Reel Life Lessons: Using Film to Engage Adolescents in Valuable Discussions About Life

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I have been so fortunate to have had the chance to study and bring to life my passion for film in the form of *Reel Life Lessons*. I would like to thank Professor Zorabedian for his inspiration and support while I worked on *Reel Life Lessons*. I would also like to thank the URI Honors Program for their guidance and for the opportunities they have presented me throughout the past four years, including awarding me the Eric Kumpf Memorial Humanities Honors Student Endowment to complete *Reel Life Lessons*. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continued love and encouragement. Just as I am a fan of the stars that light up the silver screen, I know they are my biggest fans and supporters.
Introduction

Films provide profound reflections and interpretations of the people and the times in which they are made. Because of this, we often feel emotionally connected to certain films. We root for a teen who pursues his talent against his family’s wishes, because we have also been misunderstood by family and friends. We cry with a young girl whose best friend has passed away, because we remember the first time we lost someone we loved. We applaud the couple whom manages to stay together despite their differences, because we still believe in happy endings. Film has had a tremendous social impact partly because of the emotional attachments viewers form to characters and storylines. Our escalating exposure and increased access to film through DVDs and the internet has further propelled us to look toward the screen for answers to life’s challenging questions.

Cinema therapy is the phenomenon of using films to help people work through emotional issues. The practice of cinema therapy is an increasingly popular method of psychotherapy where psychotherapists prescribe patients certain films to help them with family and relationship issues, substance abuse, and other problems. The purpose of watching prescribed films is to help patients feel like there are others who have gone through similar situations and that solutions to their problems exist. Dr. Birgit Wolz, a psychotherapist who specializes in this form of therapy, calls cinema therapy “a powerful catalyst for healing and growth for anybody who is open to learning how movies affect us.” She explains that one aspect of most movies is that they serve as allegories, in the same way stories, myths, jokes, fables, and dreams sometimes do, which can all be utilized in therapy. When we are observers of a film, we are able to step back and clearly see the bigger picture. Watching movies helps us learn to understand ourselves and others more deeply in the big picture of our own lives. We develop a skill to see ourselves and the world more objectively and less judgmentally. Therapists such as Jan Hesley, who specializes in marriage and family therapy, believe the films help their patients develop new perspectives on their situations and inspire them to make positive changes. Hesley has found that movies “connect a client’s world to the characters and plots: furnishing role models, providing inspiration and hope, and offering new solutions to old problems” (John Hesley, 55). Cinema therapy is able to reach patients in new and effective ways through the accessible medium of film and its portrayal of identifiable characters and situations.
Reel Life Lessons: Using Film to Engage Adolescents in Valuable Discussions About Life brings the principles of cinema therapy into the homes of adolescents, ages 11-15, and their parents. It is a tool for parents to connect with their children, to inspire conversations about the important events in their lives, to counsel them on issues they are facing, and to answer their questions about the world around them. The chapters reflect important subjects in the lives of adolescents including: Family, Romantic Relationships, Friendships, School, Adulthood, and Death and Dying. Each chapter contains profiles of three popular films that relate to each subject. The profiles provide summaries of the films and their relevance to the chapter in addition to discussion questions through which parents can interact with their children about the topics. By watching films together, parents and children will be able to relate not only to the characters but to each other as well. Reel Life Lessons aids parents and children in facilitating discussions about what they see on the screen and how those situations permeate their own lives. Reel Life Lessons is based on the belief that communication between parents and children at the stage of adolescence is extremely important in the development of healthy parent-child relationships through the teen and adult years. These positive relationships nurture young people to become healthy adults, emotionally and psychologically. Reel Life Lessons incorporates the concepts of cinema therapy and the facilitation of discussion questions to provide parents and children with an engaging means to build connections and inspire meaningful dialogues.

Get started with your adolescent! Pick a favorite film and use its profile as your guide as you enjoy a movie night with your child full of discussion, learning, and self discovery.

Catherine Collazzo
April 30, 2009
Tutorial

This tutorial explains the purpose of each section of the films’ profiles and describes how best to use the section to facilitate conversations. You and your child are encouraged to use any combination of questions and to add your own questions in your discussion about the film. Understand that the films’ profiles are foundations for discussion upon which you and your child can build.

Spoiler Alert! The synopses and questions may reveal significant and surprising events that take place in the film. If you and your child have not yet seen the movie and do not want to know what happens before you watch it, wait to read the profile until after your viewing. However, as the parent, you may choose to read the profile first to determine if anything in the plot may be particularly sensitive or inappropriate for your child.

BEHIND THE SCENES
The purpose of this section is to provide you with information about the film to help identify which films would be of interest and relevance to you and your child. It highlights the starring actors, director, MPAA rating, and running time. This section also includes the age ranges that Reel Life Lessons recommends based on content and language in the film, provides a brief synopsis of the film, and highlights themes that relate to the chapter. In addition, it indicates other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply to the film.

TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM
The purpose of these questions is to help both you and your child think about the meaning of the film and how it relates to your own experiences. The questions are centered on the events of the film but do not have a right or wrong answer. Instead they are based on your and your child's interpretations of the events in the film. “Parent and Child” questions are for both parent and child to answer.

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE
The purpose of these questions is to allow you and your child to share your opinions and experiences in an open and non-judgmental dialogue as they relate to the themes in the film. The questions are based on events in the film that could apply to your and your child’s own experiences. They should encourage thinking about the chapter theme and its relevance to your and your child’s lives: past, present, and future. “Parent to Child” questions are for you to ask your child. “Child to Parent” questions are for your child to ask you.
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

These are suggested proactive activities for your child to perform in order to increase understanding about himself/herself and the themes in the film. Some of the suggested activities reflect events in the film that were influential to the characters’ learning experiences that could benefit your child as well. The other suggested activities encourage your child to apply what he/she has learned from the film and discussion with you into his/her own life in unique ways. You may want to add other relevant activities that may be especially helpful for your child.
Family

The following films explore issues relating to the struggles, acceptance, responsibility, and love that families share.

*BILLY ELLIOT*
*LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*
*LITTLE WOMEN*
Billy Elliot (2000)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Jamie Bell  
Director: Stephen Daldry  
MPAA Rating: R  
Runtime: 110 min.  
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 13-15 yrs

Synopsis:
A boy growing up in a working class family finds an escape and his identity in dancing. His aggressive father and brother strongly disagree with his new passion, especially when he skips boxing, an accepted male hobby, to pursue dance. The boy and his family learn the importance of accepting family members for who they are no matter what circumstances, and of supporting the talents that define them.

Billy Elliot follows Billy as his talent for dance emerges and develops. Even though he experiences the obstacles of his unsupportive family, demanding dance instructor and intolerant community, Billy pursues his gift for dance. The film reveals the power of family ties and the depth of their ability to understand and support each other despite differences in opinions and ideals.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Friendships, Death & Dying

“You’re a disgrace to them gloves, your father, and the traditions of this boxing hall!”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

*Parent and Child:*
- What inspires Billy to dance?
- Why does Billy’s family not support him at first?
- What effect has the death of Billy’s mom had on the family?
- What does the film tell us about family relationships?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

*Parent to Child:*
- Do I support your interests?
- If you were passionate about something as Billy is about dance, would you continue to pursue it even if I disagreed? Why?
- Is there something you are passionate about that I disagree with? How does it make you feel that I disagree with it? How can I be more accepting?
- What things do adults not understand or are not open-minded about?
- Billy’s family thinks that ballet is only for girls. How do certain activities and chores become “girl things” versus “boy things” and vice versa? Does our family identify certain activities or chores as such?
- Do you believe that in a family there are certain things boys and girls should or shouldn’t do? What and why?
- Is your only reason for participating in certain classes, activities or sports to make me happy? Which ones and why?

