

Challenging media:

talking with young people about what they're watching

PHOTO: Steinar Engeland



“Here’s the thing. Your teenager is being influenced by the things they watch. The best person to help them with that is you, their parent or guardian. This guide is about helping you to help them”

– CHIEF CENSOR DAVID SHANKS

Young people can access virtually any content on their devices – anywhere, any time.

As digital natives, they can and should make use of these opportunities for communication, education, and entertainment.

But young people can also be negatively impacted by what they see. We know this from international studies, our own research¹, and from talking directly to parents and teenagers nationwide. Young people are looking for guidance – we know because they’ve told us so.

We also know that parents and caregivers are concerned about what young people are viewing in movies, TV shows, games and websites².

This guide is for parents with teenagers at home. It has practical advice to help you:

1. Share and talk about entertainment media with your teen
2. Encourage them to think critically about what they view
3. Talk about sensitive or complex issues
4. Support your teen if they’re distressed by something they’ve watched

You can’t control everything young people see, but you can build their confidence by giving them tools to help deal with challenging media.



PHOTO: Leticia Björn

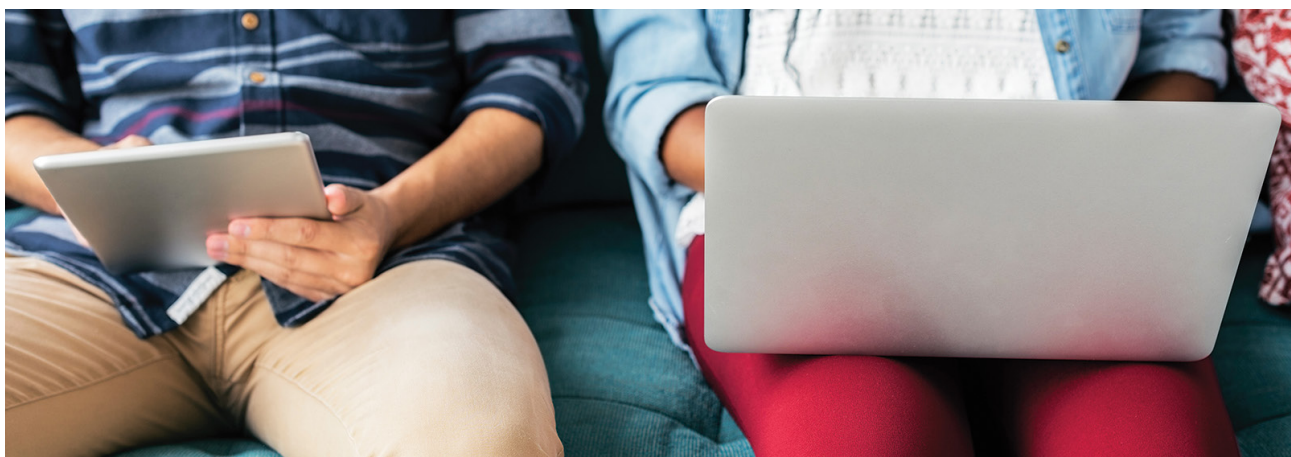
¹ *Young New Zealanders Viewing Sexual Violence*, OFLC, 2017

² *Children and teen exposure to media content*, OFLC/UMR, 2017

Let's start talking:

sharing media experiences with young people

What young people watch, play, read or listen to helps shape them as individuals. This section is about engaging with your teen's media use by sharing experiences and talking about what you watch. In later sections we'll look at challenging content and how to deal with distress, but we'll start with the basics.



START THE CONVERSATION

Getting started is easy. Pick an opportunity to talk to your teen about something you're watching or playing yourself, and ask them about what they're watching or playing. Talk about what you like and what you don't.

ASK your teen about their favourite TV/online shows, or their favourite channels on YouTube. What do they like about them? Who are their favourite and least favourite characters? If you don't talk about the small stuff, it'll be harder to talk about the big issues.

When you're comfortable talking about movies, shows and games, you'll be more likely to watch things together.

WATCH OR PLAY SOMETHING TOGETHER

Ask your teen about a show they're interested in, watch it with them, and talk about what's happening on screen.

ASK your teen's opinion about something you've both watched – it opens the door for ongoing dialogue. Show that you respect their points of view, even when you disagree.

You could also watch a movie as a family, or start a regular movie night. Always take the opportunity to watch something together – even if it's something you wouldn't choose to watch yourself.

