

Time to Listen: Why Australian parents need a better media classification system

RESEARCH REPORT BY CQUNIVERSITY
FOR CHILDREN AND MEDIA AUSTRALIA



Suggested citation: Heaselgrave, F., Couzens, A., & Handsley, E. (2026). Time to listen: Why Australian parents need a better media classification system. *Children and Media Australia*.

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ISBN 978-1-925067-07-1

This report provides empirical evidence to support the need for a classification system that is designed for and with parents in Australia

Executive summary

This report, *Time to Listen: Why Australian Parents Need a Better Media Classification System*, presents findings of a national survey undertaken by researchers at Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) on behalf of the Australian Council on Children and the Media, t/a Children and Media Australia (CMA). Research was conducted to assess Australian parents' knowledge and use of the National Classification Scheme (NCS) and its relevance and usefulness to parents for supporting decisions about children's media consumption.

The survey, completed by 66 parents and carers, shows a disconnect between what the classification system provides and what parents actually need for informed decision-making. Whilst parents' expectations of G-rated content are mostly consistent with the government's classification, parents struggle to interpret the PG and M ratings meaningfully. Many parents cannot find information about elements that most concern them (particularly scariness), and the majority express a clear preference for age-based ratings (e.g. "6+", "9+") over the current

system that rates content according to impact (e.g. Mild impact equates to a PG rating).

Eighty-six percent of parents identify 'scariness' as a classification priority, yet this descriptor doesn't exist in the Australian system. When asked to rate content themselves, parents consistently identified scary elements as their primary concern – more than violence, more than language, more than any other factor. Yet the NCS does not have scariness as a classifiable element. Parents are also frustrated by the vagueness of the "Themes" element, which bundles together sexual violence, suicide, self-harm, and alcohol abuse without giving them the specific information they need. When offered these as separate elements, 97% of parents wanted sexual violence, and suicide and self-harm themes explicitly classified.

This report includes recommendations for Australian policymakers to introduce additional age-based ratings, to add missing content descriptors that reflect parental concerns, and to establish regular, meaningful consultation with parents.

Key findings:

- **Parents are struggling with the current classification system.** The ratings of PG and M are widely misunderstood, creating confusion and forcing parents to seek guidance from external sources
- **The PG rating is too broad and inconsistent.** Parents perceived the age-appropriateness of PG content as spanning 0-13 years, undermining the rating's usefulness as a decision-making tool
- **Parents want clearer, age-based ratings.** Over half (57.5%) of surveyed parents prefer numerical age categories (e.g., 6+, 9+, 12+) over impact-based descriptors
- **Content descriptors do not reflect parental concerns.** 86% of parents want "scariness" classified, and 97% want sexual violence and suicide/self-harm explicitly identified rather than hidden under the element of "Themes"
- **International comparisons show there is another way.** Countries like the UK and Netherlands provide age-specific ratings and detailed descriptors, engage in parental consultation, and regularly update classification guidelines.

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1 Introduction and purpose

In Australia, the National Classification Scheme (NCS) is the result of a federal cooperative arrangement between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. The overarching Commonwealth legislation, the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games Act 1995 (Classification Act)*, establishes a Code and Guidelines, which apply ratings (G, PG, M, MA15+, R18+, RC) to content based on the perceived impact on audiences of six classifiable elements: Nudity, Language, Drug Use, Violence, Sex, and Themes (see Table 1).

Established in 1995, the NCS has remained largely unchanged, despite dramatic transformations in how families access and consume media, advancements in child development research, substantial shifts in community attitudes, and significant advances in international best practice. Despite these changes, classification guidelines have received only minor updates, and there have been no changes to ratings, classifiable elements or the “impact” basis of the system.

The 2020 Stevens Review had an opportunity to address this stagnation.

Australian classification rating	Assessed impact level
General (G)	Very Mild
Parental Guidance (PG)	Mild
Mature (M)	Moderate
Mature Accompanied (MA15+)	Strong
Restricted (R18+)	High
Refused Classification (RC)	Very high

Table 1. A display of how the NCS calculates classification ratings by level of impact.

Commissioned by the former Liberal Government, the Stevens Review (2020) acknowledged some parental concerns regarding the current system and even noted that a PG-13 category could help parents better distinguish appropriate content for children under 12 years. But it stopped short of recommending concrete changes, instead concluding there was “insufficient support” to alter classification categories.

Among the 84 available submissions made to the Review’s public consultation, only a handful represented parents – an overwhelming underrepresentation of the very people who use classification information the most.

A further government-commissioned mixed-methods study was conducted in 2023 (Orima, 2023) to understand

community expectations and standards regarding classification. The research found strong agreement for maintaining existing ratings despite confusion being expressed by participants about their meaning. The sample size was large (2159 in total, across the survey and the focus groups), yet only 29% of the 2054 who participated in the survey and 31% of the 105 participants who took part in focus groups were parents.

The latest development is the release, in March 2026, of a consultancy report authored by Mettlesome and the Social Research Centre. It makes recommendations based on findings from an elaborate research program that included national online engagement, public co-design workshops, interviews and submissions with stakeholder groups and a quantitative survey with 1,020 participants. Of those, about 47% were parents.

It is not known which proportion of participants in other parts of the research were parents. At the time this report was released, there was an open consultation about the proposals.

Australia's seeming resistance to classification reform, and its limited incorporation of parental perspectives, may breach our nation's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), which requires encouragement of guidelines that protect children from

material that may be injurious to their wellbeing (Article 17(e)).

Moreover article 18(1) places responsibility on the government to support parents and caregivers – which would include ensuring they are confident and empowered to make informed decisions about children's media use. This report provides empirical data to support the provision of a robust and agile classification system that is informed by parental experiences and their identified needs.