*Child to Parent:*
- Did your parents ever prevent you from doing something you were passionate about? What was it and why did they disapprove? Did you continue doing it anyway?
- Did your family consider certain activities or chores to be appropriate for boys but not girls and vice versa? What were they and why?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

• Spend the day doing things that your mom or dad likes to do. Then, spend the next day with your mom or dad doing things that you like to do. This is a great way for you to get to know and understand each other better, just as Billy’s dad finally grew to appreciate his son’s interest in ballet.

• Discover something you and your mom or your dad like to do together. Make it a tradition. For example every weekend you could watch a baseball game, or once a week you could play cards or make a meal together.

“I’ve got this fire in my body. I’m just there. Flyin’ like a bird. Like electricity.”
Little Miss Sunshine  (2006)

BEHIND THE SCENES

_Starring:_ Greg Kinnear, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Alan Arkin, Abigail Breslin, Paul Dano
_Director:_ Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris
_MPAA Rating:_ R
_Runtime:_ 101 min.
_Reel Life Lessons recommended ages:_ 13-15 yrs

**Synopsis:**

A dysfunctional family comes together to make their youngest member’s dreams come true. Throughout their journey, members of the family discover more about each other, both the good and the bad, and always stick together to get past the obstacles they face on the road. The family also realizes that if they can not accept each other’s differences, then no one will!

_Little Miss Sunshine_ chronicles the road trip Olive and her unique family take as she pursues the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant crown. Along with Olive are her depressed uncle, inappropriate grandfather, overwhelmed mother, withdrawn brother, and ambitious but unsuccessful father. Together they make the long trip and along the way learn the importance of accepting, supporting, and loving their family for exactly who they are.

*Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply:* Adulthood

“Everyone just pretend to be normal.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Do you think the Hoover family is dysfunctional? Why or why not?
• Did Olive have a chance at winning the Little Miss Sunshine pageant? Why or why not?
• What makes each member of the Hoover family unique?
• What does the film say about family relationships?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

• Do you enjoy road trips with our family? Why or why not?
• What are your favorite things we do as a family? What other things do you want us to do as a family?
• Do you think we support and encourage your passions like Olive’s family supports her dreams of winning a beauty pageant? How can we be more supportive?
• Is our family similar to most other families? How? What makes our family unique?
• Do you think anything about our family is odd or weird?
• What are your favorite family memories? What are your least favorite family memories?
• What are your favorite family traditions? What are your least favorite family traditions? What new family traditions can we make?

Child to Parent:

• What was your family like growing up? How have your family members changed over the years?
• Was your family similar to most other families? What made your family unique?
• What are your favorite family memories and traditions?
• Which of your accomplishments made your family most proud?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Create a list of the qualities, hobbies, physical traits, and traditions that are different or special about your family. Have your parent create his/her own list and compare lists to see if you both agree on what is considered “normal” and “different” about your family.
- Next time your family goes on a road trip, don’t dread it; look forward to it! Create mix CDs of your family’s favorite songs and come up with games you can play. It’s rare for everyone to be in the same place for an extended period of time, which makes it the perfect opportunity to catch up on how everyone is doing and find out what’s going on in their lives.
- When someone in your family has an important event, go to it! Whether it’s your sister’s soccer game, your cousin’s play, or your dad’s bowling tournament, show your support by showing up and cheering them on.
- Put together a family scrapbook to honor your family’s accomplishments. Include programs, ticket stubs, award ribbons, and photos of the sports events and activities in which your family participated and excelled.

“You know, like it or not, we’re still your family, for better or worse.”
Little Women (1994)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Susan Sarandon, Winona Ryder, Kirsten Dunst, Claire Danes

Director: Gillian Armstrong

MPAA Rating: PG

Runtime: 115 min.

Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:

A New England family is brought together by the struggle of the Civil War. In the midst of economic and political unrest, the family flourishes and discovers that together they can overcome any adversity. By continually putting each other first, the family is able to persevere through troubled times.

Little Women is the most recent adaptation of the beloved Louise May Alcott novel. The film follows the March family women as young adults as they mature and grow closer together despite family tragedy and differences in personality, political beliefs, and location. Jo in particular steps beyond the role of what is expected of women during this time, as she strives to follow her passion of becoming a writer. However, no matter what journey they are on, Jo, Meg, Beth and Amy find a way to keep their bond strong and learn that family is where they will always find unconditional love and support.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Romantic Relationships, Adulthood

“I have always known that I belong to the March family.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:
- Do the characters in the film remind you of people in your own family? Who and why? With which sister do you most identify?
- Do you think the girls make the right decisions in their lives (to travel versus to stay home, to get married versus to pursue their careers, etc.)?
- How is Jo different than the other March sisters?
- What do you imagine the future will be like for the March family?
- What does the film say about the role of family?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:
- Even though Laurie is not related to the March family, he becomes such good friends with them that he is like a brother. Is there anyone in your life to whom you are not related but still consider family? Who and how did he/she become so close to our family?
- Do you have arguments with your siblings like the March sisters have with each other? What do you and your siblings argue about? How do you resolve the arguments?
- Describe your relationship with each family member. Do you feel close to certain people and distant from others? Are there members of our family with whom you wish you had better relationships? Who are they and how can you change your relationships with them?
- How do you think your relationships with your family members will change over time: When you are a teenager? When you leave home or attend college? If you have your own children?

Child to Parent:
- Did you used to argue with your siblings? What would you argue about? How did you resolve the arguments?
- Do you still argue with your siblings today? What do you argue about? How do you resolve the arguments?
- How have your relationships with your family members changed from when you were a child? When you were a teenager? When you left home or attended college? When you had your own children?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Make a list of the unique or special qualities each family member possesses. They be can simple, such as “always makes people laugh”, or exceptional, such as “is a great athlete”, or maybe something you had not considered before, such as, “is always there for everyone.” Share your list with that person. Sometimes we take for granted the best qualities of the ones we love and don’t let them know how we feel about them.

- Help your parents around the house with chores like the March girls help their mom. The sooner the responsibilities are taken care of, the sooner the family can spend time together doing fun activities.

- Jo writes an autobiography where she chronicles her favorite family memories. Keep a diary where you can record your favorite memories about your family or write a book or story about your family like Jo does. Your writings will be a wonderful memento for you and your family when you are older.

- Do you have a family member who has moved far away, is in the hospital, or at war like Mr. March is? Keep in touch with him/her through letters, emails, or phone calls to let him/her know what is going on at home and to share any news about your life. Don’t forget to tell him/her that he/she is missed!

"Now we are all family, as we always should have been."
Friendships

The following films explore issues relating to acceptance, support, and companionship that friends share.

HAIRSPRAY
STAND BY ME
THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS
Hairspray (2007)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Nikki Blonsky, John Travolta, Zac Efron
Director: Adam Shankman
MPAA Rating: PG
Runtime: 117 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:

A vivacious teen in the 1960’s dreams of being on a popular TV dance show and is determined to make her dream come true. However, she is viciously teased for not looking like the other girls on the show and is not given a fair chance during her audition. She befriends other people who are looked down upon because of their differences and together they fight for acceptance and equality on the show and in their community.

