

PG-13 Films Not Safe for Kids?

PG-13 FILMS have lots of “happy violence” – as defined by the late communications theorist George Gerbner, that which is “cool, swift and painless” – without considering the consequences of violent acts, such as injury, death and the shattered lives of the people involved, according to a study by researchers at the school’s Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center.

Homicide is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds in the United States. Media depictions of violence help teach such acts to children, leading to three effects – increased aggression, fear for their own safety, and a desensitization to the pain and suffering of others, according to the study team, which was led by Theresa Webb, a researcher in the Department of Epidemiology and at the center. The study was published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

In a sample of 77 PG-13 rated films, Webb and her colleagues recorded a total of 2,251 violent actions, with almost half resulting in death. Although a small subset of this content contained violence that was associated with negative effects such as pain and suffering, only one film – *Pay It Forward*, in which the young hero is stabbed to death – contained violent acts that would demonstrate to youthful viewers how horrific violence can be.

“Violence permeated nearly 90 percent of the films in this study,”

Webb says. “And while the explanations and causes of youth violence are very complex, the evidence is clear that media depictions of violence contribute to the teaching of violence. This is especially true in our society, where the average young person’s engagement with visual media in all its forms can run to as many as eight hours a day.”

The researchers sampled all of the PG-13 rated films from among the 100 top-grossing movies of 1999 and 2000, as established by the *Hollywood Reporter*. To obtain their results, they coded each act of violence and the context in which it was presented based on features known to put violence in a good or bad light. Such features include the motivation for violence, the presence of weapons, the consequences of violence and the degree of realism.

The findings follow up on a 2005 study the researchers conducted that looked at movie violence in all ratings categories established by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). In that study, they found that parents using the ratings system to gauge movie content receive little meaningful guidance related to violent content.

This time around, the researchers selected the PG-13 category because it has become a repository for action films. “These films are often the largest budgeted ones made by the Hollywood film industry and have also been found to be equally, if not more, violent than R-rated films,” Webb notes.

Distribution of Violent Actions Among PG-13 Films, by Genre

Genre	Number (%) of Films with Violence	Number (%) of Violent Actions	Average Number of Acts Per Film*	Minimum Number of Acts Per Film	Maximum Number of Acts Per Film
Action (n = 13)	13 (16.9)	1,178 (52.3)	91	6	263
Comedy (n = 37)	31 (40.3)	747 (33.2)	20	0	137
Drama and Romance (n = 18)	14 (18.2)	75 (3.3)	4	0	28
Horror, Sci-Fi, Thriller (n = 9)	9 (11.7)	251 (11.2)	28	2	98
Total (n = 77)	67 (87.0)	2,251 (100)	29	0	263

* Includes all films in genre, both with and without violence