HOW TO:

Programme Film For Children

In this guide we help you choose films that will extend and enhance children's experiences of film culture, and develop a clear rationale for choosing films to screen at festivals or film clubs in school.

Our guide is divided into two sections:

1. **Strategies for choosing films for children**
2. **Debunking the myths** about children's film and television drama – no more excuses to screen the same old films!

STRATEGIES FOR CHOOSING FILMS FOR CHILDREN

START FROM THE HEART

This means the heart of the film first and foremost, and then your response to it. Listen to your instincts about what local children will enjoy and whether it will work:

- What is it about?
- What is the story?
- Will it be familiar to children?
- Will they recognise themselves in it?
- Will it make them laugh or cry?
- Will it challenge, puzzle or disturb them?
- Will it help them understand the world better?
- Will it fire their imaginations?

POPULARITY VS QUALITY

Popularity and quality are not mutually exclusive and can be misleading criteria with which to judge film. Popular films can be rich and complex, while less mainstream, low budget films might have lower production values than we're accustomed to. Additionally, there is evidence of the positive impact of including children's existing experiences of film in the classroom – which will often consist of more popular titles.

Purpose is a more useful, accurate and inclusive tool for choosing films is. Ask questions such as:

- Is the film accessible?
- Are there moments of humour as well as more serious issues?
- Does it inspire you with ideas for related activities?
- Are the characters well rounded, especially in terms of gender?
- Are there representations of the world the children will recognise/respond to?
- Is it rich, complex and in need of further exploration?

FOR CHILDREN VS ABOUT CHILDHOOD

Be clear on whether a film about childhood is appropriate for the children in your audience - carefully consider the extent to which they can cope with material. Certification can help you with this, often providing detailed information about how and why the certification decisions were made, which can also be a useful prompt for pre and post screening discussions. This is not to say that challenging content should be avoided; film can be a very useful medium for exploring a wide range of themes and ideas that highlight injustice, poverty and gender inequality, and international films can help children engage with these issues and develop empathy.

FAMILIAR AND UNFAMILIAR

Programmers should aim to screen familiar and unfamiliar films side-by-side. When children watch films from outside their usual experience they notice those things that make them different which in turn draws their attention to the potentially more conventional characteristics of familiar films. For example, if children watch an old movie they'll notice it is in black and white and therefore become more aware of the role of colour in film, they might observe a character is dressed in a particular colour or the colour of a room. Similarly, short films, which often have ambiguous or elliptical endings, can help children to notice the more conventional narrative structure of the films they already know. Showing children a wide range of films increases their opportunity to be alert to all the different ways in which film makes meaning.

INTRODUCE CHILDREN TO SUBTITLED FILMS

As discussed below in *Myth: Children don't like subtitles!* and *Myth: There are only American films for children!* we can open up children's experiences to a wide range of films from around the world by introducing them to subtitles. This is an easy classroom activity using clips and shorts, once children become accustomed to subtitles they start to read them as part of the overall film experience. To get started visit our list of favorites in How To Create a Study Guide for Film.

CHILD-LED CHOICES

We can help children build decision-making skills and develop their identities by enabling them to make choices about the films they watch. Initiatives that actively support children to set up film clubs for pleasure and assist them in making their own choices for weekly or monthly screenings are highly valuable, especially when they are given training and access to a wide range of material about choices outside their cultural comfort zone. Children can also be meaningfully involved in juries and/or selection panels for cinema or festival events. This can be an empowering experience, leading to deep and lifelong engagement with film culture. It also ensures that the festival programmer has opportunities to gauge the reaction of local children to the film, helping them understand which audiences to recommend screenings to.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

THEY GET ENOUGH OF THAT AT HOME!

Children engage and participate in film and television narratives from an early age and are influenced by them in talk, play, emergent writing, identity and orientation to literacy. They are key storytelling forms that are still popular with children, despite competition from other on and offline activities. If only for these important reasons we need to be active in helping children access a wide variety film and television. For some handy tips, see How To create a Study Guide for Film.

BOOKS LEAVE MORE TO THE IMAGINATION!

As educators, first and foremost it is our responsibility to resist the argument that one medium is intrinsically less difficult than another. Contemporary children's films are often full of complex intertextual references and parodic humour and the moving image explores meaning in different ways, using a range of modes. Through exposure to film and television children learn to process complex conventions, such as continuity editing or mis-en-scene, and are actively engaged with a process of anticipation, interpretation of meaning and picking up on cues. Once they have undertaken some film production activity they become even more adept at these processes. Engaging with films where the conventions are unfamiliar also helps children see the conventions in more familiar films. To get started with film production see How To Create Films With Children 7-14.

CHILDREN DON'T LIKE SUBTITLES!

This is an easy myth to debunk! At Sheffield's Showcomotion children's film festival, children as young as three would read the subtitles in special screenings. Across the world children whose first language is not English regularly watch subtitled films. In countries such as France, Iran and Denmark, all of which also have their own vibrant film productions for children, audiences watch the majority of their international film and television drama with subtitles. In fact, when the film industry tried to introduce dubbed live-action American films in Europe they were rejected. See our tips for introducing children to subtitled films in the Strategy section above.

MYTH: CHILDREN DON'T LIKE OLD FILMS!

Anyone who has had the pleasure of showing a Laurel and Hardy film to group of young children knows that this is simply not true! We can increase children's access to their own film history and wider film culture by introducing them to older films in a way they can connect to and be engaged by just as we would with older written texts. We have never had better access to older films, both black and white and colour; take advantage of this treasure trove just as you would with classic literature.

FILMS MAKE CHILDREN VIOLENT/OBESE/STUPID!

Moral panics about children and the media are not new. In the 18th century there was grave concern that reading novels was impacting the 'moral fibre' of women, but we know now that these were a cultural form in which women's voices began to be heard. In the 21st century social media and games are in the spotlight for negative media attention. Our response is that no single medium is responsible for causing a particular kind of behaviour. If a child watches films all day every day, eating cake and doing nothing else, we might have grave concerns about their future, but we wouldn't feel that way if a child was reading books all day. We live in a digital era with access to many diverse activities; children should be encouraged to try out a wide range of social, cultural, sporting and leisure activities and always be encouraged to develop and nurture their favourites.

THERE ARE ONLY AMERICAN FILMS FOR CHILDREN!

There is a wealth of children's films from around the world to choose from. Teachers play a key role in working with film educators to lobby for more funding and support for European and World children's films that can be shown alongside the many great children's films made in the U.S. As educators we wouldn't accept that children were being well served if they only had American books to read, so it follows that children are being short-changed if they only see representations of children and childhood that are U.S. based, even those that are designed to have universal appeal. For some fresh ideas see our list of favorites in How to Create a Study Guide for Film
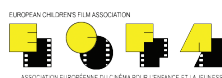
EUROPEAN CHILDREN'S FILM ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION EUROPÉENNE DU CINÉMA POUR L'ENFANCE ET LA JEUNESSE

Co-funded by the European Union

Creative Europe MEDIA