THE GOOD GUYS:
HOW CHARACTER STRENGTHS DRIVE KIDS' ENTERTAINMENT WINS.

CENTER FOR SCHOLARS & STORYTELLERS

UCLA

common sense media®

Authors:
Lauren B. Taylor, MA
Yalda T. Uhls, MBA, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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SCHOLARS &
STORYTELLERS

INTRODUCTION

Communication

Compassion

Courage

Curiosity

Empathy

Gratitude

Humility

Integrity

Perseverance

Self-control

Teamwork

The world today is an increasingly interconnected and overwhelming place. Generation (Gen) Z, referring to people born after 1995, is the first one to grow up in this world as digital natives. As a result, Gen Z places a high emphasis on the use and importance of technology. Researchers have also found that Gen Z values social justice, the truth, and individuality[1][2]. As Gen Z fights to address the many systems that are broken and must be fixed, they are going to need every tool possible to succeed. They are going to need to be courageous, empathetic, and persevering. These are character strengths that can be developed–especially if media producers and storytellers help them along. Youth are spending more time than ever consuming media. **That raises a question: what are they learning from all this content? And what can they learn?**

Several years ago, Common Sense Media launched an initiative, funded by the Bezos Family Foundation and the John Templeton Foundation, to help parents, educators, and children select content that models skills and virtues that support positive youth character development. They identified a list of 11 core Character Strengths (defined below) that can be demonstrated through media to youth audiences.

This list was then used to develop a first-of-its-kind tagging system that helps parents and children easily identify content promoting these Character Strengths. Common Sense Media began systematically identifying content with these Character Strengths in March 2016– and then evaluated the use of this tagging system among parents and children. In 2019, the Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS) released a report, finding that both parents and children prefer media content that promotes character development, especially when it features Character Strengths. **In other words, parents and children want to watch content that sparks conversation and provides learning opportunities.**

But does that preference translate into paying customers? To find out, we combined data provided by Common Sense Media with publicly-available records such as boxofficemojo.com and rottentomatoes.com to create a sample of over 1,700 films. We analyzed how the inclusion of Character Strengths related to box office performance both in the U.S. and internationally.

We also looked at differences in how many Character Strengths were featured in films across recommended viewing age groups. We grouped audiences based on developmental milestones: 2- to 5-years old, 6- to 7-years old, 8- to 12-years old, and 13- to 18-years old.

[1] Clark, S. (2022, August 1). Do Your Brand's Values Align With Those of Gen Z?. CMSWire. https://www.cmswire.com/customer-experience/do-your-brands-values-align-with-those-of-gen-z/

[2] Francis, T., & Hoefel, F. (2018, November 12). 'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies. McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we:

1. **DOCUMENT THE FREQUENCY OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN FILM (1,728 TITLES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY);**

2. **EXAMINE HOW THE INCLUSION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS RELATES TO FILM SUCCESS BY LOOKING AT SEVERAL METRICS OF BOX OFFICE PERFORMANCE; AND**

3. **LOOK AT THE NUMBER OF TOTAL CHARACTER STRENGTHS ACROSS RECOMMENDED VIEWING AGE GROUPS.**

At the Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), we know that storytellers care deeply about the content they are putting into the world, in particular targeted to youth. In partnership with child development experts and social scientists, we can work together to integrate these Character Strengths in a way that enhances the storytelling and has a positive impact on youth.

CSS is proud to be working with the John Templeton Foundation to develop resources to support content creators who are interested in ensuring their stories have a positive impact. We look forward to sharing these tools widely in the coming months.

The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), at UCLA, collaborates with leading scientists to provide research-based insights for content creators crafting authentic and inclusive stories for children (ages 2-9) and adolescents (ages 10-25). Our resources and tools include tip sheets, workshops, and original research. As the only organization with industry expertise, academic credibility, and institutional affiliation that focuses solely on youth, CSS aims to positively impact kids, tweens, and teens where they are: on screens. You can learn more about our work at scholarsandstorytellers.com.