If your teen doesn't want to watch a particular show with you, that's OK. There are all kinds of reasons for this, and we know young people often prefer watching things alone or with friends. Think about watching the show yourself and then talking to them about it. You might not personally like the shows your teen is into, but try not to be overly critical of the content or they'll be less likely to want to talk in future.

TIP: want to get a conversation going? Look for something that features diverse and complex characters, or deals with serious or controversial issues.

"I liked talking about things and just having discussions because it made me really think about the things I watch and whether I actually felt uncomfortable watching them"

– TEENAGE PARTICIPANT IN OFLC RESEARCH

USING ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AS A LEARNING TOOL

Watching and talking about entertainment media with your teen can lead to useful learning opportunities. Media is full of messages about how society works, how people should behave, and what's right and wrong. Use what's happening on screen as an opportunity for discussion and learning – and encourage your teen to think critically about what they're watching.

ASK your teen what they like about how a movie or show represents different characters and issues.

TIP: everyone experiences media differently. Encourage teens to see things from other people's points of view.

ASK if they think a movie is realistic. Could/would this happen in real life?

ASK if a movie or show uses stereotypes about men and women for example, or people with different ethnic backgrounds. What messages does this send to people watching?

TIP: keep in mind that what we see in movies, shows and games reflects the interests and points of view of the people who made them.

ASK if the real consequences of violence are shown. Are there better ways of handling conflict? What messages are sent about the use of violence?

KEEPING IT CASUAL

Young people will switch off if it sounds like a lecture. Remember, keep conversations casual. When young people are comfortable talking about media in general they'll be more likely to open up about things they've watched that were sensitive or upsetting.

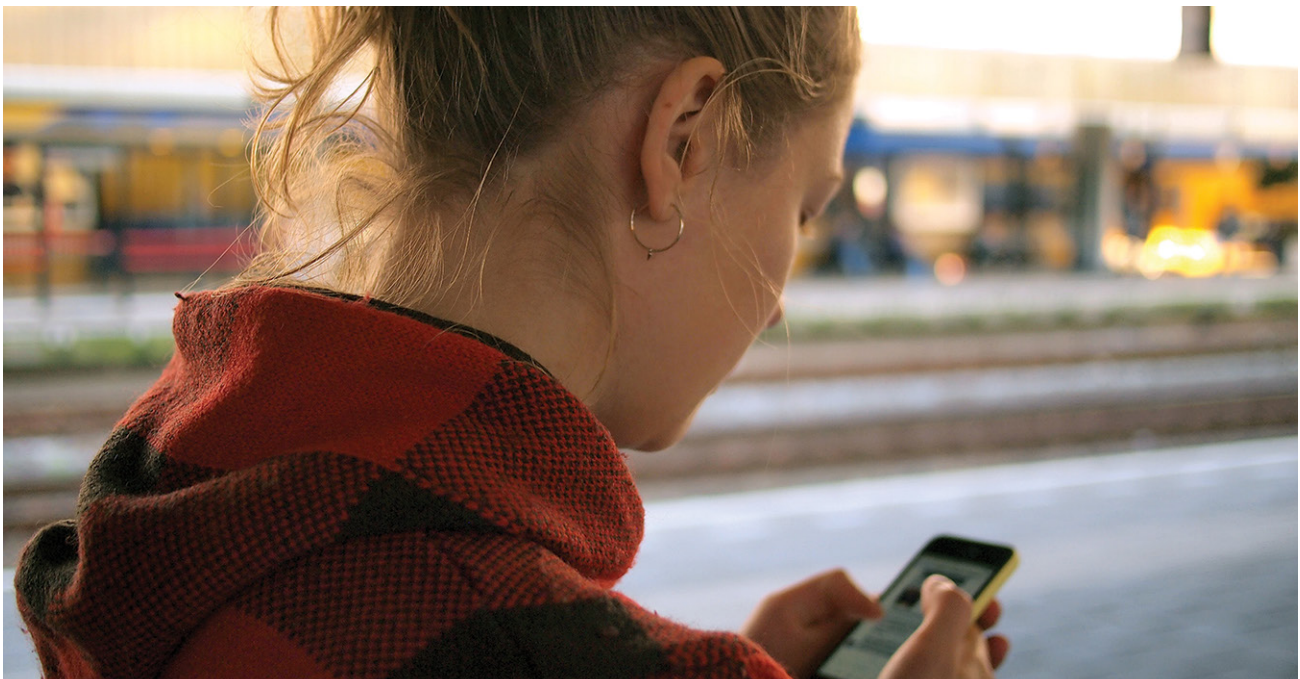


PHOTO: Daria Neprakhina

Challenging content:

talking to young people about sensitive or distressing media content

Sharing movies, shows and games can be a useful – and fun – way to learn. These experiences also make it easier for your teen to come to you for support if they've seen something challenging or distressing.