In the film adaptation of the popular Broadway musical, Hairspray depicts a segregated world that meets its match in Tracy Turnblad. Even when she is shunned by the popular kids at school and on the Corny Collins show because of her weight, she never gives up her pursuit of dancing on the show. Along the way she befriends other people who are looked down upon because of their race and looks. They unite to make a strong statement that talent and friendship are more than skin deep.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Romantic Relationships

“Mom, I want you to meet my new friends.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

*Parent and Child:*

- Why did people tease Tracy? Why did they not let her be on the Corny Collins show at first?
- How were Tracy and her friends able to change people's minds about allowing a diverse group of people on the Corny Collins show?
- What does the film say about friendship?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

*Parent to Child:*

- Do you have friends who are different from you in their looks, religious beliefs, race, family life, etc.? Do those things matter in a friendship? Why or why not?
- Has someone's looks, religious beliefs, race, or family life ever prevented you from being their friend? Why or why not?
- Have you ever avoided befriending someone because you were worried that other people would think negatively of you? Did you end up becoming friends with that person anyway? Why or why not?
- Has someone teased or not befriended you because of your looks, religious beliefs, race, or family life? How did this make you feel?

*Child to Parent:*

- Do you have friends who are different from you in their looks, religious beliefs, race, etc.? Do those things matter in a friendship? Why or why not?
- Did you ever avoid being friends with someone because of his/her looks, race, or religious beliefs, even if you wanted to be friends with that person?
- Did you have a diverse group of friends when you were my age? What were your friends like?
- Did anyone tease or avoid befriending you because of your looks, religious beliefs, race or family life? How did you handle the situation?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Celebrate the diversity of your group of friends! Attend events for religious holidays they celebrate, attend sporting events they participate in, or learn about a unique hobby they have. This is a great way to get to know your friends better and to show them you support them no matter what!
- Is there someone at school who isn’t accepted by his/her peers because he/she is different in some way, like Tracy? Befriend this person and get to know him/her better. You’ll probably discover that your peers’ perception of the person is wrong and you’ll make a new friend!
- Get your friends together and have a dance party like the characters in the movie dance on the Corny Collins show! Feel comfortable to look as silly as you want in front of your friends, because they won’t judge you!

“We’re gonna shake and shimmy it and have some fun today!”
Stand By Me (1986)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Will Wheaton, River Phoenix, Corey Feldman, Jerry O’Connell
Director: Rob Reiner
MPAA Rating: R
Runtime: 88 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15

Synopsis:
After finding out about the location of the dead body of a classmate, four friends decide to have one more adventure before the summer ends and try to find the body. The boys’ exploration ends up being the last time all four are together before they go their separate ways in high school, but each leaves with a new-found understanding of friendship and himself.

Stand By Me has become a beloved coming of age film. The film is narrated by an adult Gordie as he reflects back on the summer that defined his youth. In those few days the boys spend together, they support and help each other through physical obstacles and emotional challenges. Their candid conversations, observations, and questions about the world around them reflect the perception of youth today. Together Gordie, Chris, Teddy, and Vern learn important life lessons about not letting negative pasts or other people’s views impact how they define themselves.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Adulthood, Death & Dying

“I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

*Parent and Child:*

- Why was it so important to the boys that they find the body of their dead classmate?
- At the end of the film, the narrator talks about what happened to each boy after that summer. Does it surprise you how each turned out? How did you think each boy would turn out?
- What lessons did each boy learn about family, friendship, and self-identity?
- What does the film say about friendship?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

*Parent to Child:*

- Who is your best friend? What makes that person your best friend?
- What are your favorite games and activities to do with your best friend?
- Do you and your friends share secrets?
- What has been your favorite adventure with your friends?
- Do you have friends like the boys in the movie? (Gordie: sensitive and smart; Chris: tough and jaded; Teddy: imaginative and unusual; Vern: nervous and bubbly) What are your friends like?
- Gordie looks up to his late older brother. To whom do you look up? Why?
- The narrator says that the boys lost touch after they started high school. Did you ever have a friend with whom you lost touch? How did you lose touch?
- How do you think your friends will turn out when they grow up?

*Child to Parent:*

- Who were your best friends growing up?
- Did you ever lose touch? When and why?
- Have you seen your old best friends recently? How have they turned out and does it surprise you?
- What was your life like when you were twelve? What were your favorite song, class, book, movie, and sports team?
- What did you look for in a friend when you were twelve? Has that changed?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Make up a secret handshake with your friends like the boys when they say “give me some skin” that only you and your friends know.
- Make up a new game or activity to play with your friends. Let everyone contribute their ideas for the rules and steps of the game or activity.
- After the boys start high school, they eventually lose touch with each other. Connect with a friend with whom you have lost touch. Send him/her an email or letter or give him/her a phone call to catch up. Plan a time to get together to play an old favorite game or do a favorite activity you both share.
- Build a fort with your friends! You can build one outside with branches, leaves and whatever other materials you find. If there’s bad weather, build a fort inside with sheets, chairs and anything else around. Get everyone involved and come up with secret passwords and games like the boys play in the movie.

“We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going. It was grand.”
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (2005)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Amber Tamblyn, America Ferrera, Blake Lively, Alexis Bledel
Director: Ken Kwapis
MPAA Rating: PG
Runtime: 119 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15

Synopsis:
At the beginning of the summer, four best friends discover a pair of pants that fits them all. The girls make a pact that, while each is away on a different adventure, they will send the pants back and forth until they reunite at the end of the summer. Throughout the summer, the girls realize that the pants are special beyond their universal fit. The pants bring each girl confidence, strength and luck as they deal with issues involving family, love, and loss.

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants is based on a popular teen novel that follows Lena, Bridget, Carmen, and Tibby on their respective summer adventures. The film reveals the power friendship has to bind people together no matter the distance and to help them through their difficult times. The discovery of the mysterious pants teaches the girls that with friendship and faith in oneself, it is possible to overcome adversity.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Romantic Relationships

“Pants equal love. Love your sisters and love yourself.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:
- Do you believe the pants are magic, or that the girls’ experiences happen on their own?
- Which summer experience would you rather have: visiting family in a foreign country like Lena, visiting family in another state like Carmen, going to camp like Bridget, or staying home to work on your hobby like Tibby?
- What lessons does each girl learn about family, friendship, and self-identity?
- What purpose do the pants serve in the movie? What do they help the girls accomplish?
- What does the film say about friendship?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:
- Each girl has a different personality, talents and interests but they are all best friends, supporting the idea that “opposites attract”. What do you think about being friends with people who are different from you?
- Do you have friends like the girls in the movie? How are your friends similar to each girl?
- How do you and your friends spend your summers (family vacations, camp, summer school, etc.)?
- The girls consider the pants to be their lucky charm. Do you believe in lucky charms? What is yours?
- Where do you and your friends find inspiration? Is there something that connects all of you to one another, like the pants inspire and connect the girl in the film?

Child to Parent:
- What was your favorite vacation or trip that you took as a kid or teenager?
- What talents, interests, personality traits and family dynamics made you different from your friends?
- How did you and your friends used to spend summers together? What things did you all do and where did you visit? What did you learn about each other after spending the summers together?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Get together with your friends and have each bring a favorite article or articles of clothing. Share with the group why each piece of clothing is special to you and dress up in each other’s clothes!
- Be an artist like Lena. When you are on a trip, instead of writing a postcard, draw a picture of your surroundings or what you are doing on the postcard to send.
- Borrow your family’s video camera to document your summer adventures like Tibby does. Interview the new people you meet and the places you go. Your family and friends will love to see your experiences and you will appreciate having captured your favorite summer memories.
- If you and your friends are separated for the summer, write letters back and forth about what you are doing and experiencing like the girls do in the movie. Include pictures and mementos.