DEFINITIONS
Character Strengths

Below are the definitions for the Character Strengths that were developed in the system that Common Sense Media uses to tag content. **These 11 characteristics encompass moral character values and social-emotional skills that underscore ethical behavior and qualities needed for thriving within social institutions (e.g., family, school, workplace).**

COMMUNICATION

- Listening attentively and appreciatively, expressing oneself clearly and sensitively, and honoring differences.

COMPASSION

- Caring about others and behaving generously and with concern.

COURAGE

- Taking on challenges even if there is a risk of physical harm and/or harm to reputation.

CURIOSITY

- Having a strong desire to learn or know something — a search for information for its own sake.

EMPATHY

- Understanding and sharing the feelings of another.

GRATITUDE

- Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen.

HUMILITY

- Not regarding oneself as more special or better than others.

INTEGRITY

- Speaking the truth, acting in a sincere way, and taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.

PERSEVERANCE

- Working hard, despite obstacles, in pursuit of a long term goal.

SELF-CONTROL

- Being able to manage one's thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

TEAMWORK

- Working respectfully and effectively with a group.

DEFINITIONS

STAR RATING

- Common Sense's star rating "are based on child development best practices. We display the minimum age for which content is developmentally appropriate. The star rating reflects overall quality and learning potential."

AGE RECOMMENDATION

- Based on reviews from the Common Sense team, a movie's age recommendation is defined as "the minimum age for which content is developmentally appropriate."
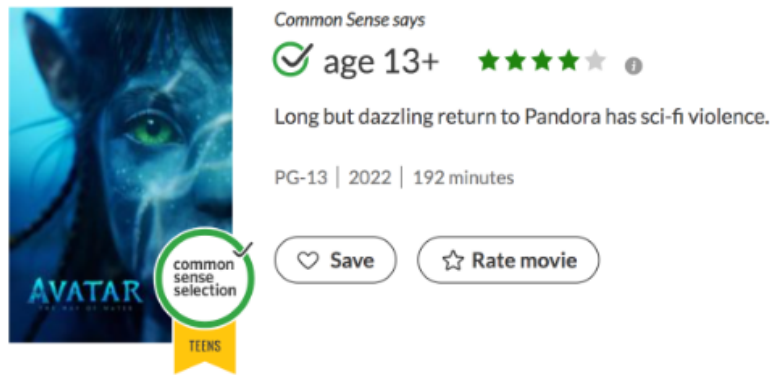
The following definitions explain the variables that were collected from online sources:

OPENING WEEKEND

- Gross revenue made by a film in the first weekend (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) of its release.

BOX OFFICE (B.O.) SALES:

- Gross revenue of ticket sales for a film at a movie theater.

    #### DOMESTIC B.O.

    - Total revenue made by a film from sales at movie theaters in the United States.

    #### INTERNATIONAL BOX OFFICE B.O.

    - Total revenue made by a film from sales at movie theaters outside of the United States.

    #### WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE B.O.

    - Total revenue made by a film from sales at movie theaters globally.

TOMATOMETER

- A score given to a film by <u>rottentomatoes.com</u> that is based on the reviews of professional film and television critics. The score represents "the percentage of professional critic reviews that are positive for a given film or television show."

AUDIENCE SCORE:

- A score given to a film by rottentomatoes.com that is based on the reviews of the general audience and users of the website. The score "represents the percentage of users who have rated a movie or TV show positively."

MAIN FINDINGS

Each of these findings are explained in greater detail on the following pages. The method by which we arrived at these findings can be found at page 12.

#1 ★★★★★

Having Character Strengths present in the film is positively related to all metrics of box office performance.

Films tagged with Character Strengths made an average of more than $87 million globally, compared to only about $34 million for films without them, an 88% difference.

#2 ★★★★★

Films for the teen audience had the lowest number of Character Strengths.

