

# How to Do Family Movie Night Right - ParentMap

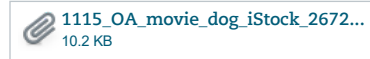
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## How to Do Family Movie Night Right

Expert tips on choosing movies, what to do when a movie isn't what you expected and how to (occasionally) use your movie choice for education

By Gemma Alexander



Since the invention of the VCR, family movie night has been an American tradition. Friday night is the apparent favorite, but sometimes the schedule shifts. Pizza in front of the TV may be the most popular dinner, but Chinese takeout has its supporters, and throw into the mix some gluten-free tacos, too. There are as many ways to do family movie night as there are families. We've talked to some movie-night pros to come up with rules (more like guidelines, really) for planning unique and successful Film Fridays, Cinema Saturdays or Screenplay Sundays (OK, we'll stop there).

Family movie night doesn't have to come with themed snacks or even be as formal as a weekly ritual. Mark Steiner, buyer at Scarecrow Video, the largest independent video store in the U.S., watches a lot of movies with his daughters, ages 13 and 10, but they don't have a regular movie night. Between extracurricular activities and baseball games on TV, family movie night happens whenever Steiner's busy family of four can fit in a movie together. "The communal experience is always different from viewing by yourself," he says.

**Takeaway: If your family is watching a movie together, it's family movie night!**

### *Do you feel lucky?*

#### Picking the right movie

"If it's going to be a family movie night, we want a film that is going to engage all of us, the kids and the adults," says Stefanie Malone, documentary filmmaker and executive director of the [National Film Festival for Talented Youth \(NFFTY\)](#). It can be hard to find films that are not only appropriate for the youngest viewers but interesting for grown-ups, so many families wait to start doing movie night until kids reach school age. "I have to watch myself to avoid 'youngest child syndrome' — letting the youngest watch things the oldest never did at the same age," Malone says.

Reaching consensus on what to watch can be nearly impossible, so many families take turns. In my family, parents can veto choices based on age appropriateness, but no one is allowed to complain about another's choice. As a result, my kids have discovered they like black-and-white movies, and I have discovered Disney's *Pixie Hollow* series is good for more than selling dolls. In other families, parents pick the movies or establish ground rules, such as banning straight-to-video releases or requiring documentaries only.

"You don't have to let the studios' taste rule you. You can't trust that just because a film is marketed to kids it will be what your kids will like. My 10-year-old asks why kids' movies always have to have a big chase scene at the end. She really loves Fred Astaire movies. You have to be choosy," [Scarecrow Video's](#) Steiner says.

**Takeaway: Pixar is good, but experiment to find movies that engage and inspire your family.**

### *Danger, Will Robinson!*

#### Picking the wrong movie

Ratings are not always consistent. Many current PG movies are scarier than PG-13 movies from the '80s. And ratings are not always based on the same things that parents care about. The website [Common Sense Media](#) provides parents with more than a recommended minimum age: Descriptions of the film's content include levels of language, violence, sexual content, drugs and alcohol, and consumerism as well as insight into any positive role models and messages in the film. The [Internet Movie Database](#) has similar information in its Parent Guide.

"You can never be sure," Steiner says. "One time we got burned by *Space Dogs*; it was just a horrible movie. Then there's the movie you think you can trust, like *James and the Giant Peach*, based on the book by Roald Dahl, who is my daughter's favorite author. The filmmakers indulged themselves and added a really creepy scene that wasn't in the book."

Although Malone relies on [Common Sense Media](#) to research unfamiliar movies, she tends to pick movies she remembers as favorites from her childhood. Shee does not hesitate to turn off a movie and watch something else when a choice proves unsuitable, and she keeps a "to watch" list of movies as alternatives in case a choice doesn't work out.

Both Malone and Steiner agree that when you're selecting movies, your children's temperaments are more important to consider than their numerical ages or movie ratings. Malone's 8-year-old son is more sensitive to scary scenes than his 10-year-old brother ever was; Steiner's 13-year-old daughter is disturbed by sustained tension and often opts out of movies her 10-year-old sister will enjoy.

**Takeaways:**

- Research movies in advance.
- Don't be afraid to turn off a movie that isn't what you expected.
- Have a "safe" movie handy as a backup so that a bad movie doesn't ruin the evening.

### *As you wish*

#### Movies as education

If chosen judiciously, inappropriate movies have their place, too. "A lot of times we watch movies with questionable values, and we use [them] as a teaching tool. I point out sexism and lack of diversity. I try not to be overwhelming, but I do let them know my opinions. It's an opportunity to talk," Malone says. On a recent trip to Chicago, Malone showed both her boys *The Blues Brothers*, deciding that the Chicago setting and musical history embedded in the movie were more significant than the language that earned it an R rating.

"You can cultivate their tastes without imposing on them. Whether it's music, a play or a movie, you should talk about it afterwards," says Steiner, whose musical selections in the car often lead to movie choices at home. Through their stories, movies provide starting points for conversations that might otherwise be awkward — or simply never come up in the course of daily life, like historical events. Malone watched the PG-13 movie *Selma* with her 10-year-old after the events in Ferguson, Missouri, and a documentary on the life of Walt Disney provided a history lesson on the Great Depression for Steiner's daughter.

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But in an overly scheduled world where every activity and product touts its educational and developmental benefits, the greatest benefit of family movie night might be relaxing together. "I don't always need a reason to watch a movie," Steiner says.

**Takeaway: Sit back, relax and enjoy the show.**

## Recommended

Malone and Steiner are both clear that movie choices are very personal. What works for one family (or even one child in a family) might not be appropriate for another. That said, here are a few of their family favorites.

### Stefanie Malone's list:

- *Duck Soup*
- *E.T. the Extra-terrestrial*
- *Raiders of the Lost Ark*
- *Star Wars*
- *The Goonies* (despite the language)
- *The Princess Bride*
- *Up*

### Mark Steiner's list:

- *Abbott and Costello movies*
- *Looney Tunes* (shorts)
- *Singin' in the Rain*
- *The Incredibles*
- *The Man Who Planted Trees* (short)
- *Up* (and other Pixar movies)
- *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*

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