



**BBFC Guide to  
Drugs**

# BBFC Guide to Drugs

**When making classification decisions we balance our objective of enabling content to reach the widest possible audience with our duty to protect audiences from harm. Our approach to classifying drugs is therefore designed to protect children and vulnerable adults from exposure to material that may encourage the misuse of potentially harmful substances.**

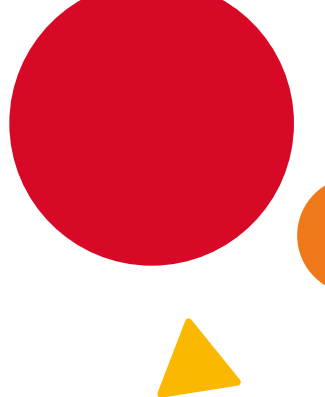
Content depicting drugs – including references to drugs, scenes of drug or solvent misuse, and narrative themes relating to drugs and addiction – must be innocuous, discreet, or have a clear aversive message in order to appear at U or PG.

At 12A/12 we allow more detailed verbal and visual references to drugs. There may also be brief depictions of drug misuse, but these will depend on the level of detail and context. Depictions of young people using drugs, for example, may be treated more restrictively than similar scenes involving adults, and the content as a whole must not promote drugs or present novel or potentially harmful information for young viewers.

Most forms of drug and substance misuse may be shown at 15, but if such content is instructional or glamorised (for example, by associating drugs with success or sex) without a clearly aversive counterbalance, it is likely to require an 18.

Our research has shown that people in the UK regard consuming alcohol, smoking tobacco or vaping nicotine as being of less concern than illegal or prescription drug misuse. We can therefore accommodate these topics at lower age ratings. However, a higher age rating may be required if these activities are presented in a promotional or glamorised manner, especially in content that could appeal to children.

When a film or video features scenes of drug, solvent or substance misuse, this will be reflected in our content advice. Please see the case studies included in this guide for examples.





# Shaped By You.

Our latest guidelines consultation  
involved 12,000 people.



To find out more about our age  
ratings, content advice and new  
Classification Guidelines go to  
**[bbfc.co.uk/about-classification](https://bbfc.co.uk/about-classification)**

# How each age rating deals with Drugs



## Universal

**U-rated content is suitable for audiences of all ages, although not all U-rated content is aimed at children.**

**Children's content should be set within a positive framework and should offer reassuring counter-balances to any violence, threat or scary scenes. Generally a U is unlikely to unsettle a four-year-old, although it is impossible to predict what might affect any particular child.**

References to drugs must be infrequent and innocuous, or have valuable messaging for young children.

## Parental Guidance

**General viewing, but some scenes may be unsuitable for young children**

**PG-rated content is suitable for general viewing. A PG should generally not unsettle a child aged around eight, although parents and caregivers should be aware that some scenes may be unsuitable for more sensitive children.**

References to illegal drugs or drug misuse should be brief and carry a suitable cautionary message.



# 12A/12

**Cinema content classified 12A and video content classified 12 contain material that is not generally suitable for children aged under 12.**

**No one younger than 12 may be permitted to attend a 12A cinema screening unless they are accompanied by an adult. Adults planning to take a child under 12 to a 12A should consider whether the main feature is suitable for that child. To help them decide, we recommend that they check the BBFC's content advice for the film in advance. No one younger than 12 may rent or buy a 12-rated video.**

Misuse of drugs or other substances will generally be infrequent. There should be no glamorisation or instructional detail.



# 15

**Suitable only for 15 years and over**

**No one younger than 15 may see 15-rated content in a cinema. No one younger than 15 may rent or buy a 15-rated video.**

Drug and substance misuse may be shown, but should not be promoted or encouraged by the content as a whole.