The higher the recommended age for films, the lower the number of Character Strengths present in them.
We found a significant negative correlation between the total number of Character Strengths in films and recommended age.

#3 ★★★★★

The most frequent Character Strengths tagged were perseverance, courage, and teamwork.

Critical Character Strengths, like humility and integrity, were not frequently included in films.

> "We're pleased to support a study that explores such an important topic for children and families," said Dr. Richard Bollinger, Senior Program Officer in Character Virtue Development at the John Templeton Foundation.
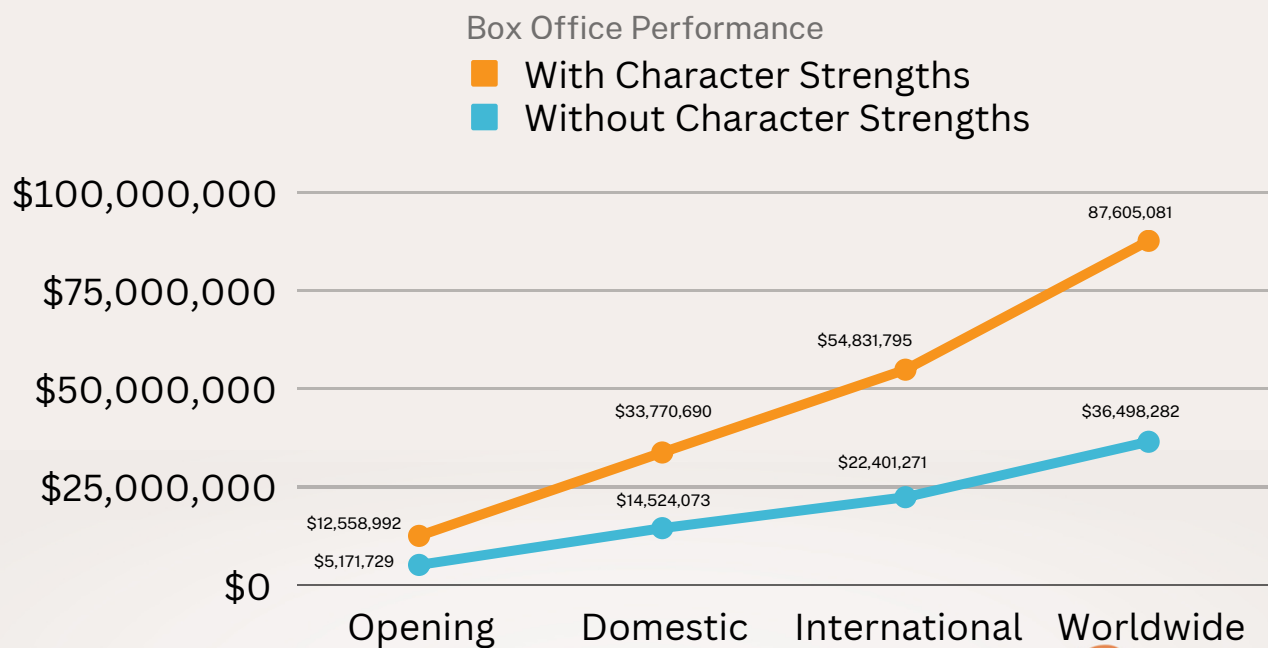>
> "There's clearly an appetite for content that inspires and empowers children to develop character strengths— strengths that we believe can help all of us, including children, to create lives of purpose and meaning."

Having Character Strengths present in the film is positively related to all metrics of box office performance (i.e., opening, domestic, international, worldwide).

Box Office Performance
- **With Character Strengths** (orange)
- **Without Character Strengths** (blue)

	Opening	Domestic	International	Worldwide
With Character Strengths	$12,558,992	$33,770,690	$54,831,795	87,605,081
Without Character Strengths	$5,171,729	$14,524,073	$22,401,271	$36,498,282

(Y-axis: $0, $25,000,000, $50,000,000, $75,000,000, $100,000,000)

What does this mean?