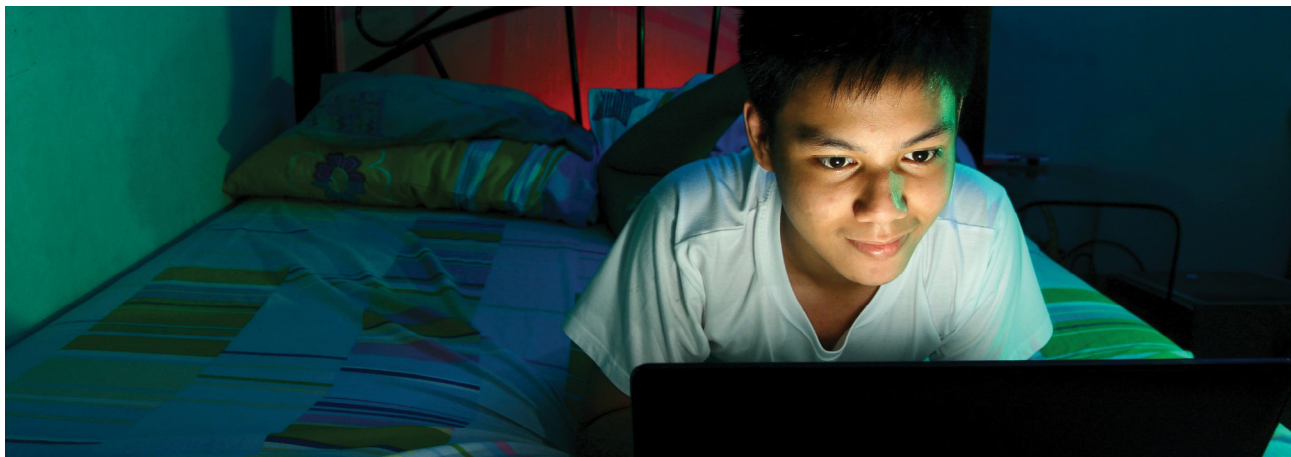


PHOTO: © Jampinam | Dreamstime.com

TALKING ABOUT SENSITIVE TOPICS

Movies, shows and games provide great opportunities to talk about sensitive topics – such as drug/alcohol use, suicide, bullying, sexual violence, or pornography.

ASK your teenager what they know about issues raised, and what they think about how these things are depicted on screen. Remember to listen and be respectful of their views.

Young people are often more comfortable talking about these things by referencing a character or storyline, rather than talking about themselves or someone they know.

You don't need to know all the answers, and if you're finding it hard to talk about something, that's OK, let them know! The important thing is that you're available for open discussion.

TIP: be ready to talk about how sex and relationships are depicted in media. Talk about respectful relationships and consent. Remember that young people often take their cues from what they see on screen, and unhealthy relationships are common in entertainment media.

TIP: just like adults, teens can become overly fearful about things like violent crime because of what they see in the media. If your teen is worried, remind them that what they see in media doesn't always reflect reality.

BE THE PERSON THEY COME TO FOR SUPPORT...

Young people often don't want to go to parents for help because they're worried they'll get in trouble – or that it might feel awkward. Remember, the more you talk with your teenager about entertainment media generally, the more comfortable they'll be discussing sensitive, challenging or distressing content that they've seen.

...but remember you're not alone

Sometimes your teen won't be comfortable coming to you and that's OK. If they need someone else to talk to, encourage them to talk to an older sibling, a teacher, a counsellor, or another trusted adult.

TIP: if your teen comes to you with a problem relating to media use, don't take away their devices in an attempt to protect them. They might feel like they've been punished and be less likely to ask for your help in future.

DEALING WITH DISTRESS: WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEEN IS UPSET BY SOMETHING THEY'VE SEEN

Watching a scary movie can be fun, but what's enjoyable for some can be seriously frightening or disturbing to others. Sometimes media depictions of things like suicide, sexual violence, or animal cruelty can trigger severe anxiety and distress.

If your teen has a strong reaction to something they've seen on screen, ask what made them feel that way, and help them talk about the emotions they're feeling.

TIP: check your own emotions before reacting, and keep calm when talking. Young people often mistake worry for anger – so let them know you're not angry. If you are worried, tell them so.

