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# ANNUAL REPORT

THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES  
MONITORING BOARD

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# A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

To say the past year has been a challenge for our country would be a grave understatement. Far too many families have faced enormous loss, separation, economic hardship, and newfound obstacles in their lives. Throughout these difficult times, however, families increasingly have turned to television to stay informed, augment their children's virtual learning, and take a break with entertainment.

Since 1996, the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board (Monitoring Board) has been committed to helping parents make informed decisions about programming that is most suitable for their families. Today, as more families spend more time watching television, the TV Parental Guidelines (also called the TV ratings system) continue to provide valuable information about the content and age-appropriateness of television shows. And the Monitoring Board remains as dedicated as ever to ensuring that the TV ratings are applied in a consistent and accurate way.

While some of our anticipated activities for this year had to be suspended or changed due to circumstances outside of our control, I am proud to report that the Monitoring Board was able to move ahead on three key priorities. These include:

1. Completion of our biennial survey of parental sentiment towards and awareness of the TV ratings system.
2. Implementation of spot check reviews of the TV ratings system across our networks.
3. Creation of a task force to review how TV ratings are utilized on video streaming services and to more formally engage with streaming services about their ratings.

We consistently found, throughout these activities, that even amid times of increased television usage, the TV ratings for broadcast and cable programming remain accurate, and parents continue to have highly favorable views about the TV Parental Guidelines.

**In this second Annual Report** of the Monitoring Board, we highlight these and other activities that have been undertaken to increase public awareness and to ensure that the TV ratings system is administered in a consistent manner. In 2021, the Monitoring Board stands ready to build on these initiatives as we continue to provide parents with useful information as to the content and age-appropriateness of television programming.

I want to thank the Monitoring Board for its continued work to make the TV Parental Guidelines a valuable resource to parents, and I want to welcome the incoming Monitoring Board chairman, Motion Picture Association (MPA) Chairman and CEO Charles Rivkin. It has been my honor to serve as chair over the past two years, and I look forward to continuing to work with this dedicated group of industry and public interest leaders.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'M Powell', written over a dark blue background.

Michael Powell  
Chairman of the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board  
President and CEO of NCTA – The Internet & Television Association

# ABOUT THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES MONITORING BOARD

**The TV Parental Guidelines were created in 1996** to help parents make informed decisions about what programs are suitable for their children. Designed by leading organizations of the TV industry, in consultation with representatives of a broad range of children's, medical and other interested stakeholders, the TV ratings are easily recognizable and easy to use. The ratings work in conjunction with parental control technology such as the V-Chip, built into most televisions, as well as cable set top boxes, allowing parents to block programs they determine to be inappropriate for their families.

**TV ratings are available** both for television programming designed for children and for programming intended for general audiences. The ratings provide information about the content and age-appropriateness of programs and apply to most television shows. Some programs, such as news, sports, religious and most home shopping programming, are not rated. The ratings information is prominently displayed at the beginning of – and often after commercial breaks in – all rated programming. Ratings information also is available in the TV listings of many newspapers, in other printed and online program listings and on numerous websites.

**In conjunction with the ratings**, the television industry established the Monitoring Board to help ensure that ratings are applied on a consistent basis across networks and programs. The Monitoring Board provides oversight by constantly reviewing and updating its practices in light of feedback; reviewing and responding to complaints and other public input and facilitating discussion among members of the Monitoring Board to ensure that ratings are being consistently applied from program-to-program. The Monitoring Board meets at least once annually to consider and review correspondence sent to the Monitoring Board, discuss current research and review any other issues relevant to the TV Parental Guidelines.

**The Monitoring Board is comprised of up to 24 members:** the chairman (the head of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), NCTA – The Internet & Television Association (NCTA) or the Motion Picture Association (MPA) on a rotating basis), as many as 18 industry members from the broadcast, cable and creative communities appointed by the NAB, NCTA or MPA and up to five third-party groups with an interest in children and media appointed by the Monitoring Board chairman. The chairman serves for a two-year term.