Films containing Character Strengths are not only beneficial to child audiences–they also make more money.

Interestingly, these Character Strengths appear to hold value across cultures and countries. Internationally, films with Character Strengths performed far better than those without, **an average of $51 million dollars more.**

FINDING TWO

Films rated for teens ages 13- to 18- years contained far fewer Character Strengths than films rated for children.

- Content for 8- to 12-year olds contained the most Character Strengths.
- Not only did films rated for teens contain less Character Strengths on average, they were more likely to not have *any* Character Strengths tagged.

Character Strengths by Age Group
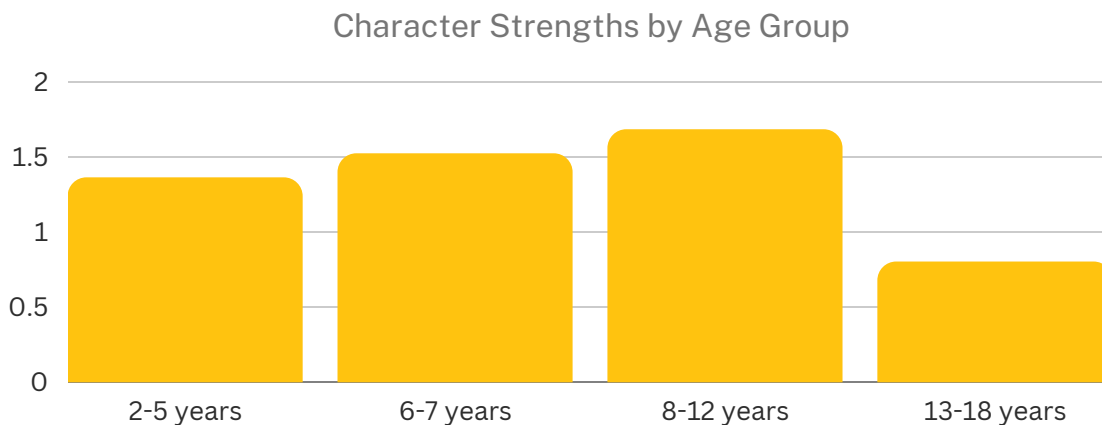
Note: There is a significant negative correlation between the total number of Character Strengths tagged in films and recommended viewing age (r = -.31**).

What does this mean?

There is a clear gap in the industry for content directed at teens that promotes positive Character Strengths. Teens are at a critical developmental stage where they are impressionable and easily influenced by their social environments, including media. Research[3] suggests that prosocial media is effective in teaching prosocial behaviors (ex., empathy) and other positive outcomes. So, storytelling that highlights these Character Strengths holds enormous promise to help youth so they can better navigate the key challenges and changes they are experiencing.

[3] Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L. M., Holmgren, H. G., Davis, E. J., Collier, K. M., Memmott-Elison, M. K., & Hawkins, A. J. (2018). A meta-analysis of prosocial media on prosocial behavior, aggression, and empathic concern: A multidimensional approach. Developmental Psychology, 54(2), 331–347. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000412

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The most frequent Character Strengths tagged were perseverance, courage, and teamwork.