2 Doing things differently: international comparisons

In Australia, the last major update to classification ratings was in 1993 with the introduction of the legally enforceable MA15+ classification (Cole, 2020). In other countries, classification systems are more responsive to changing societal expectations and inclusive of parental perspectives. For example, the UK's British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) conducts extensive consultation with parents and children every 4-5 years, and the Netherlands' Kijkwijzer system, which was originally designed in consultation with Dutch families (Valkenburg et al., 2002), undergoes annual reviews, incorporating child development research and parental feedback (Stevens, 2020). Both countries have introduced or refined existing age-specific ratings (e.g. PG-12A and 9) and refined content descriptors based on regular consultation with families and child development experts.

2.1 United Kingdom: evidence-informed and responsive

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) was established in 1912 as an independent regulator. Despite operating one of the oldest systems in the world, the BBFC demonstrates how classification can be both rigorous and responsive.

The BBFC endorses:

Regular consultation

- Classification guidelines are reviewed every 4-5 years with extensive public engagement
- The latest consultation (BBFC, 2024) involved over 12,000 participants
- Parents, grandparents, teachers, and teens watched content and participated in focus groups
- In addition, online surveys were conducted that allowed mass participation in rating trailers

Evidence-based changes

The 2018 consultation revealed concern about sexual violence at 12A, leading to revised 2019 guidelines restricting detailed instances of this element to age 15+.

Clear age categories

British classification ratings for cinema movies include U (Universal), PG, 12A, 15 and 18.

A separate 12 rating was introduced in 2009 to restrict children from buying/renting and, later, streaming movies without an adult present (Cole, Driscoll & Grealy, 2018), recognising parental presence matters when children are viewing content.

Specific descriptors

British classification applies to 11 content elements, including categories for Discrimination, Dangerous Behaviour, and Threat and Scary Scenes (see Table 2).

BBFC content elements	U(niversal)	PG	12/12A	15	18
Violence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nudity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sex	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Drugs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Discrimination	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dangerous behaviour	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Threat and scary scenes	✓	✓			
Sexual violence			✓*	✓	✓
Suicide and self-harm			✓	✓	✓
Threat and horror			✓	✓	✓

Table 2. Content descriptors and age ratings used in the British classification system.

*Implied verbal references only.

2.2 Netherlands: parent-centred and agile

In The Netherlands classification is managed through the Kijkwijzer – meaning ‘watch wiser’ in Dutch.

Developed by the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media (NICAM) in 2001, Kijkwijzer is a co-regulatory system that provides reliable information to guide parents’ decisions about media use (Gosselt, Van Hoof & De Jong, 2012). Kijkwijzer is a mandatory self-regulatory tool used by trained coders working in the media industry and was informed by research from child experts and in consultation with Dutch families (Valkenburg et al., 2002). Content is classified according to 8 age ratings and 6 content descriptors (see Table 3).

The Kijkwijzer system: a robust framework for classification

Age-specific ratings

Kijkwijzer has 8 age categories (All ages, 6, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18) that have evolved over time - with ratings for 7, 9, 14, and 18 being added to the system as ongoing research revealed gaps that did not provide adequate support to parents.

Clear descriptors

The 6 content elements include Fear as a standalone category, recognising the emotional impact content can have on children.

Co-regulatory model

Industry coders are trained to apply consistent standards, with oversight from NICAM ensuring accuracy is maintained.

Research-driven

The system was developed in consultation with child development experts and Dutch families

Annual reviews

Classification guidelines are updated yearly based on child development research and parental feedback.

The frequent consultations and adjustments made by both the British and Dutch systems demonstrate that classification can be nimble

in approach, using evidence from multiple stakeholders, to meet the needs of families.

Kijkwijzer content elements	A(II)	6	9	12	14	16	18
Violence		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sex				✓	✓	✓	
Smoking/Alcohol/Drugs				✓	✓	✓	✓
Fear		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Discrimination				✓			

Table 3: Content descriptors and how they apply to age ratings in the Kijkwijzer classification system

3 Research methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods survey to collect data from Australian parents and carers of children aged 1-15 about their perceptions, comprehension and use of classification for parenting. University ethics approval was obtained (protocol no. 204898) and the research was conducted between September 2023 and March 2024. Inclusion criteria required that participants' children regularly consumed movies at home, in the cinema or via streaming as these media are classified under the *Classification Act*.

Although the NCS applies to both films and video games, this study focused exclusively on film classification to explore and understand the specific concerns of parents regarding movie content. Films are a central part of family media consumption, particularly through streaming platforms and cinema experiences, and are often the first point of contact for parents navigating classification advice. Focusing on films allowed for a more targeted investigation of parental understanding and use of classification categories—especially the PG and M ratings, which have been identified as problematic in other research (see Stevens, 2020, Cole, 2020).

Participants were recruited through CMA's parent network, advocacy groups, social media, and media outreach. Of the 110 contributions made, 66 were considered valid after screening and completion rates were accounted for.

Participants represented all states and territories except the Northern Territory, with strong representation from NSW (28%), Victoria (23%), and South Australia (17%).

The research employed mixed methods, combining:

- *Quantitative analysis of parents' classification knowledge and preferences*
- *Qualitative exploration of parental decision-making processes when choosing content for their children*
- *An innovative rating exercise using the trailer for Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio (2022)*

Participants were asked to identify current classification elements, explain their understanding of ratings, classify content themselves, and indicate preferences for alternative systems.

Sample characteristics

The average age of respondents was 43 years. Most (80%) were female, reflecting the dominant role of mothers in managing children's media use (Heaselgrave, 2023). Many (85%) held bachelor's degrees or higher and 88% were married or cohabitating.

While the sample skews toward engaged, educated parents, this strengthens rather than weakens the findings, because if even informed parents who actively use classification still struggle with the system, reform may be even more pressing.

4 Key findings: parental engagement with classification

This section presents key findings from the mixed-methods survey, focusing on how Australian parents interpret and use classification guidelines to manage their children's media consumption.

