

# Parents prefer media content ratings system to age-based ratings in new national study

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Although parents appreciate having media ratings systems to help protect their kids from questionable content in movies, video games and television, the current age-based system doesn't meet their needs, according to a new study led by Iowa State University's Douglas Gentile. The study found that parents would prefer media ratings that focus on detailed content information.

A national sample of 2,392 [parents](#) were surveyed by independent research firms -- Harris Polls and Research Now -- in the study "Parents' Evaluation of Media Ratings a Decade After Television Ratings Were Introduced," which will be published in the July 2011 issue of [Pediatrics](#) (published online June 20). It summarizes the results of three studies -- the first from 2007, the second in 2008 and the third in 2009 -- examining what parents really think of current rating systems, how they use them, and what improvements they would make.

"We have always assumed there was general agreement underlying age-based ratings that a certain type of content is acceptable for child of a certain age," said Gentile, an associate professor of psychology. "But nobody, to my knowledge, ever attempted to verify that assumption. In this study we directly asked parents what content they care about, would they restrict their kids from viewing it, and at what age do they think it's acceptable for kids to see each type of content. The surprising result is that parents do not agree at what age it is acceptable to view different types of content.

"When we dug a little deeper and looked at different groups of parents -- those who were regular churchgoers, for example -- they have very different opinions on what age they'd find certain content to be acceptable for children," he said.

A large majority of parents (76 percent) indicated that they would like to see detailed content ratings, as well as age-based ratings.

Study authors -- which also include Julie Maier, an Iowa State psychology graduate student; Mary Rice Hasson, a communications consultant from Fairfax, Va.; and Beatriz Lopez de Bonetti, a market research consultant from Kansas City, Kan. -- conclude that existing ratings do not cover all the areas parents want, are not completely accurate, and as a result, are not used regularly. They wrote that improvements in ratings are needed to make them beneficial for parents.

When asked how they felt about the three current major ratings systems (movies, video games and television), a majority of parents said they regularly used movie ratings the most (48 percent), followed by [video game](#) ratings (34 percent) and television ratings (31 percent). But when asked how accurate the ratings were, only 5 to 6 percent viewed the movie, television and video game ratings as always accurate.

"For age-based ratings to be valid, the people who need to use them -- parents -- must generally agree that they are accurate. If parents don't agree at which age different content is acceptable, that means all age-based ratings must, by necessity, be invalid," said Gentile, who first started studying the validity of the ratings systems 10 years ago.

"This is a stake through the heart of age-based ratings," he concluded.

The authors compiled a list of 36 content labels and descriptors -- listed under four content categories: sexual, violent, offensive language and

mature -- that Gentile says could be used as a basis for a future content ratings system.

"For about half of those 36 different types of content, more than 50 percent of parents said, 'Yes, I would screen this for my kid if I knew about it,'" he said. "Therefore, we know what [content](#) parents want to know about."

A majority of parents thought there should be a universal rating system for all media, including additional media types such as Internet websites and games, music CDs and games on handheld devices. And given that media have converged in a way that almost all types of media can now be accessed on one electronic device, Gentile says it's a good time to re-assess how ratings are applied.

Provided by Iowa State University

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