Presence of Character Strengths

■ Number of films
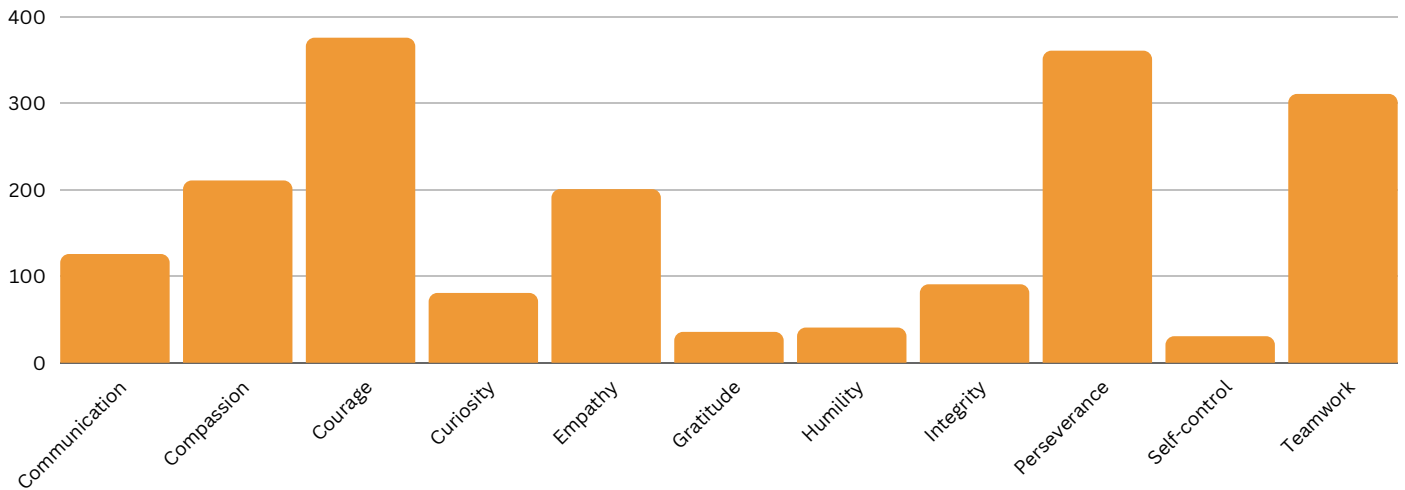
Not surprisingly perseverance and courage are Character Strengths frequently used in storytelling. And teamwork is often featured in content to younger audiences. Yet our research found that other Character Strengths such as humility, integrity, and self-control could be more frequently modeled in stories.

In a survey[4] of over 1,000 teen boys, only 2% believed that honesty and morality are valued traits for boys. Our study shows that integrity is infrequently modeled in films, thus perhaps confirming one of the places where boys are getting this message.

4 Plan International (2018). The State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Films containing Character Strengths are not only preferred by parents and children, as demonstrated in previous research[5], but also by audiences worldwide. Our findings show that the number of Character Strengths in films is directly related to worldwide box-office performance.
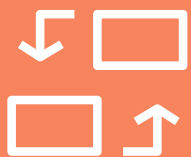
However, there are two major areas for improvement to help better equip Gen Z and the next generation in navigating an increasingly overwhelming world:

FIRST, Teenagers who are at a critical developmental stage are not being provided enough content that can help their character development and social-emotional learning. As such, content directed at teenagers should feature more Character Strengths to help teens with positive character development, as they are currently being left behind.

SECOND, Key Character Strengths–such as integrity, gratitude, and humility–should be more prevalent in content for all ages. While the most frequent Character Strengths of perseverance, courage, and teamwork are valuable skills, they could be supported by the other Character Strengths that are less frequently portrayed in film storylines, as all are necessary for positive character development and academic and professional success. Further, these are the Character Strengths that children struggle with the most, and so creators may be missing an opportunity to help children where they need it most.

At CSS, we are committed to finding ways that storytelling can support youth to thrive and grow. We have shown that content with messages of positive character development is not only preferred, but also performs better financially. We have also identified the gaps in the market and hope that the industry takes these findings into consideration when developing future content, especially those creating content for teens. And as mentioned in our introduction, we look forward to sharing tools to support storytellers who want to feature Character Strengths in their content in the coming months.

