to provide assistant information about the content. Examples of consumer advice may be: mild violence, moderate sex scenes, strong violence, frequent coarse language, etc.