

## Teen Issues

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Identifying specific issues in teen films is difficult, because the same issues tend to emerge again and again. Teens and parents. Teens and peer pressure. Teens and sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. As an alternative to creating a massive cross-reference of films tripping over more films, the Issues in Teen Films list found on pages 40-41 has been taken from *Entertainment Weekly's* September 2006 ranking of the 50 Greatest High School Movies, and has been charted in terms of what issues emerge in each film. The list is not perfect and the ranking of the movies is debatable, but this is a comprehensive list of teen films, and it provides a consistent standard from which to work. What follows is a brief analysis of each teen issue category on the Issues in Teen Films list.

### ACHIEVEMENT AND TESTING

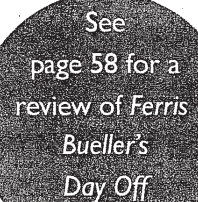
Issues of achievement and testing often cross paths with several other teen-related issues, such as Anxiety about the Future, Teachers and Authority, and Upward Mobility. In fact, there are so many teen movies based on the stress of taking tests, it could be considered a sub-genre unto itself. Two of the best examples of achievement and testing on film are *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Friday Night Lights* (2004). In *Stand and Deliver*, Edward James Olmos teaches a classroom of gang members mathematics through examples they

can relate to from their personal lives. The film culminates in the students taking their SATs. *Friday Night Lights* is a sports film, which emphasizes that achievement in athletics can be as grueling as the expectations placed on students in the classroom.

### ANXIETY ABOUT THE FUTURE

Strangely enough, two of the best examples of films featuring high school characters dealing with anxiety about how their future may or may not turn out both star Matthew Broderick, but were made thirteen years apart. In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), Broderick plays the title character as someone who only wants to have fun, but secretly needs a day away from the pressures of teenage life and school, because he realizes that his future as an adult will be forced upon him soon enough.

In *Election* (1999), Broderick plays Jim McAllister, a high school teacher on the other side of the desk from Ferris, who embodies a living, breathing version of Ferris' worst visions for the future. McAllister seems normal, but is bitter and petty, and is determined to bring down over-achieving



See page 58 for a review of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

academic superstar Tracey Flick (played by Reese Witherspoon), if it's the last thing he does. Tracey's anxieties about the future lead to cheating, deceit, and betrayal, and are only compounded when she realizes that Jim is out to get her once and for all. Perhaps strangest of all, both of these films are laugh-out-loud comedies.

### BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

Bullying and violence is not limited by gender. In a film such as *Mean Girls* (2004), females rule the school by verbally threatening and abusing those around them, while in *Carrie* (1976), the title character played by Sissy Spacek is abused by males and females equally, until she takes matters into her own hands and exacts a revenge like no other. *Carrie* also presents a complex understanding of bullying, relating female insecurities towards body issues and fears over sexual development as a primary anxiety leading to violence amongst teenagers.

*The Karate Kid* (1984) is an example of a film that takes teenage violence and places it into an athletic setting. Issues relating to romance, jealousy, and bullying spill over into the story of an adolescent man and his mentor, but the story focuses primarily upon learning to express anger in healthy and controlled ways.

See  
page 63 for a  
review of *Mean  
Girls*

### DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

*Fame* (1980) may be remembered as just another song-and-dance film about teenagers trying to make it in the world, but looking back, it is a hard hitting, earnest film dealing with drug abuse, suicide, and abortion. *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) is an example of a film that was so well received by critics upon its release that no one thought to call it a teen film at the time. However, this film is set in a high school, deals with issues of teenage romance, identity, confusion about where to fit into one's family, and ultimately depression and suicide. Sofia Coppola adapted the screenplay for this film from a novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, which was published in 1993.

### DRINKING AND DRUGS

Drinking and doing drugs is a difficult subject to present on screen. On the one hand, filmmakers do not want to seem uptight or preachy about the perils of experimenting with narcotics, but on the other hand, they don't want to make it seem as if drinking and doing drugs can not include serious consequences. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1983) and *Dazed and Confused* (1994) take the comedic route when presenting teenagers discovering drinking and drugs for the first time. The filmmakers avoid the depiction of hard drugs, focusing instead on the ways in which fitting in, finding oneself, and enjoying one's teenage years is typically associated partying and discovering one's limitations. The best teen films about drinking and drugs – including the two ex-

amples discussed here - balance a wide variety of characters' perspectives. Some of the characters enjoy getting drunk and high, while other characters don't drink or do drugs at all.