4.1 Parents want more specific content descriptors

Parents were given a list of 14 content elements from Australian and other classification systems and asked which ones they believed were already used in Australia and which elements they felt should be applied (Figure 1). Prejudice, although not used in other comparable classification systems, was included to understand whether characters' prejudicial

attitudes were of concern to parents, compared, for example, to the display of discriminatory behaviour. Understanding the weight that parents attribute to different elements based on the words/terms used is useful for ascertaining what language is most effective for classification guidelines.

Of the six elements currently used, five (*Nudity, Language, Drug Use, Violence* and *Sex*) were identified most frequently as existing, with consistency shown between parents' expectations (what should apply) and knowledge of existing elements for all but *Language*, which shows an 11% difference (77% in favour compared to 88% awareness).

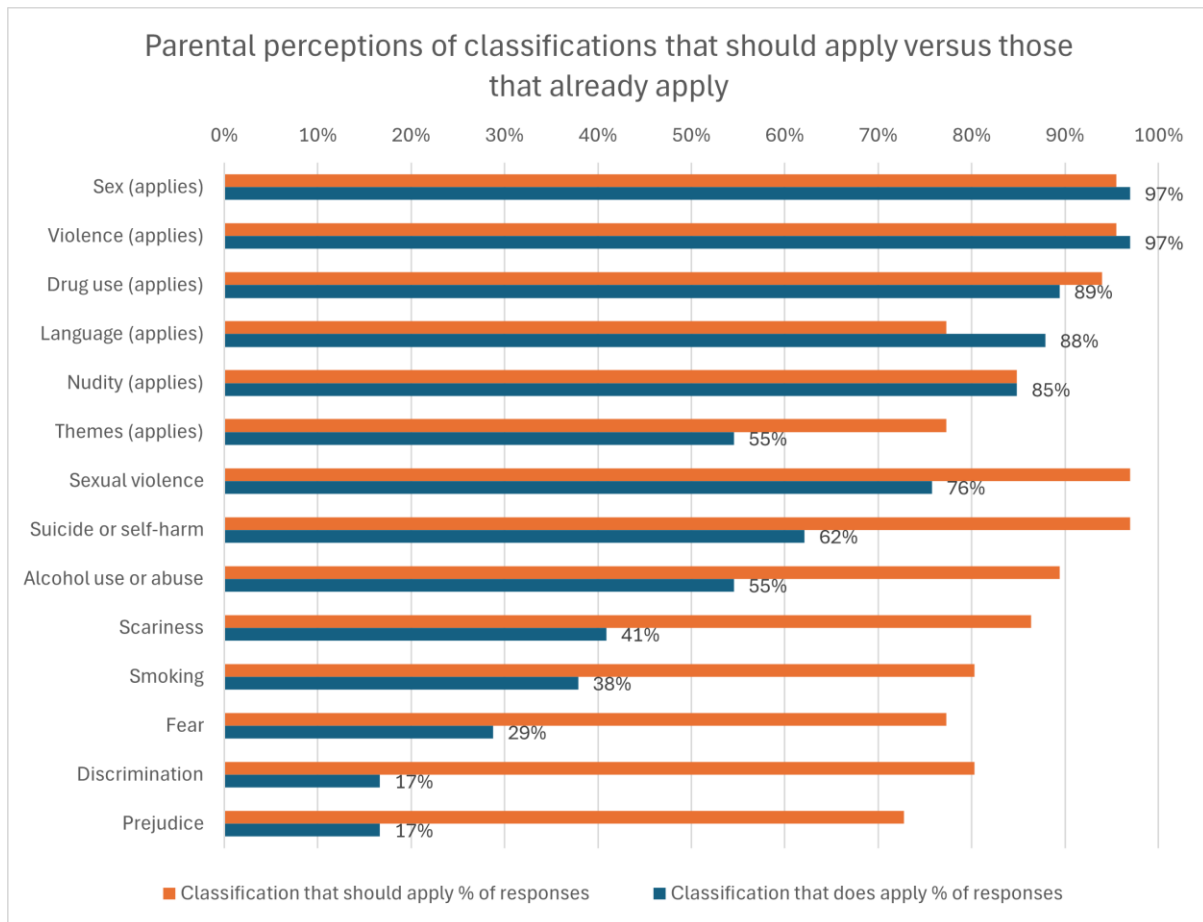


Figure 1. Parental perceptions of classification elements that currently exist (as indicated), compared to those they feel should apply.

4.1.1 The "Themes" problem

Parents' knowledge of the sixth category, *Themes*, was much lower, with only 55% of parents recognising it as a current classification element. Themes are defined as "social issues such as crime, suicide, drug and alcohol dependency, death, serious illness, war, family breakdown and racism" (Australian Government, 2019).

However, when asked about the current elements in the classification Guidelines:

- **76% of parents thought Sexual Violence was already included**
- **62% thought Suicide and Self-harm were included**

- **55% thought Alcohol Use and Abuse were included**

Qualitative responses also revealed interpretive inconsistencies and confusion around the vague umbrella term of Themes:

"I assumed self-harm was part of violence, not themes. It's not clear what themes actually covers."

This ambiguity suggests that while parents may recognise the presence of certain elements, there is not always alignment between the language used in classification guidelines and their understanding. The term *Themes*, for instance, was often conflated with other descriptors or misunderstood entirely.

4.1.2 The scariness gap

Additionally, parents expressed concern about the absence of descriptors that reflect emotional effects, such as Scariness. This oversight is particularly concerning for parents of young children who want help discerning age-appropriate content:

“I wish they would include scariness in the G/PG ratings. I know I can't show my kids any PG because they get scared too easily and there's no way to know in advance.”

Of the 14 elements provided to parents (Figure 1), Scariness was identified as the sixth-most concerning element, with 86% indicating that it should be classified.

Parents reported that scary content – jump scares, suspenseful music, frightening imagery – affects their children long after viewing, a perception also borne out by research (Cantor, 1998).

