**How can I use TV and movies to teach my kids media literacy?**

Common Sense Media

Sometimes, we're so concerned about texting, apps, social media, games, and so on that we forget [how important -- and influential -- TV shows and movies are to our kids](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission/about-our-ratings). Whether you're watching together or they're off streaming shows on their personal devices, [kids still take in tons of TV and movies](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america-2013/key-finding-4%3A-tv-still-dominates-kids%27-media-time). And the messages that come through have a huge impact on their attitudes and behavior. But you know what else has a huge impact on kids' attitudes and behavior? Parents.

The idea of [media literacy may not seem to mix with the fun of TV and movies](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/news-and-media-literacy/what-is-media-literacy-and-why-is-it-important). But when kids relate to the content, they're more engaged, and they can learn critical-thinking skills from discussing it. [All you want to do is get your kids to think more deeply about what they're watching.](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/news-and-media-literacy/how-do-i-teach-my-kids-media-literacy) You may want to reinforce the positive ideas on the shows, or you might want to offer a different perspective. Teaching kids to pause and think -- and not just accept things at face value -- is teaching them a valuable skill. If your kids watch shows on their phones and tablets, they'll be used to discussing, sharing, and commenting with their friends. Ask them to show you what they like to watch (sharing what you're watching helps, too). Use those moments to inject your opinions and values (bonus points for not lecturing!). Here are some ways to teach media literacy using TV and movies for all ages:

**Little Kids**

* **Teach them to recognize commercials**. [Until around age 7, children don't understand the "persuasive intent" of commercials (the idea that someone is trying to sell them something).](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/marketing-to-kids/at-what-age-do-kids-understand-what-advertising-or-marketing-is)In fact, they often really like the "shows" that feature their favorite toys or foods. Begin by [getting kids to understand the idea behind ads](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/marketing-to-kids/how-do-i-teach-my-kids-to-understand-when-something-is-an-ad). When a commercial comes on, ask:
  + What is this about?
  + How do you know that?
  + What do you like about it?
  + What is it telling you?
  + How does it make you feel?
* **Reinforce real-world lessons.** Make the connection between positive actions and real life. When you see something you like (a character being helpful or resourceful), say, "That's nice that Joe helped Sam."
* **Make sure they understand what they're watching.** Little kids don't always follow how screen media relates to the real world. Point out connections to the real world (familiar people, activities), and ask questions to check that kids are making sense of what they see.

**Older Kids**

* **Encourage deeper thinking about commercials.**
  + [Point out when favorite characters are used to sell products, and ask kids if they're more likely to want something if, say, SpongeBob is on the packaging](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/marketing-to-kids/will-my-kid-feel-left-out-if-our-family-avoids-branded-merchandise).
  + Ask whether they think a food commercial is about healthy food or junk food; ask for examples to support their opinions.
  + Ask whether they think products work the same in real life as they do on commercials.
* **Discuss the real-world consequences of characters' behavior.** Encouraging this kind of critical thinking will help them avoid imitating or accepting behavior that they haven't fully thought through.
* [**Nip stereotypes in the bud**](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/tips-for-battling-stereotypes)**.** Point out positive, non-stereotypical attributes of characters (the princess is brave; the train conductor is kind).
* **Talk about how TV shows and movies are made.** You can discuss camera angles, lighting techniques, props, and even close-ups and long shots. All of these help kids understand that different methods are used to tell a story, provoke different reactions, and sometimes manipulate audiences.

**Tweens and Teens**

* **Dive into**[**media-literacy questions**](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/news-and-media-literacy/how-do-i-teach-my-kids-media-literacy)**to get them thinking for themselves.** You don't want tweens and teens just accepting everything they see. Ask:
  + Who made this? How can you tell?
  + Why did they make it? Why do you think that?
  + What is the creator's point of view? How do you know?
  + Who is the audience? How do you think this would go over with different audiences?
* **Discuss ethical dilemmas.**The tween and teen years are when kids begin to figure out their own sets of principles to live by. Using characters who struggle with right and wrong from movies and TV can really get them to think through those issues for themselves.
* **Talk about the marketing of movies and TV.**Explore how production houses use different methods, including viral videos, celebrity appearances on late-night shows, online quizzes, and teasers, to promote their shows. Ask tweens and teens why certain shows use certain outlets, such as social media, to get attention.