### EATING DISORDERS

A surprising lack of teen films exists about eating disorders. Is it because the subject matter is too difficult to capture convincingly on screen, or is it because the idea of a female actress intentionally losing a great deal of weight for a role seems unhealthy and dangerous? Perhaps eating disorders are just too unappealing a subject matter to be funded by Hollywood, which tends to be interested in making money rather than raising social consciousness.

Interestingly, even though there are no feature films depicting teenage eating disorders, many teen films featuring female protagonists focus on eating and weight gain as a common and constant female anxiety. Both *Clueless* (1995) and *Mean Girls* (2004) feature female teenagers who due to the pressure of popularity are surrounded by friends obsessed with calorie counting and cellulite. The characters in these films ultimately draw the conclusion that one must be happy in one's own body regardless of the opinion of anyone else, and yet this is not an easy or obvious conclusion for these characters to arrive at.

### FAMILY ISSUES

Teenagers and family issues go together like cheese and crackers. In fact, whether a teen film is a comedy or a drama, a horror movie or a road movie, unwanted parents and siblings are always lurking in the background somewhere. Two examples of classic Family Issues teen films are *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). These films were almost made twenty years apart, but they both capture the feeling of being trapped by your surroundings, of loving your family but needing to find one's own way in the world, how teenagers act with friends when their parents are not around, and in turn how teenagers act with their parents when friends are not around.

### FITTING IN AND PEER PRESSURE

*Dead Poets Society* (1989) is probably best remembered for Robin Williams' performance as John Keating, the new English teacher at a prep school for boys, but the heart of this film lies in the stories of the seven teenage boys who try to find themselves both by fitting in with the group, and simultaneously figuring out what makes them unique from everyone else around them. These young men struggle to find their way, and often have to decide whether fitting in with friends can co-exist with satisfying the orders of demanding and misunderstanding parents.

*Heathers* (1989) is an example of extreme peer pressure from a female perspective, though in turn both *Heathers* and *Dead Poets Society* can be regarded as corollaries to Upward Mobility Films. Whereas Upward Mobility Films tend to feature racial minority protagonists, the films discussed here could be called, "White, Private School" films.

#### IDENTITY (RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS)

A wide variety of films exist in this category of teen issues. *Pretty in Pink* is a 1986 film focusing on teenage romance from the point-of-view of social cliques, and makes thoughtful observations about how wealth, or more to the point a lack of wealth, can affect how others see teenagers, and in turn how teenagers see themselves. *Molly Ringwald* stars as a poor girl who has to choose between the rich, popular boy at her school (Andrew McCarthy), and a strange, not-so-popular boy (Jon Cryer).

*Hoop Dreams* (1994), meanwhile, could not be further from the plot of *Pretty in Pink*, but also deals with issues of teenage identity. *Hoop Dreams* tells the story of two inner-city black adolescents, Arthur Agee and William Gates, both of whom hope to one day play in the National Basketball Association. Filmmakers Steve James, Peter Gilbert, and Frederick Marx filmed Agee and Gates for five years. The finished film is three hours in length and has become legendary for how well it captures the struggles of many black Americans as

their lives relate to economic instability, divisions of class, racism, and the lack of educational opportunities available to entire generations of teenagers.

#### SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

This may be the teen issues category with the most number of films in it. Every year it seems, several films are released pertaining to teenagers and sex. Even if it is a horror film about teenagers, sex will find its way in there somehow. As expected, some films treat sex and relationships lightly, whereas other films take sex and relationships very seriously. This varied approach makes sense, because depending on which teenager you talk to, love and relationships are either a source of constant joy or constant heartache.