4.2.1 Parental interpretations of the PG rating

The findings reveal significant disparities between parents as to the appropriateness of PG content for children of different ages (see Table 4):

- 69.2% disagreed PG is suitable for all ages
- 58.9% disagreed PG is only suitable for ages 5+
- Opinion split almost evenly on whether PG is suitable for ages 8+ (41.5% agreed, 46.2% disagreed)

4.2 The PG rating is widely misunderstood

Previous classification consultations indicate parents want clearer PG guidelines to determine age-appropriateness for children of different ages (Stevens, 2020). Our study also found support for increasing clarity and recognition of classification ratings among parents.

To understand parents' perceptions of ratings, we asked parents to explain what they thought the 5 standard classification ratings mean and to indicate an approximate age category for each. We provided an open textbox for descriptive content (Figure 2) and, because PG has been identified as a problematic rating, we used a Likert scale to capture parents' interpretation of the PG rating's age-appropriateness (see Figure 3).

A box and whisker plot (Figure 2) shows that PG has the greatest variation in age distribution of all ratings, with participants indicating that PG content is suitable for children aged 0-13 years.

This variance in interpretation is not a problem with parents, but it is a problem with the rating itself. Such an inconsistency undermines the usefulness of PG as a decision-making tool.

	The PG rating indicates content is appropriate for all ages	The PG rating indicates content is only suitable for children aged 5 and over	The PG rating indicates content is only suitable for children aged 8 and over
Strongly agree	2 (3.1%)	2 (3.1%)	5 (7.7%)
Somewhat agree	14 (21.5%)	23 (35.9%)	22 (33.8%)
Neither agree nor disagree	4 (6.2%)	1 (1.6%)	8 (12.3%)
Somewhat disagree	23 (35.4%)	23 (35.9%)	17 (26.2%)
Strongly disagree	22 (33.8%)	15 (23%)	13 (20%)

Table 4. Frequency table for PG classification age suitability highlighting median points for age

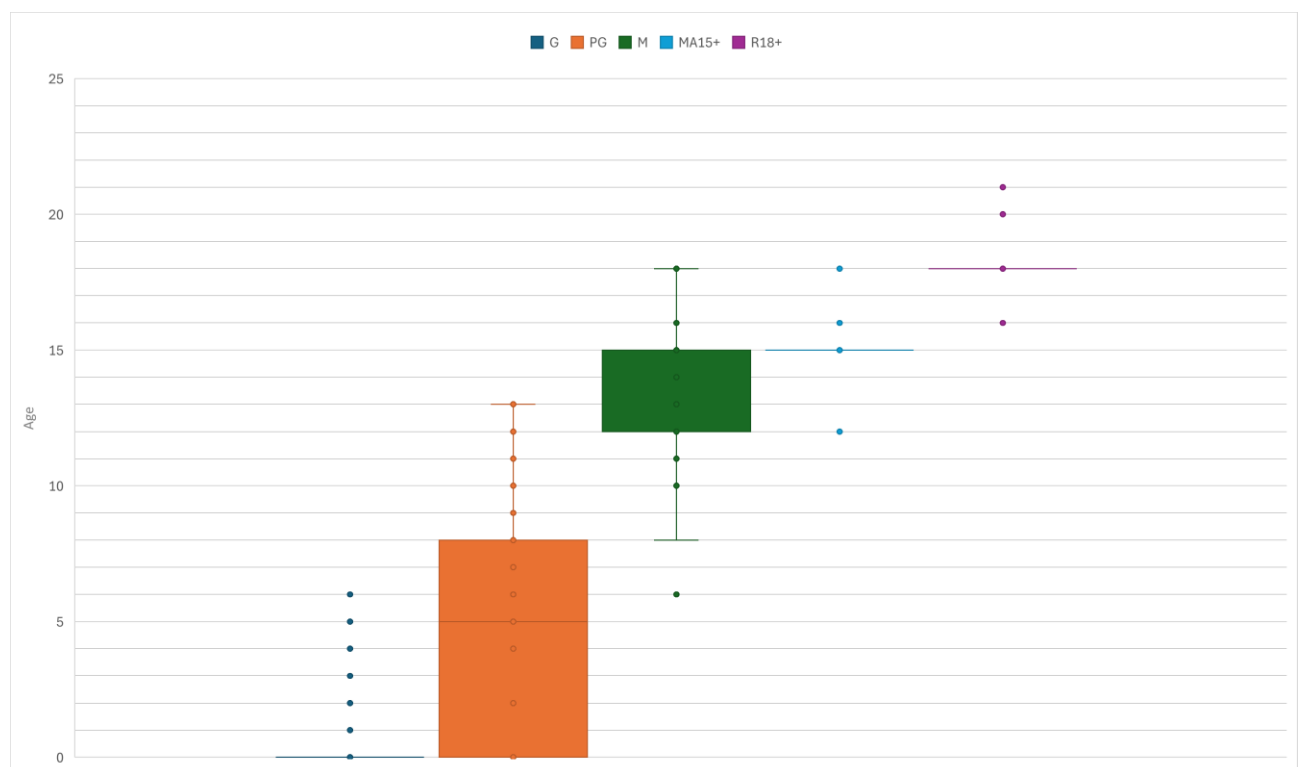


Figure 2. Box-and-whisker plot showing distribution of minimum age identified for each classification.

Qualitative responses showed a high level of agreement about what the letters PG stood for, with most including the words ‘parental guidance’ in their description of this rating. However, when asked what they thought of the PG rating, some spoke directly to its perceived relevance and value for informing their decisions. Of those who answered (27=41%), nearly half (12=44%) mentioned how vague the rating is and that it requires further clarification about age appropriateness:

The diverse responses of these participants relating to the age suitability of the PG rating indicate a lack of consensus about how the classification can support children’s media consumption.

For some, though, PG served its purpose as consumer guidance, saying:

“It’s ok to have a classification indicating parents need to decide.”

“I think it’s fine – it indicates the need to use parental discretion with the content and your individual kids.”

However, as one participant highlighted, the broad age range represented by the PG rating demands substantial effort for parents to determine its suitability for children:

“It is definitely too broad, what is suitable for a 14-year-old is totally different to what is suitable for a 4-year-old”

“It’s a pointless rating as it is too broad. 10-, 12- and 15-year-olds don’t want to be constrained to watching Bluey, as everything else with even the slightest non-babyish topic is rated M”.