“We knew now that no matter how far we traveled on our own separate paths, somehow we would always find our way back to each other.”
Romantic Relationships

The following films explore issues relating to crushes, dating, and love amidst family and social pressures.

PRETTY IN PINK
SAY ANYTHING
THE MAN IN THE MOON
Pretty In Pink (1986)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Molly Ringwald, Andrew McCarthy, Jon Cryer
Director: John Hughes
MPAA Rating: PG-13
Runtime: 96 min.

Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:
When a girl from the wrong side of the tracks catches the eye of a rich, popular boy at school, both they and their groups of friends learn an important lesson about love and acceptance. Despite their differences, the two fall in love and plan on attending the high school prom together. However, their friends, family traditions and financial status threaten to keep them apart.

Pretty in Pink is an 80's classic that brought a story to the screen, which most children and parents could relate to on some level. Blane is a well-off popular boy who feels pressure from his friends and family to act a certain way and date girls who are similar to him. Andie is free-spirited in her fashion and attitude and guarded when it comes to her heart. Duckie is Andie’s quirky go-to best friend whose love for her is not reciprocated. The three learn that true love can accept differences and overcome challenges.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Friendships, School, Adulthood

“I'm not particularly concerned with whether or not you like me, because I live to like you.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

- Whom do you think Andie should have ended up with at the end of the film, Blane or Duckie?
- What do you think Blane learned from befriending Andie?
- What do you think of Andie’s prom dress? What would your ideal prom dress or outfit look like?
- What do you think this film says about love and acceptance?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

- Have you ever been to a school dance?
- Did students ask each other to the dance or did they just meet each other there?
- Did you dance with a boy or girl you liked?
- Have you ever had a crush on your friend like Duckie has a crush on Andie? Did your feelings for your friend change your friendship?
- Has a friend ever had a crush on you whom you did not like back? How did you handle the situation? Did his/her feelings change your friendship?
- Have you ever had a crush on someone who did not like you back? How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever had a crush on someone who was not in your group of friends, like Blane has a crush on Andie? How did your friends react?
- Is it possible for two people to be together when they have a lot of differences (different friends, family traditions, financial status, etc.)?

Child to Parent:

- What was the first school dance you went to?
- Did you go with someone? With whom? Did you like that person romantically or just as a friend?
- Have you ever dated someone who was different from you (had different friends, family traditions, financial status, etc.)? What obstacles did you face? How did you overcome these obstacles?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Design your dream prom dress or outfit. Draw it free-hand or cut out pictures from magazines and create a collage.
- Dance around your room to your favorite song like Duckie does in the record store. Invent some new moves to impress your friends and crush.
- The next time your school puts on a dance, go! If you don’t have a date, get a group of friends together to go with. Don’t miss out on this fun night by sulking at home.
- When you are at the school dance, make sure you and your friends dance! It doesn’t matter if you’re good or bad at dancing, as long as you are having fun!
- Is your crush at the school dance? Ask him or her to dance. If he or she says no, it’s no big deal. Just go back to having fun with the friends who came to the dance with you.

“You said you couldn’t be with someone who didn’t believe in you… Well, I believed in you.”
Say Anything (1989)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: John Cusack, Ione Skye
Director: Cameron Crowe
MPAA Rating: PG-13
Runtime: 100 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 13-15 yrs

Synopsis:
After graduation, a young man feels pressure to express his feelings to his crush before she leaves for school in England. The two fall in love but experience several obstacles, including parental pressures, as they try to stay together. They learn that love has the strength to persevere through hard times when you have someone special by your side.

Say Anything is the iconic film that depicts Lloyd Dobler’s quest to win the heart of Diane Court. Though the two go to the same high school, they never meet because Diane is a top student taking college courses and Lloyd is a free-spirit focusing on his kickboxing career. Lloyd develops the courage to ask Diane out and they start a summer romance met with hurdles involving their futures, families, and even the government. Lloyd and Diane have to decide if their differences can be conquered by their love.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Adulthood

“I gave her my heart, she gave me a pen.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Why does Lloyd like Diane before he even gets to know her? Why does Diane fall in love with Lloyd?
• Diane and Lloyd come from very different backgrounds, but what do they have in common?
• Why is Diane’s father not supportive of her relationship with Lloyd?
• Does Lloyd make the right decision by going to England with Diane? Do you think Diane and Lloyd will stay together?
• What does the film say about love and relationships?

Parent to Child:

• Have you ever been on a date? With whom? What did you do? Did you ask him/her out on the date or did he/she ask you out?
• Diane’s father doesn’t feel that Lloyd is the “right” person for Diane, although that proves to be wrong. Have you ever been attracted to someone, but felt you weren’t “good enough” to spend time with him or her, or vice-versa?
• Have you ever been through a breakup? Who initiated the breakup? How did it make you feel? How did you get over the breakup?
• Should the boy ask the girl out on a date or should the girl ask the boy out? Who should pay on the date?
• What would be your ideal date? Where would you go? What would you do? Is there someone you know with whom you would like to have that date?
• What makes you like someone romantically versus just as a friend?
• What do you think it is like to fall in love? Do you want to be in love someday? When do you think you will fall in love with someone?

Child to Parent:

• What was your first date like? With whom? What did you do and where did you go? Did you go out with him/her again?
• What was the best date you have ever been on?
• Did you ever like someone that you, or your parents, felt wasn’t “good enough” for you or in your social class, or vice-versa?
• Have you ever been through a breakup? How did it make you feel? How did you get over the breakup?
• What is it like to fall in love? How many times have you been in love?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- If you have a crush on someone at school, get to know him/her as a friend first. Practice being confident and comfortable talking to the person you like by acting out the conversation with yourself or with a friend beforehand so you don’t feel embarrassed when you approach him/her. Talk about what you have in common whether it’s a favorite sport or hobby, or group of friends. This is a great opportunity to make a new friend and find out whether or not you really like him/her romantically.

- Get a group of friends together to go to the movies, a sporting event, or a school event and invite your crush. This is a great way to get to know your crush better without the pressure of being on a date.

- If you have strong feelings for someone but don’t feel comfortable telling him/her in person, write him/her a letter like Lloyd does to Diane. Sometimes it is easier to express yourself through writing your emotions and thoughts than by speaking them.

- If you hear your peers talking about how someone isn’t “good enough” to date someone else, because one’s family makes more money, or one of them belongs to a certain clique, discuss with them how it is possible that those things do not necessarily matter if the two people really care about each other. Outside pressure like this from peers can take its toll on relationships. It’s always important to stand up for something you believe in, especially when it benefits others.

“What I really want to do with my life - what I want to do for a living - is I want to be with your daughter. I’m good at it.”
The Man in the Moon (1991)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Reese Witherspoon  
Director: Robert Mulligan  
MPAA Rating: PG-13  
Runtime: 99 min.  
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15

Synopsis:

The summer she is fourteen, a young girl experiences many ‘firsts’: her first crush, her first kiss, and her first heartbreak. After meeting her new neighbor, she falls head over heels for him even though he is older than she. With the help of her family, she learns that love is not always easy and that people experience it in different ways.