## **Current members of the Monitoring Board are:**

- ABC
- A+E Networks
- AMC Networks
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Call for Action
- Discovery, Inc.
- Entertainment Industries Council
- Fox Corporation
- Hulu
- Lifetime Networks
- National PTA
- NBC Universal
- Sony Pictures Entertainment
- Univision
- ViacomCBS



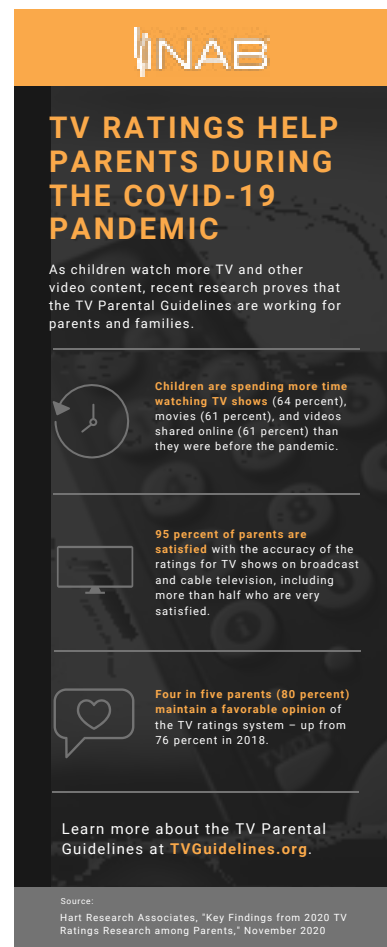
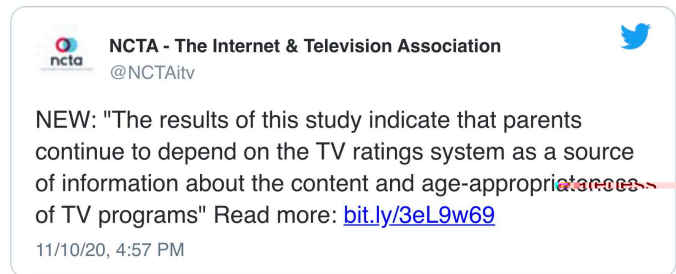
# BIENNIAL SURVEY OF PARENTS

This year, the Monitoring Board commissioned its biennial survey as part of an ongoing effort to track parents' awareness regarding, usage of, and sentiments about the TV ratings system. The national survey was conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of the Monitoring Board from late August to early September 2020; [results](#) were released to the public on November 9, 2020. Respondents included 1,020 English- and Spanish-speaking parents of children aged two to 17. The survey is a follow-up to surveys conducted in 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

The 2020 survey revealed that usage and positive sentiment toward the TV ratings system remains high, even as parents report that their children are watching more TV amid the COVID pandemic. Among topline results, the survey found that:

- Children are spending more time watching TV shows (64 percent), movies (61 percent), and videos shared online (61 percent) than they were before the pandemic.
- 95 percent of parents are satisfied with the accuracy of the ratings for TV shows on broadcast and cable television, including more than half who are very satisfied.
- Four in five parents (80 percent) maintain a favorable opinion of the TV ratings system – up from 76 percent in 2018 and the highest level ever measured in a TV Parental Guidelines survey.
- 90 percent of parents understand the TV ratings system.
- Nearly nine in 10 parents (89 percent) find the TV ratings system helpful.
- More than three in four parents (77 percent) report using the TV ratings often or sometimes.
- Nearly nine in 10 parents (88 percent) are aware that the TV ratings provide guidance based on a child's age.

"The results of this study indicate that parents continue to depend on the TV ratings system as a source of information about the content and age-appropriateness of TV programs, especially as their children are consuming more TV programming during the pandemic," said Michael Powell, chairman of the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board and President and CEO of NCTA.