*Say Anything...* (1989) is an example of a teenage movie that combines intelligence and humour, and makes the point that the hardest part about falling in love as a teenager is all of the road blocks in the way. These roadblocks include parents, friends, differing plans for the future, and all sorts of human emotions, from jealousy to anger to confusion. *Get Real* (1998) is a British film which tells the story of a track star who falls for a student who's into photography and journalism. None of this is a problem, but the fact that both students are male provides a refreshing change of pace to the standard highs and lows of high school romances, as well as how issues of fitting in, being liked, and just making it in the world of

high school society can be effected by being true to one's heart. *Get Real* is not well-known, but deserves to gain a broader audience for its combination of frank discussions of sexuality and humour.

#### TEACHERS AND AUTHORITY

Whether it be Sidney Poitier teaching a classroom of rowdy British teens how to behave like adults in *To Sir, With Love* (1967), or Gene Hackman teaching a bunch of Indiana high school basketball players how to play like a team in *Hoosiers* (1986), tough love usually rules the day in these type of films. The formula often crosses over into the Upward Mobility and Identity categories, especially in recent years as a rash of films dealing with sassy, white teachers showing a group of black inner-city children how to behave have emerged [*Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Freedom Writers* (2007)].

#### UPWARD MOBILITY

An inspiring example of a teen issue film category, these movies tend to crossover with Teachers and Authority, as well as Identity issues of race and class. The plots of films such as *Cooley High* (1975) and *Boys N the Hood* (1991) deal with teenagers attempting to escape their limited surroundings through intelligence, hard work, and

the guidance of a caring teacher and/or parental figure. These films often blend hope and tragedy, and tend to be dramatic rather than comedic in tone.

#### Further Reading

Media Awareness Network offers suggestions to teenagers, parents, and teachers on how teenagers can become more aware of the messages and ideas presented in movies marketed towards young adults:

Movies - Special Issues For Teens and Tweens, (2007). *Media Awareness Network*. Retrieved April 2, 2007, from [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/teens\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/teens_movies.cfm)

*Entertainment Weekly's* list of the 50 Best High School Movies, with an accompanying photo gallery of stills from select films:

The 50 Best High School Movies. (2006, September 15). *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved April 2, 2007, from <http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,1532588,00.html>

# Issues in Teen Films

Film Title	Year	Achievement and Testing	Anxiety about the Future	Bullying and Violence	Depression and Suicide	Drinking and Drugs	Eating Disorders	Family Issues	Fitting In and Peer Pressure	Identity (Race, Gender, and Class)	Sex and Relationships	Teachers and Authority	Upward Mobility
The Breakfast Club	1985												
Fast Times at Ridgemont High	1982												
Dazed and Confused	1993												
Rebels Without a Cause	1955												
Heathers	1988												
American Graffiti	1973												
Clueless	1995												
Boys N the Hood	1991												
Election	1998												
Ferris Bueller's Day Off	1986												
Say Anything...	1989												
Mean Girls	2004												
High School	1988												
Donnie Darko	2001												
Carrie	1976												
Lucas	1986												
Peggy Sue Got Married	1986												
Rock 'n Roll High School	1979												
The Last Picture Show	1971												
Dead Poets Society	1989												
Grease	1978												
American Pie	1989												
Cooley High	1975												
Rushmore	1998												
Hoosiers	1986												
Pretty in Pink	1986												
To Sir, With Love	1967												
Back to the Future	1985												
Gregory's Girl	1982												
Bring It On	2000												

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The Karate Kid	1984	•											
Scream	1996			•								•	
Hoop Dreams	1994	•	•	•				•		•		•	
Get Real	1999			•									
Brick	2006			•									
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	2005	•											
Friday Night Lights	2004	•		•				•					
Bye Bye Birdie	1963		•										
The Virgin Suicides	2000			•	•			•					
Risky Business	1983		•					•					
Can't Buy Me Love	1987												
Fame	1980	•			•			•					
Stand and Deliver	1988	•				•		•					
Can't Hardy Wait	1986		•										
My Bodyguard	1980			•				•					
Fifteen	1992	•		•				•					
Napoleon Dynamite	2004			•				•					
Just One of the Guys	1985	•		•				•					
Sixteen Candles	1984							•					
Splendor in the Grass	1961				•			•					