One participant observed that: *“The problem isn’t the PG rating. The problem is that there should be something between PG and M”* and another mentioned *“PG is often too scary for my 6-year-old. Feels like there needs to be more nuance between PG and M.”*

“So many media fall into this rating that have such different content! There’s lots of PG rated movies that I investigate further that we decide is appropriate for both children but equally as many that I would never allow my 8-year-old to watch. It takes so much more effort to read up and investigate using other tools ... to be able to make an informed choice. I know that so many people can’t/won’t do that.”

This comment highlights how some parents are forced to spend significant time researching consumer guidance websites and parent review platforms because Australia’s official system lacks the information they need.

4.3 Classification is out of step with parental concerns

We asked parents to watch [a trailer of Guillermo Del Toro's \(2022\) *Pinocchio*](#) and to: 1) identify the classifiable elements they thought were present; 2) apply an Australian classification rating based on the perceived impact; and 3) apply a classification rating based on the Dutch Kijkwijzer system. In Australia, an M rating was applied to the film. In many overseas countries, including the UK, Canada and the U.S., a PG rating was applied to the film. A rating of 9 was applied in The Netherlands. The official trailer was rated PG.

4.3.1 Parents' assessment of classifiable elements

Scariness is a recurring theme that influences parents' evaluation of content and is an issue that has been raised in previous classification consultations (Stevens 2020). Our findings show Scariness was the most frequently selected element (82%, or 54 parents) when classifying the *Pinocchio* trailer (Table 5), followed by Fear. Scariness refers to the immediate impact of viewing, including an anticipatory effect or impending sense of doom. Fear accounts for the emotional effect that content can have on children well after the experience of watching something frightening (Valkenburg et al, 2002).

Compared to Scariness, participants articulated Fear less frequently in their qualitative comments, but the quantitative results show it is a clearly distinguishable concern in the trailer.

- **Scariness** was most frequently identified (82%) as a classifiable element.
- 83% assumed the trailer had a PG rating. Of these, 65% identified the impact as Mild, consistently with that rating, and 25% rated it as Moderate or Strong.
- 47.7% selected a '9' rating using the Kijkwijzer model.

Interestingly, despite our earlier discovery that the Themes element provokes confusion in some parents, its characteristics seem more tangible in context of the *Pinocchio* trailer where adult themes related to death, loss and identity are more palpable.

Identification of Prejudice and Discrimination was also curious as participants had seldom referenced these terms explicitly, yet their presence was clearly observed, presumably in the behaviour of characters towards *Pinocchio's* difference. That these two concepts are difficult to articulate may suggest parents are conscious of their negative influence but not how they are manifested in the content.

Classifiable element	Frequency (%)
Scariness	54 (81.8%)
Fear	37 (56.1%)
Themes	35 (53.0%)
Prejudice	29 (43.9%)
Discrimination	27 (40.9%)
Violence	24 (36.4%)
Language	5 (7.6%)
Suicide or self-harm	3 (4.5%)

Table 5. Frequency of classifiable elements identified in the *Pinocchio* trailer

4.3.2 Perceived impact and how it aligns to ratings

Most participants (83%) assumed *Pinocchio* had been given a PG (Mild) rating by the Australian Classifications Board (ACB). Of these responses, 65% (42 parents) also agreed the trailer was Mild in impact, while 20% (13 parents) selected Moderate impact and 5% (3 parents) Strong impact (Figure 3).

Most parents (83%) correctly assessed the trailer's impact as suitable for a PG rating. However, qualitative comments show evidence that the NCS does not

always align with parental values and perceptions. As the sample in Table 6 reveals, the trailer invoked some visceral reactions among some parents that would likely influence their decision regardless of the rating applied. Parents' knowledge of impact factors and content descriptors contribute to some extent to decision-making regarding children's media use. However, as the next section shows, the breadth of the PG rating may make it difficult for parents to make fully informed choices.