The Man in the Moon evaluates love and relationships from the innocent point of view of Dani Trant. Her feelings of friendship toward the older Court Foster soon develop into a crush despite their age difference. As she struggles to understand her feelings and decide if she should act on them, she looks toward her older sister Maureen for advice. Maureen is beautiful, smart and garners the attention of boys at school, while Dani is still maturing physically and emotionally. When the two sisters find themselves in love with the same boy, it threatens their close relationship. Dani must come to terms with the new emotions she feels and learn the profound influence love has on us and the people around us.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Adulthood, Death & Dying

“Did you ever like somebody so much that it almost made you sick?”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Dani’s behavior changes once she meets Court. How does she act differently?
• Was it appropriate for Court to try to be friends with Dani even though he is older? Do you think Court leads Dani on? How?
• Do you think Court is in love with Dani, Maureen, or both girls?
• Do you think Dani and Maureen will ever fall in love again after Court’s death?
• What does Dani learn about love?
• What does the film say about love and relationships?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

• Who was your first crush? How old were you? What attracted you to this person? Who is your current crush? What attracts you to this person?
  • What is the difference between liking someone romantically and liking them as a friend?
  • Have you had your first kiss? When and with whom? How did it make you feel?
  • Maureen tells Dani, “I don’t go with him, I go out with him.” What is the difference? Do you and your friends use similar expressions? What other expressions for dating do your friends use?
  • Can someone be too young to fall in love? How old should someone be when he/she falls in love? How old should someone be when he/she starts dating?

Child to Parent:

• Who was your first crush? How old were you? What attracted you to this person?
• How old were you when you had your first kiss? With whom was it? How did it make you feel?
• With whom was the first person you fell in love? How did you know you were in love?
• When can I start dating? What advice do you have for me about dating?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Keep a diary so that you have a safe and personal place to write your thoughts about the romantic feelings or confusing emotions you have.
- Dani turns to her sister Maureen with her questions about kissing and dating. Identify someone in your life whom you feel comfortable asking questions about love and relationships or confiding in about your feelings. This could be a parent, older sibling, or good friend.
- Try not to be intimidated by the person on whom you have a crush. Get to know him/her as a friend first, like Dani gets to know Court, by finding out what you have in common. Invite him/her to sit with you at lunch or help you with a school project. With time, you and your crush may start a romantic relationship or decide to just stay friends.

“*I think love should be so beautiful and powerful. I want to be swept away by love.*”
School

The following films explore issues relating to teachers, classes, cliques, and stereotyping.

DEAD POETS SOCIETY
MONA LISA SMILE
THE BREAKFAST CLUB
Dead Poets Society (1989)

BEHIND THE SCENES

*Starring:* Robin Williams  
*Director:* Peter Weir  
*MPAA Rating:* PG  
*Runtime:* 129 min.  
Reel Life Lessons *recommended ages:* 11-15 yrs

**Synopsis:**

Students at an all-boys boarding school in the 1950’s feel pressure from their parents, teachers, and peers to succeed. The boys have their own talents but feel so overwhelmed with the high expectations to excel in academics, that their other interests are stifled. However, their English teacher, Mr. Keating, encourages the boys to realize that there is as much to learn from doing the things they love as there is in reading textbooks.

*Dead Poets Society* captures the essence of the struggle teens face to please their parents, teachers, and themselves by succeeding in school. Neil is forced by his dad to quit the extracurricular activities he loves and to focus solely on his school work; Todd is constantly being compared to his star big brother; Dalton is pressured to expose the secret society; and Knox pines for a girl who is out of his league. Mr. Keating teaches them to be free-thinkers and to capture every moment and opportunity that comes their way, to “Carpe Diem!”--Seize the Day! He instills in the boys the confidence and esteem they need to be truly successful men in the real world.

*Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply:* Friendships, Romantic Relationships

“*Carpe diem*, ‘seize the day’, boys. Make your lives extraordinary.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

- Was it right for Neil’s father to prohibit him from participating in extracurricular activities? What benefits do extracurricular activities serve students?
- Mr. Keating does not just teach the boys about poetry. What does he teach them about life?
- Have you ever had a teacher like Mr. Keating? Would you want to have a teacher like Mr. Keating?
- What does the film say about teachers and school?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

- What do you think it would be like to go to a boarding school?
- Do I put pressure on you to succeed? Do I want you to pursue a career that you don’t want to pursue?
- Is your school as tough as Welton Academy? How is your school similar or different?
- What does “Carpe Diem”, “Seize the Day”, mean to you?
- Who is your favorite teacher? Why?
- Who is your least favorite teacher? Why? In your opinion, what can he/she do to be a better teacher?
- Mr. Keating makes the boys stand up on their desks to engage them with the material. Has your teacher done or made you do anything unusual to help you learn? What was it and was it effective?

Child to Parent:

- Who was your favorite teacher when you were in school? What made him/her your favorite?
- Did your parents put pressure on you to do well in school? How did you handle it? Did you always meet their expectations?
- What was your school like? How was it similar to or different from Welton Academy?
- What was your proudest academic accomplishment? Why is important to you?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Get your friends together and form a society or club at your school where you discuss a hobby or passion you all share, like a book club where you discuss favorite books or a writing society where you share your own writings.
- Do you have a favorite poem or saying? If not, read a book of poems and pick out favorites to share with your friends or family like the boys in the film. If you still can’t find a favorite, write your own!
- Research the poems referred to in the movie: *O Captain! My Captain!* by Walt Whitman; *To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time* by Robert Herrick; *O Me! O Life!* by Alfred Tennyson; *The Prophet* by Abraham Cowley; *Ulysses* by Alfred Tennyson; *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost; and the poets William Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, George Byron. Identify how they apply to the film and to your own life.
- Mr. Keating encourages his students to be confident in themselves and their abilities. Next time a teacher asks someone to participate in class (answer a question, read out loud, share an opinion) raise your hand to respond. Feel confident in what you have to contribute to the class.

“*No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.*”

BEHIND THE SCENES

*Starring:* Julia Roberts, Kirsten Dunst, Julia Stiles, Maggie Gyllenhaal
*Director:* Mike Newell
*MPAA Rating:* PG-13
*Runtime:* 120 min.

Reel Life Lessons *recommended ages:* 11-15 yrs

**Synopsis:**
A free-thinking art professor in 1953 travels across the country to accept a position at a conservative all-girls college and makes a significant impact on the lives of her students. She challenges the restrictive traditions of the school and inspires her students to achieve beyond society’s limiting expectations of them.

*Mona Lisa Smile* shows what life was like in the 1950s and how repressed women were in their pursuits of higher education. Katherine Watson arrives at Wellesley College after graduating from UCLA and has different views on the assumed responsibilities and academic abilities of women than the standards set by society at that time. At first her students resent her involvement in their lives but soon come to understand the important impact she is making on all their futures. The film reminds us of the profound influence that teachers and education have on the course of our lives.

*Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply:* Friendships, Romantic Relationships

“Look beyond the paint. Let us try to open our minds to a new idea.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

- Why do the other teachers at Wellesley College dislike Ms. Watson? Do you agree with their opinions of Ms. Watson?
- Was it fair for Wellesley College to fire Ms. Watson? Why or why not?
- What, besides art history, do the students learn from Ms. Watson?
- What does the film communicate about teachers and schools?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

- What is your favorite class at school? Why?
- What is your least favorite class at school? Why?
- What class do you wish your school taught? Why?
- Have you wondered about your teacher’s personal life? Does he/she have a spouse or family? Do you know where he/she lives? What does he/she do on the weekends for fun?
- What is the most difficult responsibility of being a teacher?
- Why do you think your teacher became a teacher? Would you want to be a teacher? What would you teach?
- What do you think your teacher was like at your age?
- Does your teacher allow students to discuss and defend their beliefs in class? When has this happened and what was being discussed?