# 18

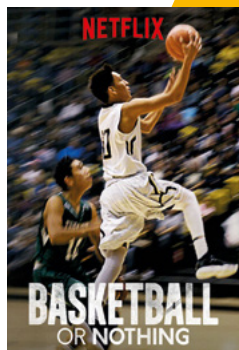
**Suitable only for adults**

**No one younger than 18 may see 18-rated content in a cinema. No one younger than 18 may rent or buy an 18-rated video.**

Adults should be free to choose their own entertainment. Exceptions are most likely where material or treatment appears to us to risk harm to individuals or, through their behaviour, to society. For example, the detailed portrayal of violent or dangerous acts, or of illegal drug use, which may cause harm to public health or morals.



## Case studies



PG

### **Basketball Or Nothing**

**drug references, mild bad language**

This six-part Netflix documentary series follows a high school basketball team from Arizona's Navajo Nation, as they compete to win the state championship.

Alongside the basketball team's exploits, *Basketball Or Nothing* also explores the hardships that many people, including children and teens, face on the Navajo Nation reservation. One of these challenges is the prevalence of drugs, and the associated impact their use and dealing can have on young people's health, wellbeing and future.

In episode two, there is a scene in which a man explains the growth of crime in the area, which is tied to drug misuse and alcohol abuse among young people. He leads the camera crew to a bridge frequented by people dealing or taking drugs. We are shown drug paraphernalia scattered on the ground and told that the use of 'meth' is on the rise.

It is unlikely that scenes of drug misuse will appear at PG, but we are concerned about what knowledge is conveyed in verbal or visual references. Our duty is to protect vulnerable audiences from potential harm, so material relating to drugs at PG should be innocuous, discreet, or have clear aversive messaging.

Although these references are impactful, there is no detail on how the drugs are taken, no sight of them being used, and the context is wholly cautionary and aversive. The speaker concludes by imploring young people to stay in school and avoid getting involved in criminal activity and drugs.

The aversive messaging is clear and the drug content is infrequent, especially when the series is taken as a whole. It is ultimately life-affirming, inspiring and has value to young audiences, and so we classified it PG for drug references, mild bad language.

#### TV SHOW

**Classification date**  
21/06/2019

**Genre(s)**  
Documentary, Sport



12A



## Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody

**drug misuse, domestic abuse, discrimination,  
sex references, language**

Shining a light on the titular singer's meteoric rise to fame, *Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody* also explores the devastating impact of addiction and abusive relationships on Houston's health and career.

Our guidelines at 12A/12 permit some depictions of drug misuse, but these should generally be infrequent, not glamorise the activities or give instructional detail.

In *Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody*, there are visual references to various drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, as well as sight of drug paraphernalia, including bongs and pipes. The film is careful, however, not to illustrate the use of stronger drugs. For example, characters are seen rubbing their noses after implied off-screen cocaine abuse, avoiding more detailed or explicit depictions.

Cannabis smoking does occur on-screen, but it is brief and without undue focus or glamorisation. Our research has also shown that people are more accepting of incidental cannabis misuse at 12A/12 than other drugs.

A challenge the film presented is whether the drug misuse is glamorised, as Houston's use of drugs escalates with her burgeoning success. Associating drug misuse with wealth and celebrity may lead content to receive a higher rating, but in the case of *Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance With Somebody*, Houston's addiction problems have a clearly detrimental effect on her health, relationships and career, ultimately leading to her death. In the full context of the narrative, the presentation of drug misuse is unquestionably aversive, and participants in our guidelines research were supportive of a 12A rating.

We classified the film 12A for drug misuse, domestic abuse, discrimination, sex references, language.

### FILM

**Classification date**  
06/12/2022

**Director(s)**  
Kasi Lemmons

**Genre(s)**  
Drama, Music

**Approx. running minutes**  
139m





15

## Beautiful Boy

**drug misuse, frequent drug references, strong language, sex**

*Beautiful Boy* is a moving US drama in which a father, David, struggles to help his teenage son, Nic, overcome addiction problems. The story unfolds from both perspectives, with Nic's declining health from drugs paralleled to David's fear, frustration and helplessness as he tries desperately to save his son.