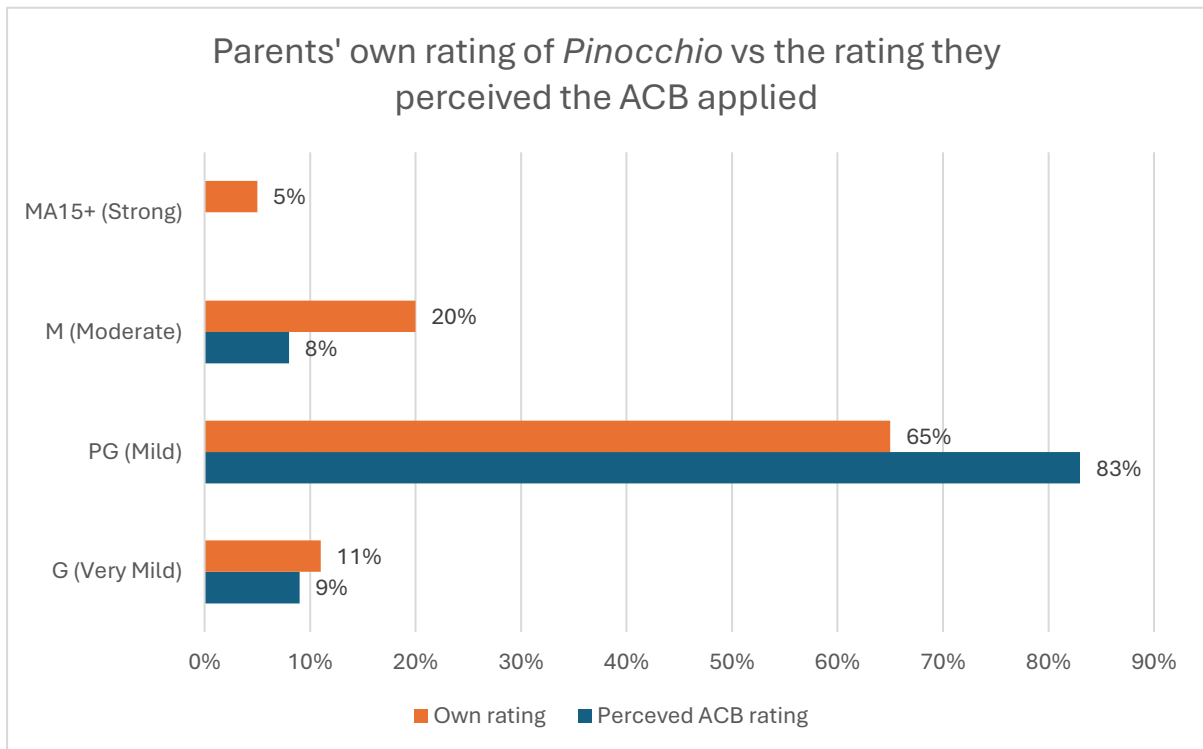


Figure 3. Parent ratings of the *Pinocchio* trailer based on perceived impact, compared to the rating parents believed had been applied.

Perceived rating applied by ACB	Rationale for the rating	Parent's rating of perceived impact	Explanation for impact level	Recommended age range
PG	<i>In my opinion the classification ratings are usually too low, that is, not as restrictive as they need to be.</i>	Strong impact (MA15+)	<i>This trailer made me cry. It shows the cruelty inflicted on the wooden boy and the deep pain he feels. It also emphasises the death of loved ones, which is deeply upsetting to young children.</i>	16 years
	<i>It feels too intense to be G but not adult enough to be M. I think there needs to be a rating between G and M based on the theme.</i>	Moderate impact (M)	<i>It's a very intense, emotional clip. Adult themes, scary illustrations.</i>	12 years, 14 years, 16 years
	<i>I'd be inclined to say 12+ but that isn't an option. It wouldn't be G, the comments of being a burden, the father having lost a child, the scary creatures all make me think it would require a parent to be with their child while watching.</i>	Mild impact (PG)	<i>The elements didn't appear from the clip to be frequent.</i>	12 years, 14 years, 16 years
G	<i>Presentation may scare younger children</i>	Very Mild impact (G)	<i>Might be scary, but impact would be very mild</i>	All

Table 6. Sample of data showing how parents rated the Pinocchio trailer based on their understanding of ACB classification and their own assessment of its impact.

4.3.3 Rating by numbers: using clearly identifiable age ratings

To offer parents an alternative way of classifying content – something that, to our knowledge, they have not previously been invited to do – we asked participants to select from the list of age categories used in the Dutch Kijkwijzer system (Figure 4) and to indicate which age rating they thought applied to the *Pinocchio* trailer.

The 9 rating was selected the most frequently (24.7%), indicating that parents thought the movie, based on their assessment of the trailer, is suitable for children aged 9 years and up.

We cross-referenced the lowest age rating that each participant selected against the

qualitative responses parents gave about the trailer's impact to check for coherence in age suitability. Age 9 emerged as both median and mode, with 47.7% selecting it, more than double the next most selected age category (age 6 –18.5%). Unlike their assessment of *Pinocchio* using the NCS, parents' classification with the Kijkwijzer accurately matched the age 9 rating that was given in The Netherlands.

These findings show how a classification system can make age-based judgements that align with those of parents, when given the right tools, and suggests the Kijkwijzer system aligns better than the NCS with what parents think.

How would you rate Guillermo Del Toros' *Pinocchio* (2022) movie trailer using the following age categories. Select all age categories that you feel the film is suitable for:

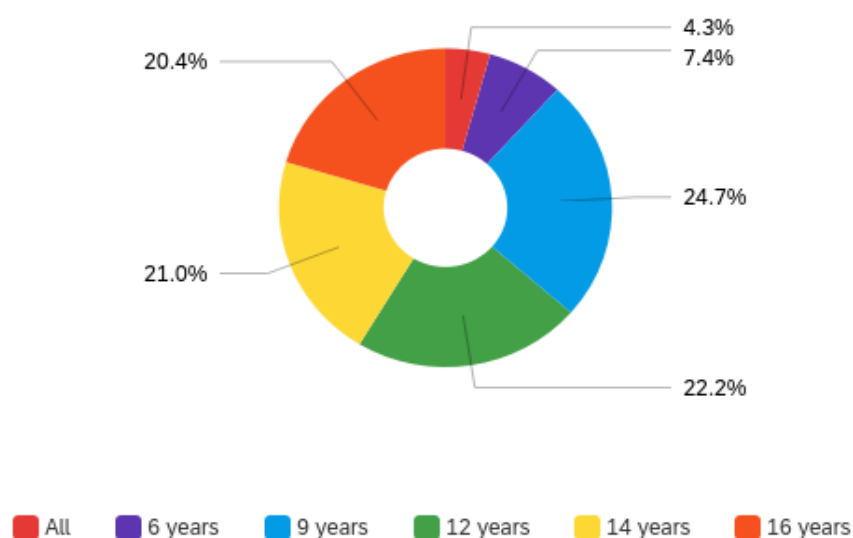


Figure 4. Frequency rate of parents selecting different Kijkwijzer age categories at which the *Pinocchio* trailer is suitable.

4.4 Parents prefer age-based classification systems

I prefer the current Australian ratings system that uses recognisable symbols to indicate the impact of media content	28.79%
I would prefer an age-based system that uses numbers to indicate the age-appropriateness of media content	57.58%
I have no preference for which ratings system is used	13.64%

Table 7. Classification preferences

To understand the relevance and usefulness of classification for parents, we asked them to indicate if they would prefer an age-based system or the current system.

While most (58%) agreed they would prefer an age-based system, 29% are also satisfied with the current one and a small percentage have no preference. Qualitative responses revealed specific reasons for these preferences, with some, once again, pointing to the need for more clarity around descriptors and the PG rating:

“The current system definitely requires a rethink of the broad, therefore pointless, PG category. It currently serves little to no purpose.”