Child to Parent:

- What was your favorite class when you were in school? Why?
- What was your least favorite class when you were in school? Why?
- What class would you have liked to have had when you were in school?
- Were you ever curious about what your teachers’ lives were like outside of school? What did you think they were like?
- Did your teacher allow students to discuss and defend their beliefs in class? What sort of topics did you discuss?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Interview your teachers to get to know them better. Ask them where they went to school, what they studied and why they decided to be a teacher. Also ask what they like and what is difficult about teaching. You and your teacher might have some surprising things in common.
- Teach your parents or siblings about an interesting topic you learned in school.
- Research the paintings that Ms. Watson showed in her class. Identify how they apply to the film and to your own life.
- Do you have a favorite painting or other piece of art? If not, look through books about art history and pick out favorites to share with your friends or family. If you still can’t find a favorite, create your own!

“Katherine Watson didn’t come to Wellesley to fit in. She came because she wanted to make a difference.”
The Breakfast Club (1985)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Molly Ringwald, Emilio Estevez
Director: John Hughes
MPAA Rating: R
Runtime: 97 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 14-15 yrs

Synopsis:

When five very different students are forced to spend a Saturday together serving detention, none of them expects to have anything in common with the others. Labeled the brain, athlete, princess, criminal and basketcase, each student associates with a specific clique and has different friends. Over the course of the day, the teens reveal their reasons for being sentenced to Saturday detention and learn about each other beyond superficial labels and societal stereotypes.

The Breakfast Club became a modern classic because of its raw portrayal of teenagers. The film exposes the flaws in the hierarchical social system that high school students have constructed to segregate their peers based on physical appearance, academic performance, and overall personality. These social expectations reward those who are attractive or athletic and punish those who are scholarly or simply don’t fit in. John Hughes explores the inner workings of the teenage psyche and reveals that all teenagers share the same experiences and pressures involving family, friends, school, and self-identity.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Friendships, Romantic Relationships

“You see us as you want to see us... In the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

- Based on your own experience, does the film accurately represent high school? How or how not?
- What did the characters’ lunches reveal about them as people?
- Do you think that the characters will be friends when they return to school on Monday? Why or why not?
- Describe each character’s relationship with his or her parents. How does it affect the way each behaves in school?
- What does the film say about stereotypes?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

- Is your school’s student body broken up into different cliques or groups? What are the names of the cliques and the people who are in them?
- To what clique or group do you belong?
- Would you consider yourself to be more like a “brain”, “athlete”, “princess”, “criminal”, or “basketcase”, as in the film, or does another label apply?
- To what other cliques would you want to belong?
- Do you hang out with students in other cliques?
- What qualifies a group of friends as a “clique” versus simply a group of friends?
- Are you happy in school and with the friends you have? What would you change?
- All the characters in the film are misunderstood because their peers assume things about who they are based on their stereotypes. What things about you are misunderstood by your peers? By your family?

Child to Parent:

- What were the names of the different cliques or groups when you were in school? Into what group did you fit?
- Did you ever get detention in school? If so, for what? What was your punishment and what did you learn from the experience?
- What did you feel people misunderstood about you when you were in high school? What do you wish they had known about you?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Is there someone whose feelings you have hurt, like Andrew does to his classmate? Write a note to that person apologizing for your hurtful actions or words. Be honest and open in your note and talk about the lessons you have learned.

- Claire talks about how the clubs she is in (like student council) are different from the clubs that Brian participates in (like physics club) and that she would never join those particular clubs. Attend a meeting of a school club, sport, or activity you wouldn’t ordinarily join. Get to know the people in the club. You might just make a new friend and discover a new hobby or talent!

- To get to know your friends or classmates better, have everyone go through their backpacks or purses like Allison does and talk about each item. These items could be buttons on your bag, notes you’ve written, key chains, pictures, anything you feel comfortable sharing.

- Brian is depressed because of the pressure his parents put on him to get straight A’s and the bullying he experiences at school. Is there someone you know at school who struggles with acceptance from his peers like Brian? Brainstorm ideas about how you could include him/her in conversations or school activities. Act on these ideas next time you see that person feeling left out.

- What were your parents’ favorite bands and songs in high school? Ask them to play you their favorites and play your favorites for them. If you’re feeling energetic, dance around the house like the characters danced around the library (don’t be embarrassed!)
Adulthood

The following films explore issues relating to the responsibilities, experiences, and struggles of growing up.

BIG
FREAKY FRIDAY
REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE
**Big (1988)**

**BEHIND THE SCENES**

*Starring:* Tom Hanks  
*Director:* Penny Marshall  
*MPAA Rating:* PG  
*Runtime:* 104 min.  
Reel Life Lessons *recommended ages:* 11-15 yrs

**Synopsis:**

A 12 year old boy is frustrated with the restrictions of his age; he has a strict bedtime, is not tall enough to ride the carnival’s biggest rollercoaster, and is not liked by girls who want to date high school boys instead. When he makes a wish on a fortune teller machine to become older, it comes true and he learns first hand the challenges and rewards of being an adult.

*Big* has become a family favorite that encourages audiences to imagine what it would be like to wake up the next day 15 years older. Josh experiences the trials and triumphs of being an adult as he encounters work responsibilities, romantic relationships, and living on his own. He realizes that being an adult might not be as great as he envisioned if it means having to miss out on meaningful years of his youth. The film explores the uncharted world of adulthood through the eyes of a child to remind both children and parents of what it really means to be an adult.

*Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply:* Friendships, Romantic Relationships

“You think that there isn’t a frightened kid inside of me too?”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

*Parent and Child:*
• Did Josh make the right decision by wishing to turn back into a 12 year old?
• What do you think 12 year old Josh is like now after his experience as a 30 year old?
• If Josh had stayed as an adult, what of his youth would he have missed out on?
• What lessons did Josh learn about being an adult?
• What does the film say about adulthood?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

*Parent to Child:*
• What would you wish for on the fortune machine?
• What career do you want to have when you grow up?
• What do you think you’ll look like when you’re an adult?
• Do you think you’ll have the same interests when you’re an adult as you have now?
• What are your favorite things about being a kid?
• What are your least favorite things about being a kid?
• Do you think it is more fun to be a kid or an adult?
• What are you looking forward to most about being an adult? What are looking forward to least?
• Do you think you could handle the adult responsibilities now that 30 year old Josh faces?

*Child to Parent:*
• What was your first job? Did you like it? Why or why not?
• When you were younger, what did you want your career to be? Did you end up pursuing it? If not, why?
• What are your favorite memories about being a kid? What are your least favorite memories?
• What is your favorite thing about being an adult? What is your least favorite thing?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- If your parents work for a company that has “Take Your Daughter or Son to Work Day”, go! It is a great chance to see what your parents do at their jobs and whether or not you’re interested in the same jobs someday.

- Make a list of your career aspirations. What can you do now to learn more about and get experience in those fields? If you want to be an actor, try out for the school play. If you want to be a meteorologist, watch the local weather report everyday and read books about weather.

- Play the game of Life! It’s fun to pick different careers, salaries, and houses and imagine what your real life will bring.

“I wish I were big.”
Freaky Friday (2003)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Jamie Lee Curtis, Lindsey Lohan
Director: Mark Waters
MPAA Rating: PG
Runtime: 98 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:

In this remake of the Disney classic, a mom and daughter can’t see eye to eye on any issue: clothes, friends, school, house rules or boys. Each thinks that life would be better as the other, but after they spend one freaky day in each other’s shoes, they realize that life as a teen can be just as crazy as life as an adult and vice versa.