Prior work[6] by CSS has documented teen's change in values and an increased desire for authentic, inclusive, and representative content. The potential is there for media producers to create content that aligns with the core values of Gen Z and help support them in these values by developing key Character Strengths necessary for success.
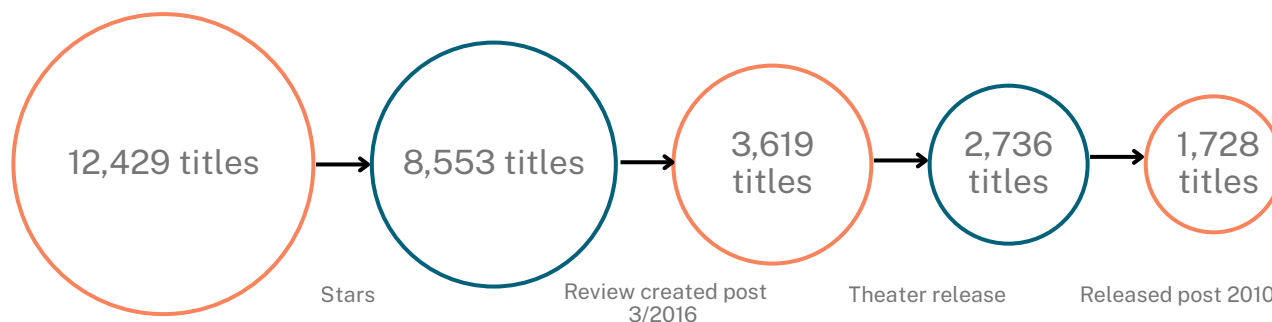
[5] Sanders, A.J., Felt, L., Wong, K. & Uhls, Y.T. (2019). The power of storytelling: media and positive character development. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Scholars and Storytellers.

[6] Rivas-Lara, S., Pham, B., Baten, J., Meyers, A., & Uhls, Y.T. (2022). CSS Teens & Screens 2022. # Authenticity. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Scholars and Storytellers.

METHODS

Sample:

Our analyses started with data provided by Common Sense Media that contained a list of over 12,000 titles that were reviewed by their team. This dataset included film titles, release date, Common Sense star rating, age recommendations, and tagged Character Strengths[7]. To answer our research questions, we narrowed the sample down using the following procedure:
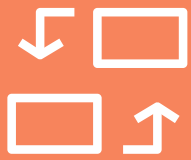
1. First, we removed any titles that had a Common Sense Media star rating of 1 or 2, as these titles were not evaluated for strengths and skills by CSM reviewers, which reduced our sample from 12,429 titles to 8,553.
2. Common Sense Media began systematically reviewing titles for Character Strengths in March 2016, the launch date of the tagging system, so we cut data from before that date leaving 3,619 titles.
3. We then evaluated whether the titles were released on streaming platforms or in movie theaters and removed streaming data points, reducing us to 2,736 titles.
4. Finally, we cut any data points that were released in movie theaters prior to 2010, giving us our final sample of 1,728 film titles.

12,429 titles	8,553 titles	3,619 titles	2,736 titles	1,728 titles
	Stars	Review created post 3/2016	Theater release	Released post 2010

Materials:

Data about each of the films was sourced using a combination of content analysis by reviewers at Common Sense Media and data entry from publicly available records including boxofficemojo.com and rottentomatoes.com.

Data on domestic, international, and opening weekend box office performance was sourced from boxofficemojo.com. This quantitative measure allowed the team to assess the success of films in relation to the Character Strengths. For a second measurement of success, we sourced audience and critic scores as rated on rottentomatoes.com.

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[7] In order to earn a tag, the strength/life skill in question must:
1) Be intrinsic to the title's plot and character(s).
2) Be repeated.
3) Be consistent with "winning."
For further details, please refer to the original report.

METHODS

Data Analysis:
Before conducting our analyses, we first needed to clean the data to make it usable in the analyses. The Character Strengths variable in the original dataset from Common Sense Media was entered as a list of the tagged Character Strengths for the movie (e.g., communication, perseverance, teamwork) as single data points. So, we created variables for each of the 11 Character Strengths individually and coded it as either absent (0) or present (1) in the movie. Next, we summed the values for each of these 11 to create a composite score of the total number of Character Strengths in a film.