# TV RATING SPOT CHECK REVIEWS

In keeping with its commitment to ensuring that TV ratings are applied to programs on an accurate and consistent basis, the Monitoring Board voted at its 2019 Annual Meeting to formally establish a spot check review program. The program is designed to assess whether television programs are receiving accurate and consistent ratings across different networks and time slots. This concept was piloted in 2019 and formally rolled out in January 2020.

To conduct the spot check reviews, the Monitoring Board established four groups, with one group meeting each calendar quarter. The Monitoring Board's public interest board members were each assigned to one of the four groups, allowing the process to take into account broader perspectives and feedback.

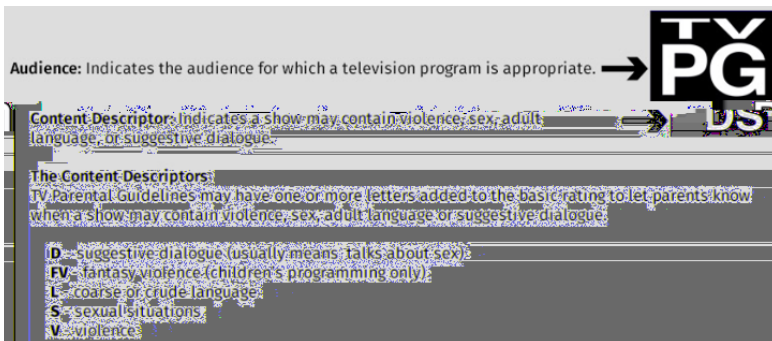
To ensure that the spot checks encompassed a wide variety of content and intended audiences, programming was selected from each of the Monitoring Board representatives' networks at a randomly predetermined time on a specific day each calendar quarter. For instance, one group reviewed programming shown during early morning hours, which is often intended for younger children. Another group reviewed late night programs, which are typically intended for adult audiences. Two additional groups evaluated programs that appeared on television during the daytime and at primetime hours.

For their reviews, the groups used the publicly available descriptions of the TVY, TVY7, TVG, TVPG, TV14 and TVMA ratings, as well as the accompanying content descriptors – D for suggestive dialogue, FV for fantasy violence, L for coarse or crude language, S for sexual situations and V for violence.

After reviewing their respective programs, each group met to determine if it agreed or disagreed with the rating assigned to a given program. The spot check review program was designed so that if a group determined that it disagrees with a rating, a dialogue is initiated with the network that showed the program. If the network disagrees with the review group's determination, the matter will be brought to the Monitoring Board chairman to determine appropriate next steps, including consideration before the full Monitoring Board, which has the authority to adjudicate disputes in the event that consensus discussion does not resolve the question.

The 2020 spot check process indicated that age ratings were applied consistently and accurately to all reviewed programs. The spot checks also indicated that descriptors generally were applied accurately and consistently as well, although there were two instances in which the process resulted in networks agreeing to add a descriptor to a program following the reviews. The process this year did not require any program to be brought to the chairman for resolution of any ratings disagreement.

Overall, the spots check review process worked as intended – reinforcing that the vast majority of content is rated correctly while also providing Monitoring Board members with the opportunity to engage in helpful discussions with one another about the use of descriptors. These conversations will further facilitate all networks' ability to hone their decision-making about when and how to use descriptors consistently going forward.



The decision to establish the task force came in part from results of the biennial TV Parental

# ANNUAL MONITORING BOARD MEETING

On October 28, 2020, Monitoring Board Chairman Michael Powell and NCTA hosted the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Monitoring Board via video conference due to COVID restrictions. The purpose of the Annual Meeting is to bring together Monitoring Board members to review yearly activities, discuss correspondence and ratings complaints, and plan for the year ahead. The Annual Meeting supplements multiple informal meetings in which Monitoring Board members gather – either over video conference or by phone – throughout the year to discuss ongoing work. The following presents an overview of the 2020 Annual Meeting.