Freaky Friday explores the universal “what if?” parents and children face when trying to relate to one another. What if Anna could have more freedom like her adult mom? What if Tess could be more carefree like her teen daughter? The film encourages parents and children to evaluate the negatives and positives of being an adult and a teen and pushes them to appreciate the struggles and rewards of both worlds.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Romantic Relationships

“You couldn’t last one day in my high school.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Who had the more difficult experience--Anna as an adult or Tess as a teenager?
• Do you think Anna and Tess are closer after this experience?
• What do Anna and Tess each learn from this experience?
• What does the film say about adulthood?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

• Would you want to trade places with me for a day?
• What do you think a day in my life is like?
• Do you think it is harder to be a teenager or an adult? Why?
• What would be the most difficult thing about being an adult? What would be the easiest thing?
• What do you want your life to be like when you’re an adult? (job, family, etc.)
• With whom would you want to switch places? Why?
• At the beginning of the movie, Anna and Tess are unhappy with their lives. Are you happy being who you are? What things would you want to change? What things can you change? How will these changes impact your future?

Child to Parent:

• Would you want to trade places with me for a day?
• What do you think a day in my life is like?
• Do you think it is harder to be a teenager or an adult? Why?
• Are you happy being who you are? What things would you want to change?
• When you were a teenager, what did you think adulthood would be like?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Ask your parents to show you old yearbooks or scrapbooks from when they were your age. See how they have changed, who their friends were, and what activities they were involved in. Identify any similarities and differences between their experience and yours.
- Show your parents your yearbook or scrapbook. Share with them who your friends and teachers are and your favorite school memories.
- Spend a day in the life of your mom or dad by shadowing his/her typical daily activities. Help him/her complete chores around the house, run errands, pay bills, and cook dinner. Learn about all his/her responsibilities and how they get fulfilled. You’ll probably realize that being an adult and parent is a lot harder than it looks!

“A journey soon begins, its prize reflected in another’s eyes. When what you see is what you lack, then selfless love will change you back.”
Rebel Without A Cause (1955)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: James Dean, Natalie Wood  
Director: Nicholas Ray  
MPAA Rating: PG-13  
Runtime: 111 min.  
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 12-15 yrs

Synopsis: Throughout the course of a teen’s first day at a new school, he is faced with obstacles that challenge his maturity. From violent bullies, to a new romantic relationship, to misunderstanding parents, to a fatal accident, he discovers his ability to handle adult situations.

Rebel Without A Cause is the 1950’s film that helped make James Dean a Hollywood legend. Jim Stark struggles to gain his parents’ respect and acceptance and craves their advice and guidance. He is unhappy with the way they communicate with him and each other and wants to be seen as the young adult he is becoming. When he is faced with difficult circumstances, he relies on his own sense of consequence and responsibility to do what is right.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Friendship

“For once I want to do something right! And I don’t want you to run away from me again!”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Throughout the film, Jim is upset and confused by his family. Why is Jim so upset and confused? What does his family do that upsets him? How does he want his family to act?
• Did Jim make the right decision in going to the police after Buzz’s accident?
• Why do Jim’s parents not want him to tell the police about the accident? Do you agree with them?
• Why do Jim, Plato, and Judy gravitate toward each other? What issues and ideas do they have in common? How are they different?
• What does the film say about growing up and taking responsibility for our actions?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

• When Jim asks his parents for advice about the accident, they respond “You’ll learn when you’re older.” Do I say that to you when you ask me certain questions? How does it make you feel when I say this? How should I respond to your questions?
• What is the best way to handle a situation where you are being picked on at school like Jim was by Buzz and his friends? Is using violence the responsible solution to the problem? Have you been in a similar situation? How did you handle the situation?
• If you were involved in a physically or emotionally harmful or unlawful act, would you take responsibility for your actions like Jim after Buzz’s accident? What would you do and to whom would you go? How would you resolve the situation?
• Have you ever been involved in a situation where you caused physical or emotional harm to yourself or others? How did you feel afterward? Did you take responsibility for your actions? What were the consequences of your actions?
• Have you ever witnessed someone committing a harmful or unlawful act? How did you respond? Did you approach that person directly, tell an authority figure, or ignore the situation? Why did you take the action that you did? Do you wish you had taken another action?
Child to Parent:

• Have you ever been involved in a situation where you caused physical or emotional harm to yourself or others? How did you feel afterward? Did you take responsibility for your actions? What were the consequences of your actions?
• Have you ever witnessed someone committing a harmful or unlawful act? How did you respond? Did you approach that person directly, tell an authority figure, or ignore the situation? Why did you take the action that you did? Do you wish you had taken another action?
• When you were a teenager, did you ever feel the way Jim feels toward his parents and about life in general?

LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

• Identify someone in your life whom you trust that you can go to when you have questions about adulthood, taking responsibility, and determining right from wrong. This person can help you make smart decisions about relationships, friendships, school, peer pressure, and life in general. Like Jim, we all need someone like this in our lives to help us through confusing times.
• Create a list of 3 or more situations, which, if you found yourself in them, you would be unsure what to do. Ask your parents for advice and see how they would react and handle those situations.
• If you want to show your parents you can handle adult responsibilities, offer your assistance in doing work around the house, babysitting a younger sibling or getting your homework done without being asked.

“I wish I had one day when I didn’t have to be all confused and I didn’t have to feel that I was ashamed of everything.”
Death & Dying
The following films explore issues relating to the confusion, sadness, and acceptance experienced with bereavement and death.

*MY GIRL*
*STEPMOM*
*THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*
My Girl (1991)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Anna Chlumsky, Macaulay Culkin
Director: Howard Zieff
MPAA Rating: PG
Runtime: 102 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:

During the summer of 6th grade, a young girl is faced with many new changes in her life as she copes with tragedies in her past. With the help of her family and best friend she discovers the importance of living life to its fullest and not spending it fearing death. She learns that a balanced life is filled with both love and loss and that every person in the course of his/her life will experience and hopefully triumph over the challenges both bring.

My Girl is an honest exploration of how children perceive and react to death. Vada is surrounded by death; her mother passed away during childbirth, and she lives in a family-run funeral home with her father and ill grandmother. As she comes to terms with the guilt she feels for her mother’s death, she also struggles to understand her father’s relationship with a new woman, her own romantic feelings for a teacher, and her friendship with Thomas J. that is looked down upon by her peers. The film poses universal questions about death that both children and adults have, and it offers answers from the unique perspective of an 11 year old girl.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Friendships, Adulthood

“I’m not asking you to stop caring for those people. But life isn’t just death… Don’t ignore the living.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

• Why do you think Vada pretend to have so many ailments?
• How does Vada cope with the death of her mom and with her grandma’s illness?
• Why does Vada feel guilty about her mom’s death? Should she feel guilty?
• Does Vada’s dad do the right thing in ignoring Vada’s invented ailments? How should he react to this behavior?
• What can Vada’s dad say to comfort her when Thomas J. dies?
• How does it make you feel when Thomas J. dies?
• What does the film say about understanding and dealing with death?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

• Has anyone important to you ever died (friend, relative, pet, or public figure)?
• How did you feel when he/she died?

Child to Parent:

• For whom was the first wake and/or funeral you ever attended? What was it like? How did you feel before, during, and after?
• Do you believe in heaven or another afterlife? What do you believe happens when someone dies?
• Are you afraid of dying or of the people you love dying? Why or why not?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Vada describes what she thinks heaven looks like. Draw a picture of what you think heaven looks like.
- Visit the grave or memorial of someone who has died, to whom you want to pay your respects. Bring a drawing, poem, picture, or flowers that remind you of the person or that express how you feel about the person, to leave at the grave.
- Vada writes a poem about Thomas J. after he dies. Write a poem or story about someone you have lost.
- When Thomas J. dies, Vada says she wishes she had told him he was her best friend. Write notes to the people in your life who are special to you to let them know what they mean to you. Share with them the impact they have made on your life as well as your favorite memories together.