“I find the classification system pretty useless so I hope there will be an overhaul, resulting in a more age specific system that gives more detail about which particular issues triggered the rating level.”

“A lot of the advice ratings that accompany the ratings for example “mature or adult themes” are meaningless and illogical. E.g. what is a mature theme? Literally a theme that has matured?”

In a few cases, participants raised specific issues that reflect contemporary parenting and which are not altogether accounted for in a 30-year-old model of classification:

“Parents need to know if content discusses gender identity or sexuality and sexual orientation to protect children that are too young from sex education.”

*“Parents should have a choice as to how and when LGBTQ material is shown to their children and so it should be indicated within the rating system as a warning to parents. I feel *severely* let down by the ratings system when my young children come across such content under a G or PG rating.”*

These findings highlight emerging areas of concern for parents that need to be heard and addressed by policy makers. Providing a robust, reliable and relevant system of classification and consumer guidance requires input from parents and child development experts, informed by empirical media research. Systems in other countries (UK, Netherlands) show this is feasible and effective.

5 Implications for parents and policy makers

The findings reveal a critical gap between Australia’s current classification system and the needs of families. For parents, the ambiguity of ratings – particularly PG – creates confusion and forces reliance on external sources for guidance. This undermines the system’s purpose as a quick and reliable decision-making tool. Parents consistently identified “Scariness” as a major concern, yet this descriptor is absent from current guidelines. Similarly, the vague “Themes” category does not include some themes (like sexual violence and self-harm) that parents would generally consider potentially harmful, leaving parents without

essential information to protect children from distressing content.

For policy makers, these results underscore the urgency of reforming the NCS to reflect contemporary parenting realities and international best practice. The strong preference for age-based ratings and specific content descriptors demonstrates that the existing impact-based model is no longer fit for purpose. Reform is not simply a regulatory adjustment – it is a child wellbeing and consumer rights issue. Providing clear, evidence-based classification guidance will empower parents, reduce stress, and ensure compliance with the Commonwealth’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

6 Recommendations

6.1 Introduce age-based ratings and clarify current categories

The ambiguity of the PG rating, seen in this report, demonstrates why age-based categories are urgently needed. Right now, PG covers everything from toddler-friendly to teen content, which confuses parents and forces them to look elsewhere for guidance. Providing age-specific ratings like 6+, 9+ and 12+ will help parents quickly understand what content is suitable for each child's age.

6.2 Include descriptors for the kinds of content that matter most to parents

Scariness, suicide/self-harm, and sexual violence themes are key concerns for parents. Creating separate categories instead of including them under broad terms like “Themes” will better equip parents to make safe choices.

6.3 Keep channels open to parents as they use the classification system

Our evidence shows that parent-informed classification systems like those in the UK and The Netherlands work effectively because they reflect real family needs. Establishing a structured process that actively listens to and engages parents in classification matters will enable Australia to keep pace with changing media trends and with emerging parental concerns.

6.4 Commit to regular evidence-based reviews

Australia's classification system hasn't changed significantly since 1995, while other countries do updates every few years. Scheduled reviews should be mandated and evaluated regularly (e.g. every 3-5 years), incorporating the expertise of child development and media researchers, alongside parental feedback. These reviews will keep the system relevant and responsive to an evolving media landscape and to parents' classification needs.

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8 Appendix: Survey instrument

Do you consent to participating in this survey?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Screening questions

Do you live in Australia?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Are you a parent or primary carer of children aged 1-15 years?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

What ages are your children?

Child One (age)

Child Two (age)

Child Three (age)

Child Four (age)

Child Five (age)

Child Six (age)

Do your children watch television programs via free-to-air and/or a streaming service?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Do your children watch movies at home and/or in the cinema?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Sources of advice

We would like to learn more about how you manage your children's media use. Please answer each question as they relate to your youngest eligible child (e.g. child aged 1 year or older).

1. When making decisions about which television shows or movies your child can see, what information or resources are you guided by? Please select all that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Children and Media Australia (know before you go) film reviews | ☐ User reviews on IMDb |
| ☐ Parent reviews on Common Sense Media | ☐ Ratings found on Classification website |
| ☐ Expert reviews on Common Sense Media | ☐ Consumer advice lines found on Classification website |
| ☐ Movie trailers | ☐ Classification symbols applied to television programs, films and games |
| ☐ Critic reviews on Rotten Tomatoes | ☐ Recommendations from friends |
| ☐ Critic reviews on IMDb | ☐ I don't seek guidance about media content |
| ☐ User reviews on Rotten Tomatoes | ☐ Parenting forums or websites (please specify) |
| ☐ | ☐ |

2. When making decisions about which video games and apps your child uses (or the games/apps you buy them) what information or resources are you most guided by?

3. Which of the following statements reflect your circumstances concerning your child's consumption of film, television and video game content. Select all that apply.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| ☐ I always check the ratings for every television show or movie before they are allowed to watch/play | ☐ I only check the rating to see if the content is M or higher | ☐ I trust my children to know what is appropriate for their age |
| ☐ I sometimes check the ratings | ☐ I only check the rating to see if the content is MA15+ or higher | ☐ I have parental controls that restrict children's access to shows and movies |
| ☐ I rarely check the ratings | | |

4. You answered that you use parental controls to manage children's media use. Could you please tell us more about which controls you use, to which platforms they apply (including streaming channels) and anything else about the type of content you restrict.

Media ratings

5. Please explain what you think each of the following classification ratings means, indicating an approximate age category where possible.



Classifiable content and impact

Classification ratings are applied to films and video games before they are released in Australia. Ratings are based on classifiable elements that are contained within those media and by the level of impact those elements are likely to have on audiences.

In the next set of questions, you will be asked to indicate which classifiable elements you think do and should apply in Australia and what the perceived level of impact of these elements are.