TIP: always take it seriously if your teen is upset by something they've seen, even if the thing that frightened or disturbed them seems silly or unrealistic. Talking it through will help them see they're not in any danger.

Young people can't always control what they see – but they can learn to manage how they respond to distressing content. Remember, things do get less upsetting over time, and talking helps.

TIP: share experiences of how media has affected you – did a movie ever make you upset or fearful?

TIP: remember that you can get help (see the list of **resources** at the end of this guide).

“...with stuff like that there's nothing you can really do afterwards except try to forget about it and just bury it in the back of your mind”

– TEENAGE PARTICIPANT IN OFLC RESEARCH

Safer media use

Taking opportunities to engage with your teen's use and understanding of entertainment media will help build their confidence and resilience. Here are some other ways you can support a safer media environment for young people.

ENCOURAGE RESPECTFUL MEDIA USE

Remind young people that when they're watching something that might be scary or offensive, they should be mindful of who they're watching it with. This is just as important when they're with friends at school as it is with younger siblings at home.

TIP: praise your teen for doing the right thing – they should feel good about it.



PHOTO: © Thomas Neubauer

IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT SOMETHING THEY'RE WATCHING

Check out an online review site for parents. When you know a bit more about the content, take the opportunity to bring it up with your teen.

TIP: we've included some helpful links in our list of **resources** at the end of this guide – take a look at Common Sense Media, (www.commonsensemedia.org) or the Internet Movie Database (www.IMDb.com) for detailed information about movies and shows.

RESPECT AGE RATINGS

They're there to help you. Read warning notes for information about why something is age-restricted. Encourage your teen to do the same, particularly if they're choosing something to watch with younger children. Be aware of 'RP' rated content – it can be popular with teens but they'll need your guidance if they're under the age on the label.

“My daughter is 14 and just last week a young boy at school showed her an ISIS beheading video he'd found on the 'net. She was seriously traumatised”

– PARENT PARTICIPATING IN OFLC CONSULTATION

SET SOME BOUNDARIES

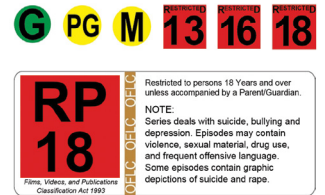
Ground rules for media use are important. We try our best to develop young people's confidence and resilience, but some things just aren't good for them to watch. Try to communicate your position clearly – if you don't want them to watch or play something, or visit certain websites, be open about the reasons why you feel this way.

Talk to your teen about what they think is reasonable – they're more likely to respect boundaries if they help shape them, and this reinforces a relationship based on trust.

TIP: parental controls or filters can be a useful tool for children or younger teens – but they're only a partial solution. As you build trust and understanding about their media use you might no longer feel these controls are necessary.

TIP: monitoring young people's media use can also be helpful, but only if you're open about it. Don't spy! It sends the wrong messages about privacy, encourages secretive behaviour, and makes it less likely that your teen will come to you for help or advice.

TIP: you can find our official NZ ratings in cinemas, on DVD/Blu-ray, and on some (but not all) online movie streaming services. You'll need to check individual streaming services to find out what ratings they use.



Don't wait until you feel like things have gone wrong or you feel out of control, or just have One Big Talk. Young people need you to guide them in the right direction, support them as they learn to navigate media for themselves, and to reinforce the positive decisions they make.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

Cyberbullying and other harmful online behaviour

Netsafe: www.netsafe.org.nz | 0508 638 723

Information about movies, TV shows and other media

Common Sense Media: www.commonsensemedia.org

Internet Movie Database: www.imdb.com

Find NZ movie ratings: www.fvlb.org.nz

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz

Helplines and information for parents, children and young people

Lifeline: www.lifeline.org.nz | 0800 543 354, free text 4357

Youthline: www.youthline.co.nz | 0800 376 633, free text 234

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865

Depression Helpline: 0800 111 757, free text 4202

Kidsline: www.kidsline.org.nz | 0800 54 37 54

The Lowdown: www.thelowdown.co.nz | free text 5626

Common Ground: www.commonground.org.nz

Skylight: www.skylight.org.nz | 0800 299 100

Rape Crisis: 0800 883 300

Shakti Crisis Line: 0800 742 584

OUTLine: www.outline.org.nz | 0800 688 5463

Samaritans: www.samaritans.org.nz | 0800 726 666

What's Up: www.whatsup.co.nz | 0800 9428 787

Rural Support Trust Helpline: www.rural-support.org.nz | 0800 787 254

Healthline: 0800 611 116

For more information see Helplines information at
www.mentalhealth.org.nz

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