“You think death has ripped you forever apart. But I know he’ll always be in your heart.”
Stepmom (1998)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon
Director: Chris Columbus
MPAA Rating: PG-13
Runtime: 125 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:
While a family struggles through the changes of divorce and remarriage, they encounter an even greater obstacle of life or death. Despite their differences and adversities, they draw closer together to support each other and redefine their family roles. They learn that loss comes in all forms, that love can transcend obstacles, and that family remains close even in death.

Stepmom brings to life the challenges that so many families face of growing pains, divorce and death. Anna and Ben are still coping with their parents’ divorce when their dad tells them he asked his girlfriend, Isabel, to marry him. Anna’s and Ben’s mom, Jackie, is wary of Isabel’s ability to care for the children. Jackie fears that Isabel’s presence further confuses and disrupts her life as well as the lives of Anna and Ben. However, when Jackie is diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, everyone in the family reevaluates his/her responsibility to and love for each other.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Adulthood

“You know every story, every wound, every memory. Their whole life’s happiness is wrapped up in you.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:
- Why don’t Jackie and Isabel get along? Do you think Jackie is justified in not liking Isabel?
- Loss comes in many forms including the loss of a parent in the home because of divorce. What other losses do people experience besides death?
- Do you think Jackie should have told Anna and Ben sooner about her having cancer? Why or why not? What, if anything, would have changed if she had told them sooner?
- Why do you think Jackie, Anna, and Ben danced around the bedroom after finding out about Jackie’s illness?
- How does each character (Anna, Ben, Isabel, Luke and Jackie herself) react to the news that Jackie has cancer?
- What does the film say about death and dying?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:
- How would you spend your last days with someone special if you knew he/she were dying?
- Would you rather know you were dying or would you rather die unexpectedly? Why?
- If I died today, what would you remember most about me?
- What do you think it is like when someone dies? How does it feel? What happens?
- What special things do you think you would like to do if you knew you had a short time to live?

Child to Parent:
- What will happen to me if you die? Who will take care of me? Where will I live?
- If you died today, what would you miss the most?
- If you died today, would you have any regrets?
- What do you want me to remember most about you after you die?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- Make a collage or scrapbook of pictures of a loved one you have lost. Include special items like ticket stubs, buttons, favorite quotes, or song lyrics that remind you of the person.
- Jackie makes Ben a cape and Anna a quilt with pictures of her and them together. Design a t-shirt or blanket with a picture of a lost loved one similar to the cape and quilt.
- Find a notebook or journal and record your favorite memories of your lost loved one. Include pictures and special items that correspond with the memories.
- Create a list of all the activities you want to do, goals you want to accomplish, people you want to meet, and places you want to go before you die. Update the list when you come up with new ideas and check off the items you complete.

“I have their past... you have their future.”
The Secret Life of Bees (2008)

BEHIND THE SCENES

Starring: Dakota Fanning, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Hudson
Director: Gina Prince-Bythewood
MPAA Rating: PG-13
Runtime: 109 min.
Reel Life Lessons recommended ages: 11-15 yrs

Synopsis:
A young girl escapes her abusive home life and begins a journey of self-discovery. After growing up with a distant father and with an infinite number of unanswered questions about her dead mother, the girl leaves with the only things she has left of her mother: a postcard and the memory of her death. She learns to overcome the grief and guilt that has encompassed her heart by finding support in new and loving friends.

The Secret Life of Bees is based on the bestselling novel by Sue Monk Kidd that follows Lily as she searches for information about her mother and herself. Along with her friend and caregiver Rosaleen, Lily discovers a second family who takes her in and teaches her how to find comfort in her troubled past. Lily discovers newfound peace with the tragic death of her mother and realizes she is not to blame.

Other Reel Life Lessons topics that apply: Family, Friendship, Adulthood

“My whole life has been nothing but a hole, where my mother should have been. It always left me aching.”
TAKE 1: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FILM

Parent and Child:

- Is Lily successful in coming to terms with her mother’s death? If so, how? If not, what else can she do?
- Do you think Lily is to blame for her mother’s death? Why or why not?
- Did Lily make the right decision to stay with the Boatright family rather than going back with her father? Why or why not?
- What does the film say about bereavement and death?

TAKE 2: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE

Parent to Child:

- Did a family member die before you were born or when you were too young to remember? What do you think that person was like? How do you think your life would be different if that person were still alive?
- If someone special to you has passed away, do you keep his/her pictures or belongings around? What is the purpose of keeping these things around?
- If someone special to you has passed away, how often do you think of him/her? Do you have dreams about him/her like Lily has dreams of her mom?
- People handle bad news in different ways: some by crying loudly and some by keeping their emotions inside. What was your reaction when you found out someone special to you had died?
- Did you ever do something and feel guilty afterward? What did you do? Why did you feel guilty? How did you deal with that guilt?

Child to Parent:

- Do you keep pictures or personal belongings of a loved one who has passed away? Why? How long have you kept these things and how long do you intend to keep them?
- How do you handle bad news such as finding out someone special died?
- Did you ever do something and feel guilty later? What did you do? Why did you feel guilty afterward? How did you deal with that guilt?
LIGHTS, CAMERA, TAKE ACTION!

- May writes down prayers on little pieces of paper and hides them in the stone wall. Find a special and secret place where you can write down your thoughts to bring you comfort, whether in a journal or on pieces of paper you collect in a box.
- Find an old jar and paste pictures on it of a loved one who has passed away, like the woman’s picture on the honey jar. Collect little treasures that remind you of the person in your jar to keep them safe.
- Create a DVD of photos of someone special to you who has died. It is a great way to commemorate your loved one and incorporate favorite pictures and songs that remind you of him/her.
- If you have questions about a loved one who has passed away, ask the people who knew him/her best, as Lily asks August about her mother. They may be able to provide you with new stories, pictures, and information to help you get to know your lost loved one better.
- Create a family tree! Talk to your relatives to find out information about your ancestors and record it all down. Make a chart to see how you are connected to all your relatives and ancestors.

“Some things in life…don’t really matter. But lifting someone’s heart? Now, that matters.”
Suggested Films

Below is a list of suggested movie titles if you and your adolescent are interested in continuing to engage in conversations related to the chapters of Reel Life Lessons using films.

**FAMILY**
- Bicentennial Man
- Elf
- Family Man
- Fly Away Home
- Parent Trap
- Secondhand Lions

**FRIENDSHIP**
- E.T.
- Now and Then
- Stolen Summer
- The Outsiders
- The Sandlot
- Uptown Girls

**ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**
- Enchanted
- Ever After
- Here on Earth
- Sixteen Candles
- Some Kind of Wonderful
- The Princess Bride

**SCHOOL**
- Akeelah and the Bee
- Clueless
- Freedom Writers
- High School Musical
- Mean Girls
- School Ties

**ADULTHOOD**
- 13 Going on 30
- Millions
- Pay it Forward
- The Karate Kid
- The Princess Diaries
- What's Eating Gilbert Grape

**DEATH & DYING**
- A Walk to Remember
- Big Fish
- City of Angels
- Corrina, Corrina
- Field of Dreams
- Old Yeller
References


