***Bully*: A Hard Documentary, but Does It Deserve to Be Rated R?**

<http://healthland.time.com/2012/03/12/bully-a-harsh-documentary-but-should-it-be-rated-r/> March 12, 2012

Profanity has garnered the new documentary *Bully* an R-rating, but anti-bullying advocates argue that the film should be PG-13, so more kids can see the film in schools and theaters without parents tagging along.

On Saturday afternoon, at a film festival in Birmingham, Mich., Kevin Epling screened [*Bully*](http://www.thebullyproject.com/), a much talked-about documentary about how brutally kids can treat one another. Epling didn’t flinch any of the six times the word *f—* was uttered during the film. Although the frequent use of the swear word is what’s garnered *Bully* an R-rating — and thus prompted its big-name distributor, Harvey Weinstein, to threaten to resign from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) — Epling has his eye on the bigger picture, so to speak.

Ten years ago, his son, Matt, was hazed by a group of upperclassmen on his last day of eighth grade. A popular kid who was into BMX biking and writing poetry and was voted “Best Smile” in the middle-school yearbook, [Matt](http://healthland.time.com/2012/03/12/bully-a-harsh-documentary-but-should-it-be-rated-r/www.mattepling.com) was lured from his house to a nearby park by a friend; high school students pounced on him around the corner, smashing eggs and pouring syrup on him and letting him know in no uncertain terms that he was no longer a hotshot middle schooler but a lowly freshman. A little over a month later, the night before he was set to talk to police, Matt killed himself. A decade ago, bullying wasn’t the cultural football it is today. “We were initially told it’s just kids being kids,” says Epling, who has spent the past decade helping raise the nation’s consciousness about the importance of taking bullying seriously.

If a picture is worth 1,000 words, then how to quantify the impact of a movie? The good that could potentially come out of swarms of kids seeing *Bully* — which opens in U.S. theaters March 30 — far outweighs any damage that may come from them hearing a four-letter word they undoubtedly already know, says Epling, who lives in East Lansing, and serves as co-director of [Bully Police USA](http://healthland.time.com/2012/03/12/bully-a-harsh-documentary-but-should-it-be-rated-r/www.bullypolice.org), a grassroots organization of educators, parents and law enforcement that tracks state laws on bullying. “As a parent who has gone through this, I think this film is very powerful,” he says. “The few words in there are there because that’s the reality of the situation. When we have an opportunity as a society to put a dent in one of the largest problems across the U.S. facing children today, we should re-evaluate our priorities.”

Those priorities, according to the MPAA, typically involve an automatic R-rating for any movie that incorporates the F-word at least twice as a general curse or once in reference to sex. In one particularly harrowing scene in *Bully*, one child makes liberal use of the word as he outlines how he plans to attack a victim.

“I wish this movie could be shown in every classroom in America,” tweeted Ellen DeGeneres. But it won’t be, due to its R-rating, Weinstein has pointed out. Last month, he lost an appeal to soften the rating. When he fell one short vote of the two-thirds needed to overturn the ruling, he announced he may pull out of the MPAA in protest, at least temporarily.

Adding to the furor is a [petition](http://www.change.org/petitions/mpaa-don-t-let-the-bullies-win-give-bully-a-pg-13-instead-of-an-r-rating) started by Michigan high school student Katy Butler, who shares what it was like to have her finger broken in seventh grade by bullies who slammed her locker shut on her hand. More than 279,000 people have signed on to her request to ask the MPAA to change the rating to PG-13, which would broaden the audience significantly by allowing children to see the movie without an adult guardian:

I can’t believe the MPAA is blocking millions of teenagers from seeing a movie that could change — and, in some cases, save — their lives. According to the film’s website, over 13 million kids will be bullied this year alone. Think of how many of these kids could benefit from seeing this film, especially if it is shown in schools?

… This makes me really mad. It means that a film documenting the abuse that millions of kids experience through bullying won’t be seen by the audience that needs to see it the most: middle school students and high school students.

Other organizations, including the National Center for Learning Disabilities, are also advocating for a ratings change. “Bullying is nothing less than a crisis in this country…” wrote James Wendorf, executive director of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, in a statement. “Sixty percent of children with learning disabilities and other special needs say they have been seriously bullied…Until parents understand this crisis and children and teens see and own the consequences of their behavior, there is little hope for improvement.”

The Parents Television Council, meanwhile, has expressed its support for the R-rating, although Dan Isett, its director of public policy, [told](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/03/bully-mpaa-will-screen-r-rated-documentary-harvey-weinstein.html) the Los Angeles *Times* he hasn’t yet seen the film. “There’s nothing in an R-rating that prevents a child from seeing a movie,” Isett said. Nothing aside from the fact that no self-respecting teen is about to set off for the cineplex with Mom and Dad.

Michael Tucker, a filmmaker who successfully appealed the MPAA’s R-rating for his Iraq war movie, *Gunner Palace*, [explained](http://news.moviefone.com/michael-tucker/bully-r-rating_b_1333649.html) on Moviefone that word choice can be essential for impact:

Never mind that in one of the scenes where the F-word is used, a boy is bullied on a school bus by an older boy who also tells the younger that he’s going to cut him and assault him with a broom handle. Watching this — and many scenes in the film — you often forget that you are in a middle school and not in a prison yard. These are ugly real threats and the escalation and use of language is essential to the film.

At its heart, “Bully” is about the power of words. To understand what these kids are really experiencing you have to hear the language. Editing or bleeping would be an insult to that experience.

For Kevin Epling, who has a 10-second cameo in *Bully* as one of several parents who release balloons in memory of children lost to bullying, the debate is clear-cut. When he asked parents who saw the movie at Saturday’s film festival whether they would let their children see the movie without them, hands shot up. “Everyone said this needs to be seen by kids today,” says Epling. “Sitting and watching the anguish of those parents in the film brought a lot of our anguish back. But out of tragedy can come great hope that we can turn things around.”

The ratings controversy has led to the MPAA scheduling a special invitation-only screening and panel discussion on Thursday for Washington, D.C., educators, parents and students; MPAA chairman Chris Dodd, the film’s director, Lee Hirsch, and Weinstein are also expected to attend. Weinstein has said he plans to invite Butler and some of the kids who appear in *Bully*. Perhaps coming face to face with real kids who’ve faced down real bullies will sway the MPAA. “With their testimony,” Weinstein [told](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/03/bully-mpaa-will-screen-r-rated-documentary-harvey-weinstein.html) the L.A. *Time*s, “anything including change is possible in my belief.”

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

You likely have a big old opinion right now on whether or not this film should receive an ‘R’ rating, thereby making it virtually impossible for most kids to see, but extract your emotion from what you have to say. Your job is to write a SOLID paragraph to the Motion Picture Association of America to either support their decision OR try to convince them to change the rating from ‘R’ to something a little softer. Remember, you are to sound like insightful, literate young adults, not stereotypical teens. Offer your EVALUATION, not your opinion, and people will listen.