## Presentation by Abigail Davenport of Hart Research Associates

Abigail Davenport, a partner at Hart Research Associates, joined the meeting as a guest speaker to present the findings of the 2020 survey of parental sentiment. She explained the results revealed that usage and positive sentiment toward the TV ratings system remains high, even as parents report that their children are watching more TV amid the pandemic. More than three-fifths of parents surveyed stated that their children are spending more time watching broadcast and cable TV shows, and 95 percent of parents said they are satisfied with the accuracy of the TV ratings. More parents (fully 80 percent) have a favorable opinion of the ratings system – four points above the 2018 findings and the highest level ever measured in a TV Parental Guidelines survey.

More information about the 2020 parental sentiment survey can be found on page 4 of this report.

## Review of 2020 Activities

The Monitoring Board reviewed various activities completed in the 2020 calendar year. Among these efforts were the completion and promotion of the first-ever Annual Report; release of the 2020 TV Parental Guidelines research findings; the implementation of the internal ratings spot check review program; and the launch of a streaming video task force. The Monitoring Board acknowledged the impact of the COVID pandemic on this year's activities, including the cancellation of the 2020 National PTA Convention and Expo, but remains hopeful about participation in additional events next year.

More information about these specific activities can be found on pages 4-6 of this report.



## TV Ratings Spot Check

After reviewing the pilot phase for the TV ratings spot check program in 2019, the Monitoring Board agreed to launch the formalized review program in 2020. The goal of the review is to spot check programming on the networks of Monitoring Board members to ensure accurate and consistent use of the TV ratings system.

During the Annual Meeting, representatives from three of the four spot check review groups (those that had completed their spot checks in the first three quarters of 2020) presented on their findings. Overall, the Monitoring Board members expressed consensus that this process serves as a valuable way to better understand the application of the TV ratings, helps public interest Monitoring Board members gain insight into the ratings process, and ensures that age ratings and descriptors are being applied consistently across networks and during different time slots. The Monitoring Board unanimously agreed to continue with the spot check review program in 2021.

More information about the spot check review program can be found on page 5 of this report.

## Streaming Task Force

Streaming Task Force Chair Ndidi Oriji, senior vice president of Advertising Standards and Program Standards and Practices at NBCUniversal, reported on the formation of a Monitoring Board task force that was established in August 2020 to explore how TV ratings are applied on video streaming services. The goals of the task force are to establish best practices for implementation of ratings in the streaming environment and to formalize engagement with streaming services that do not currently participate in the TV Ratings system. The task force will meet quarterly throughout 2021.

More information about the streaming task force can be found on page 6 of this report.

## Review of Complaints and Correspondence

Prior to the Annual Meeting, a summary of all correspondence and complaints received by the Monitoring Board since the previous meeting was shared with Board members. During the Meeting, Monitoring Board members reviewed the year's emails, phone calls and letters. As has been the case for several years, the majority of correspondence received related to commercials, the subject matter of program content or scheduling changes, rather than complaints about the accuracy of ratings.

More information about complaints and correspondence can be found on pages 9-10 of this report.

## Preview of 2021 Activities

In addition to committing to continue the spot check review program and to regular meetings of the streaming video task force, the Monitoring Board agreed to explore opportunities to raise greater awareness about the TV Parental Guidelines online, to continue to be more visible through press outreach and events (health and safety permitting), and to ensure continued effective communication with consumers.

# 2020 CORRESPONDENCE SUMMARY JANUARY - DECEMBER

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**One of the primary roles** of the Monitoring Board is to address complaints about the ratings on specific programs. The Monitoring Board does this by reviewing complaints and other correspondence, facilitating discussion about the application of the ratings, and working to resolve concerns as expeditiously as possible.