6. Which of the following classifiable elements do you think *already* apply to films and video games in Australia? Select all that apply

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Prejudice | ☐ Sex |
| ☐ Language | ☐ Violence |
| ☐ Nudity | ☐ Sexual violence |
| ☐ Discrimination | ☐ Suicide or self-harm |

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Drug use | ☐ Scariness |
| ☐ Alcohol use or abuse | ☐ Fear |
| ☐ Smoking | ☐ All of the above |
| ☐ Themes | |

7. Would you like to tell us more about your selection?

8. Which of these classifiable elements do you think *should* apply to films and video games in Australia?

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Prejudice | ☐ Sex |
| ☐ Language | ☐ Violence |
| ☐ Nudity | ☐ Sexual violence |
| ☐ Discrimination | ☐ Suicide or self-harm |
| ☐ Drug use | ☐ Scariness |
| ☐ Alcohol use or abuse | ☐ Fear |
| ☐ Smoking | ☐ All of the above |
| ☐ Themes | |

9. Are there other content or classifiable elements that you think should be included in the Australian classification system?

You will now be asked to watch a movie trailer from Guillermo Del Toro's *Pinocchio* (2022) and to rate the clip according to the classifiable elements you observe.

Watch Guillermo Del Toro's *Pinocchio* Official Trailer (2 minutes 36 seconds)

[Embedded link to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od2NW1sfRdA]

10. Based on your understanding of the classification ratings in Australia, which rating do you think applies to the *Pinocchio* trailer?

- ☐ G
☐ PG
☐ M
☐ MA15+

11. Please tell us a bit more about why you rated the *Pinocchio* clip in this way

12. Which classifiable elements do you think are present in the *Pinocchio* movie trailer? You may want to watch the trailer again as you record your response

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Prejudice | ☐ Sex |
| ☐ Language | ☐ Violence |
| ☐ Nudity | ☐ Sexual violence |
| ☐ Discrimination | ☐ Suicide or self-harm |
| ☐ Drug use | ☐ Scariness |
| ☐ Alcohol use or abuse | ☐ Fear |
| ☐ Smoking | ☐ All of the above |



The symbols used on classification ratings indicate the perceived level of impact that classifiable elements have on audiences. This impact is recorded as Very Mild, Mild, Moderate, Strong and High. For example, language may have a high or mild impact on audiences depending on the frequency, type and context of language used and the maturity of consumers.

Impact is aligned with the symbols used in classification ratings, where G = Very Mild impact, and so on.

13. Taking into account the classifiable elements you observed in the Pinocchio movie trailer, what overall impact do you perceive these would have on audiences? Please use the classification ratings below to indicate your answer.

- ☐ Very Mild (G)
- ☐ Mild (PG)
- ☐ Moderate (M)
- ☐ Strong (MA15+)

14. Please tell us more about why you rated the Pinocchio clip in this way

15. Different countries use different classification systems. How would you rate Guillermo Del Toros' Pinocchio (2022) movie trailer using the following age categories. Select all age categories that you feel the film is suitable for:

- ☐ All
- ☐ 6 years
- ☐ 9 years
- ☐ 12 years
- ☐ 14 years
- ☐ 16 years

16. Please tell us a bit more about why you selected these ratings

17. Please indicate which classification system you would prefer.

- ☐ I prefer the current Australian ratings system that uses recognisable symbols to indicate the impact of media content
- ☐ I would prefer an age-based system that uses numbers to indicate the age-appropriateness of media content
- ☐ I have no preference for which ratings system is used

18. To what the extent do you agree with the following statements about the PG (Mild) rating

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
The PG rating indicates that content is appropriate for all ages	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The PG rating indicates content is only suitable for children aged 5 years and over	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The PG rating indicates content is only suitable for children 8 years and over	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The PG rating means I need to watch/play the content with my child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The PG rating is too broad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am unclear what age range the PG rating applies to	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

19. Is there anything else you would like to say about the PG rating?

20. Which of the following ratings do you think are legally restrictive in Australia? Select all that apply

- ☐ G
- ☐ PG
- ☐ MA
- ☐ MA15+
- ☐ R18+
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ All of the above

21. What information would be of most value to you as a parent to help you make decisions about children's media use?

Demographic questions

Thank you for completing the previous questions. We now need some demographic information about your family to help us understand how media classification affects different households in Australia.

22. What is your age in years?

23. In which Australian state or territory do you currently reside?

- ☐ South Australia
- ☐ Western Australia
- ☐ Queensland
- ☐ Tasmania
- ☐ Northern Territory
- ☐ New South Wales
- ☐ Australian Capital Territory
- ☐ Victoria

24. How would you describe your sex

-
-
- ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Intersex
 - ☐ Prefer not to say
 - ☐ I use a different term (please specify)

25. How would you describe your gender

- ☐ Woman or female
- ☐ Man or male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ I use a different term(please specify)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

26. How would you describe your sexual identity

- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Another sexual identity (please specify)

27. Would you describe your relationship status as:

- ☐ Cohabiting
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Single
- ☐ Non-cohabiting relationship
- ☐ Another term (please specify)

28. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ Yes, both
- ☐ No, I am not of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin

29. What is your country of birth?

30. What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ High school certificate
- ☐ Certificate I - IV
- ☐ Diploma/Advanced Diploma
- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Postgraduate certificate/diploma
- ☐ Masters Degree
- ☐ Doctoral Degree
- ☐ Other (please specify)

31. What is your cultural/ethnic identity?

32. What is your employment status?

- ☐ Paid employment
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Voluntary work
- ☐ Unpaid work in the home or caring for others
- ☐ Other (please specify)

9 About this research

This research was commissioned by Children and Media Australia (CMA), Australia's national peak body representing children's interests in media, and conducted by independent academic researchers between September 2023 and March 2024.

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About Children and Media Australia

Children and Media Australia is an independent, not-for-profit organization advocating for children's interests in media policy and practice. CMA supports children's healthy development and protect their rights and interests as digital and screen media users by assisting families and children's professionals, and by influencing decision-makers.

Publication date: 06 May 2026

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