To evaluate the relationship between the number of Character Strengths tagged in a film and box office performance, we ran a multiple linear regression analysis to evaluate impact on opening, domestic, international, and worldwide revenues. In the analysis, we controlled for star rating, as well as both audience and critic scores, to ensure that higher rated, better-received films were not driving higher box office scores.

Next, we used descriptive statistics to compare the total number of Character Strengths across age groups. We first grouped the data into four commonly-used age categories (2- to -5- years old, 6- to 7-years old, 8- to 12-years old, and 13- to 18-years old), then calculated the average number of Character Strengths for each age group.

Limitations:
While our original dataset contained over 12,000 titles, our sample was reduced to only 1,728 film titles that could be included in the analysis due to a lack of box office data for some titles and the tagging system not being systematically implemented until March 2016.

There were also many titles in the sample that were tagged with Character Strengths, but were released on streaming platforms and thus do not have box office data. Once streaming data becomes publicly available (and there are standardized measures of evaluation for such releases), we hope to look at the relationship between Character Strengths and performance for streaming services and replicate our findings.

Additionally, as with all content analysis, the project is limited by the potential for human subjectivity in the rating and evaluation of film titles for Character Strengths. However, Common Sense Media's reviewers are a team of highly trained experts that represent and consider a diverse range of perspectives in their ratings.

A MESSAGE FROM COMMON SENSE MEDIA

At Common Sense Media, we're committed to recommending age-appropriate media that kids can enjoy and families and teachers can feel good about. We believe that media has the power to enrich, entertain, and inspire. Through our thousands of reviews of movies, TV shows, games, books, and apps, we're helping families make smart media choices that are safe, high-quality, and also meet their family's needs and values. We're also always listening to the millions of parents, caregivers, and educators who rely on our ratings and reviews to better understand what they're looking for in their media.

In 2015, we surveyed our community and learned that they're looking for stories and experiences that can help teach kids prosocial values. That's why we launched our Character Strengths Initiative — to help families and teachers discover, use, and share great visual and interactive media that highlights and builds kids' character strengths, both at school and at home. Today, we have thousands of reviews that feature this first-of-its-kind ratings system, highlighting the movies, TV shows, games, and apps programs that stand out for character strengths like teamwork, collaboration, empathy, and more.

In partnering with the Center for Scholars & Storytellers, based at UCLA, we want to encourage the entertainment industry to tell more stories that help our kids grow into kind, empathetic, collaborative adults. Families and educators aren't just asking for this type of media — they're actively seeking it out. So let's give them more of what they want, to the benefit of all kids.

Common Sense Media is the nation's leading nonprofit organization working on behalf of kids and teens to make the digital world healthier, safer, more accessible, and more engaging for them and for all families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

RESOURCES FOR BUILDING CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Media-based resources for youth

Barbie Dream Gap to develop empathy, resilience, and other SEL competencies

Caring and Sharing from Sesame Workshop

Channel Kindness from Born This Way Foundation

CSS's Kindness is Contagious playlist: Curated YouTube playlist that promotes kindness, empathy, and gratitude developed by CSS in partnership with UCLAs Bedari Kindness Institute and the school of theater, film and television

Emotions and Self-Awareness from PBS Kids

Resilience from Sesame Workshop

Learning resources for families and educators

Beyond Our Neighbors: A Curriculum for Expanding Empathy and Compassion to "Others" from Doing Good Together

Big Heart World from Nick Parents

Common Sense Media's Tips for parents and media picks that promote Character Strengths

CSS Building Character Strengths resource page

K-8 Learn Kind SEL Curriculum from kindness.org

Kindness.org tools for fostering kindness at home

Making Caring Common Resources for Families and Educators to develop gratitude, empathy, and compassion

Nurturing Resilience & Joy in/among Young BIPOC Children from Embrace Race

Read with Empathy from Doing Good Together

SEL at Home: Learning Together from the Lions Club International Foundation

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