In 2020, the Monitoring Board continued an enhanced policy of responding to all correspondence, which it initiated the previous year. Ratings complaints are now shared with a broader team of representatives from the applicable network to ensure greater awareness of the ratings complaint and to facilitate a timely response. Further, the Monitoring Board has improved its correspondence tracking system to allow for better complaint processing and status tracking of each complaint. When complaints about ratings are received, the Monitoring Board works closely with network representatives to determine why the show was given a particular rating and to communicate that information to the viewer. In some cases, based on viewer feedback, a network also agrees to modifying its rating.

Here is a summary of correspondence received in 2020:

From January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020, the Monitoring Board received 636 public comments – one letter, 85 phone calls and 550 emails. Of this correspondence, 240 complaints about the general content or casting of shows, 101 complaints about scheduling changes, 119 complaints were about commercials and there were only 23 complaints specifically about TV ratings. Other correspondence included viewers offering positive feedback on programming, marketing requests, requests for information on how to start or star in a show, generic questions about the TV ratings system (icon specifications, ratings and descriptors and the like) and other miscellaneous questions and comments as well as spam e-mails. The largest volume of complaints received this year focused

on the Super Bowl Halftime Show, homosexual characters in programming, political advertisements or commentators, and various Black Lives Matter commercials, specials or banners airing on networks.

Of the 23 ratings complaints, 16 were directed at broadcast and cable television networks or streaming services that participate in the TV Parental Guidelines, while the remaining seven complaints related to ratings for programming on streaming services that do not participate in the TV ratings system. Valid ratings complaints about programming on a broadcast or cable network or streaming service that participates in the TV Parental Guidelines are sent to those respective industry representatives as they are received. Industry representatives then review the ratings internally and respond to the viewer either directly or through the Monitoring Board with further information about the rating and/or to resolve any discrepancies. All ratings complaints are also shared with representatives from the NCTA, MPA and NAB on a monthly basis along with a summary of all other correspondence.

In addition, over the course of this year, 15 content creators reached out to the Monitoring Board asking for information on how to apply ratings to their shows. The Monitoring Board formalized its process this year for connecting content creators with standards and practices professionals at participating Monitoring Board networks to aid them in the process of ensuring their shows are accurately rated and use the correct descriptors.



# CONCLUSION

In 2020, the Monitoring Board continued to improve upon and promote the valuable TV ratings system that helps parents make appropriate viewing choices for their children. This year, the Monitoring Board worked hard to ascertain parental sentiment and to assess whether ratings are being applied accurately and on a consistent basis. The Monitoring Board also focused its attention on increasingly-popular video streaming services. The goal of these efforts is to ensure that parents are aware of the tools available to help them make informed decisions about what programs are suitable for their children. The Monitoring Board remains committed to continuing to evaluate its efforts and improving in the year ahead.

For more information, please visit [www.tvguidelines.org](http://www.tvguidelines.org).

# THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES

## KNOW THE FACTS: TV RATINGS AND PARENTAL CONTROLS

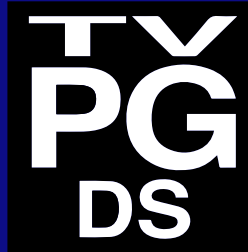
The television industry designed a TV ratings system – known as the TV Parental Guidelines – to give parents more information about the content and age-appropriateness of TV programs. The TV ratings can be used in conjunction with the V-Chip – a device built into most television sets – to allow parents to block out programs they don't want their children to see. Parental control technology in cable and satellite set-top boxes can also be used with the TV Parental Guidelines to block programs based on their rating.

## KNOW THE RATINGS

Audience: indicates the audience for which a television program is appropriate.



Content Descriptor: Indicates a show may contain violence, sex, adult language or suggestive dialogue.



TV Parental Guidelines may have one or more letters added to the basic rating to let parents know when a show may contain violence, sex, adult language or suggestive dialogue.

D – suggestive dialogue (usually means talk-about sex)

L – coarse or crude language

S – sexual situations

V – violence



### ALL CHILDREN

This program is designed to be appropriate for all children. Whether animated or live-action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.



### DIRECTED TO OLDER CHILDREN

This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy violence or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children.



