Background and Best Practices on Rating Systems and Libraries

Rating systems, by their nature, are flawed. The major problem with them, whether from MPAA or other organizations such as Common Sense Media, is that they are subjective: reviewer X’s idea of an R rated movie may be Reviewer Z’s ho-hum PG13. A rating system may also prejudice a library patron towards a resource, either favorably or unfavorably.

In terms of movies, it is important to remember that the MPAA’s motion picture ratings have no legal standing; they are guidelines issued by the MPAA and are not intended for other uses. As such, there is no requirement that libraries abide by them, nor should they.

The American Library Association has published an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights dealing with rating systems (http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/rating-systems) Their guidance is straightforward: libraries should not use rating systems, primarily for the reasons given above. ALA also notes that a library which adopts or enforces ratings systems may be violating the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Ultimately the only judge of whether or not something is appropriate for a certain group of library patrons is the patrons themselves, or their parents/caregivers.

When considering minors, remember that libraries do not act in loco parentis and have no responsibility nor right to set arbitrary age limits for checking out or viewing library materials. Doing so puts a library in violation of section 5 of the Library Bill of Rights, which states "A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.” It is not far-fetched to imagine that such policies could even result in a charge of age discrimination. Nor is it far-fetched to imagine a parent/caregiver upset because their child was unable to check something out.

Best Practices

- Do not actively use rating systems in your library. If a resource includes a rating, or has one on its packaging, that’s fine. If a MARC record includes a rating, it’s fine to leave or remove it as you see fit. There is no requirement to add them to a MARC record.
- Do not set a minimum age for check out of library materials based on ratings or other factors: any library user should be free to check out any library materials.
- Purchase movies, etc. as you would books: in line with your collection development policy, your patrons’ tastes and wants, and your budget. Do not let an arbitrary rating be your guide.
- If your board of trustees insists on setting age limits for check out of certain materials, that’s ultimately their choice, but make sure they are aware of the facts involved.
- If a parent/caregiver objects to their child checking out something they feel is inappropriate, gently point out that the library cannot act in place of parental guidance: parents have different opinions of what “appropriate” is. These are conversations a parent/caregiver needs to have with their child if they are concerned. And again, the library has no legal authority to act in loco parentis.