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**Youth-Rated Films Should Be Smoke-Free**

**by**

**Tobacco-Free Action**

**of Columbia & Greene Counties**

Children are impressionable, little sponges unconsciously soaking up their surroundings without understanding them, repeating things they see and hear for practice. Parents know they must watch their own language and behavior “around the kids” or risk seeing bad habits reflected back at them. Adolescents are primed for experimentation and wide-open to suggestion without fully grasping the potential consequences of their choices. The teenage years are fraught for parents who want to protect their offspring from the most obvious dangers while allowing them to explore the world and begin to find their own way, an exhausting combination.

The entertainment industry has always been a source of inspiration or corruption for teens, which one depends on your perspective and the type of entertainment involved. In its heyday, Hollywood was at the center of the entertainment world and is still a formidable player on that stage. The motion picture rating system of G, PG, PG-13, and R was introduced in 1968 as a way to help parents decide what films are [appropriate for their children](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriate_for_children). Violence, profanity, drug use, nudity and sexual content—all things that could be frightening or suggestive to young minds—are considered in determining what rating a film receives. Smoking and tobacco use were not included.

Arguing that this omission was a mistake and citing abundant research showing a connection between on-screen tobacco use and teen smoking, parent groups, public health advocates, and even the National Association of State Attorneys General, have for decades urged the Motion Picture Association to keep youth-rated films smoke-free. In 2007, the MPA said it would consider smoking in rating a film, but in practice that has been very loosely applied or ignored altogether. There are instances of even G rated films that contain smoking, and lighting up in PG-13 films is not uncommon. Among this year’s PG-13 Oscar-nominated films, “West Side Story,” “King Richard,” and “No Time To Die” all show characters using cigarettes.

So far, Disney is the only production company that has made it corporate policy to eliminate tobacco imagery from all its films. For example, in the studio’s 2021 re-make of the original cartoon “Cruella,” a PG-13 Oscar nominee, gone is the villain’s ubiquitous cigarette. Other PG-13 smoke-free nominees are “Dune,” “The Eyes of Tammy Faye,” “Free Guy” and “Spiderman: No Way Home.”

More movies now reach audiences through streaming than through traditional theater venues and are more accessible to young people. A recent study from Truth Initiative found that 60% of the top 15 television and streaming shows for youth in 2020 featured smoking, exposing an estimated 27 million aged 15-24 to tobacco imagery. The worst was the popular animated show "Family Guy.” Other Fox offenders are “The Simpsons” and "Bob's Burgers." Netflix remains the streaming platform with the most liberal use of smoking, despite a 2019 pledge to improve. Some Netflix shows, such as "The Umbrella Academy" and "The Queen's Gambit," normalize tobacco use by showing it in every episode. In fact, only 14% adults in the US are smokers (12.8% in NYS).

In recent years technology has been propelling cultural shift at many levels, including at the intersection of teens and tobacco. Vaping, the new cool, has replaced smoking as a preference among high school students. Hollywood was defined as the “Big Screen”; now there are many small screens. Particularly during the pandemic, phones, tablets and laptops have become a retreat, refuge, and distraction for multitudes. The up-swell of streaming services and social media platforms has transformed the way many people, including young ones, communicate and consume entertainment. What young people are seeing is harder for parents to supervise and far ahead of regulation. Social media influencers with millions of teen followers promote all sorts of products, including tobacco and vaping, on Instagram and other sites, and have become the celebrity spokespeople for Gen Z. On YouTube, teens perform vaping tricks and compete to see who can consume the most in the least amount of time. The effort to limit tobacco imagery gets more difficult all the time.

There are many different reasons, some of them interconnected, that the vast majority of people who smoke (or vape) start in their teens; entertainment industry influence, including social media, is only one of them. Whatever the cause, the earlier one starts the harder it is to quit because of changes nicotine makes in the developing brain. This is a harsh truth that movies never show, and influencers don’t talk about on Instagram.

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*The Healthcare Consortium is a local charitable organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information: visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.*

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