### DIRECTED TO OLDER CHILDREN - FANTASY VIOLENCE

Programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category will be designated TV-Y7-FV.



### GENERAL AUDIENCE

Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.



### PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED

This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children. Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program may contain one or more of the following: some suggestive dialogue (D), infrequent coarse language (L), some sexual situations (S), or moderate violence (V).



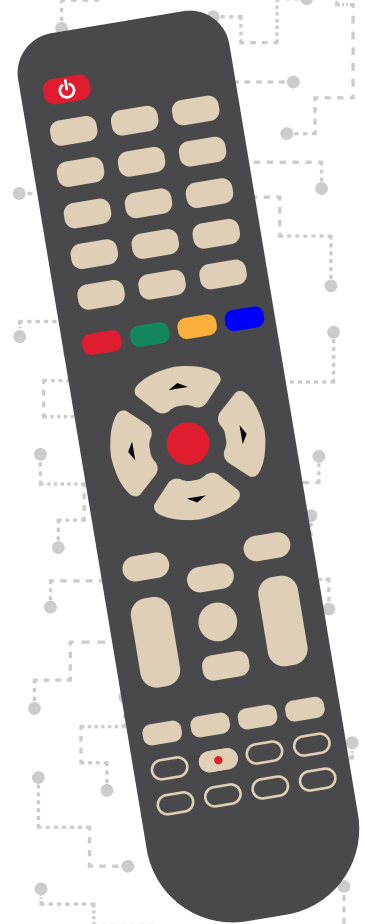
### PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED

This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age. Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program may contain one or more of the following: intensely suggestive dialogue (D), strong coarse language (L), intense sexual situations (S), or intense violence (V).



### MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY

This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V).



# THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES

## KNOW THE FACTS: TV RATINGS AND PARENTAL CONTROLS

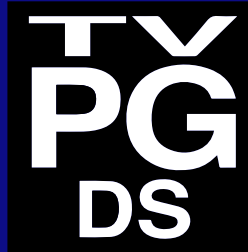
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Audience: indicates the audience for which a television program is appropriate.



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D – suggestive dialogue (usually means talk-about sex)

L – coarse or crude language

S – sexual situations

V – violence



### ALL CHILDREN

This program is designed to be appropriate for all children. Whether animated or live-action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.



### DIRECTED TO OLDER CHILDREN

This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy violence or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children.



### DIRECTED TO OLDER CHILDREN - FANTASY VIOLENCE

Programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category will be designated TV-Y7-FV.



### GENERAL AUDIENCE

Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.



### PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED

This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children. Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program may contain one or more of the following: some suggestive dialogue (D), infrequent coarse language (L), some sexual situations (S), or moderate violence (V).



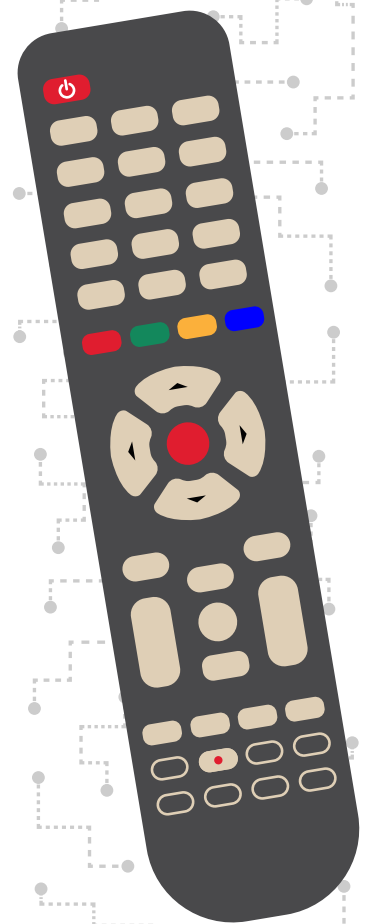
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### MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY

This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V).



**TV**



**Parental  
Guidelines**