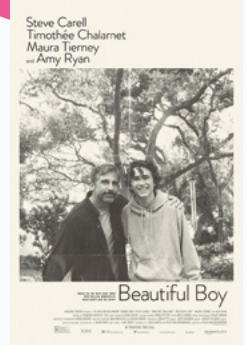
At 15, BBFC guidelines allow for some drug taking to be shown, as long as the content as a whole does not promote or encourage drug misuse. Depictions of drug misuse may also be of concern if they present detail to teens that may be new or instructional.

*Beautiful Boy* features scenes in which people use various drugs, including by different methods such as snorting or injecting. Even David himself is seen using methamphetamine, which he does in an effort to understand Nic's mindset and how the drug is affecting him. The detail across these scenes, however, is limited and unlikely to present wholly novel information to audiences.

In addition to depictions of drug misuse, there are frequent verbal and visual references to drugs. Some present drug misuse in an enthusiastic or positive light, but these are forcefully countered by repeated warnings from health professionals about the consequences of drug misuse, as well as distressing scenes of people overdosing.

One particularly challenging scene from a classification perspective sees Nic and his friend, Lauren, take drugs and proceed to have sex. Content which suggests drug misuse has a positive impact on sexual performance or experience is, according to our guidelines, likely to require an 18. In the case of *Beautiful Boy*, however, this sequence is counterbalanced by the wholly negative portrayal of drugs, addiction and the deterioration of Nic's health across the film. When tested in our research, audiences were supportive of the film being rated 15.

We ultimately classified the film 15 for drug misuse, frequent drug references, strong language, sex.



### FILM

**Classification date**  
03/10/2018

**Director(s)**  
Felix Van Groeningen

**Genre(s)**  
Drama

**Approx. running minutes**  
116m





18

## Loro

### strong sex, drug misuse

From Italian filmmaker Paolo Sorrentino, *Loro* is a biopic of politician and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, exploring themes of power, corruption and deceit through his extravagant and at times debaucherous lifestyle.

At 15, content as a whole should not glamorise or promote drug misuse, especially the misuse of harder drugs. For example, a sequence may briefly associate drug misuse with wealth, fame or success, but other scenes should undercut this portrayal with aversive or cautionary messaging. If content does not offer this counterbalance, it is likely to require an 18.

A key area of concern is if drugs are portrayed as enhancing sexual experiences. In *Loro*, there is an extended sequence at an elaborate pool party in which a man profiles the effects of MDMA on users. As the camera shows the young, stylish party goers – some of whom are

naked – the man describes the effects of the drug on people's libido. As colourful pills rain from the skies, people start to dance, have fun and engage in sexual activity.

The sequence is neither brief nor discreet, and conflates drug misuse with glamour and sex. It is not clearly challenged elsewhere in the film, and those depicted do not appear to suffer negative consequences as a result of the drugs. Our research has shown that people are concerned about material which may encourage teens to take drugs, and so such content is unlikely to be permitted at 15. This was the case for *Loro*, in which the glamorised portrayal of drug misuse resulted in us classifying the film 18 for strong sex, drug misuse.

#### FILM

**Classification date**  
07/02/2019

**Director(s)**  
Paolo Sorrentino

**Genre(s)**  
Drama

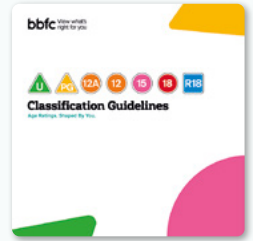
**Approx. running minutes**  
151m

# BBFC Classification Guidelines. Shaped by you.

**We provide age ratings and content advice for films and other content in line with our published Classification Guidelines.**

With more content more accessible than ever before, it is imperative that our age ratings and content advice provide a trusted guide that people can rely on when choosing what to watch, whether at the cinema, on DVD and Blu-ray or on Video on Demand (VoD) services.

Every four to five years, we speak to thousands of people from all over the country to explore what matters to them when it comes to classification. In our most recent guidelines research, 12,000 people took part – the highest number of participants we have ever consulted – providing us with a very robust set of findings to help ensure our standards continue to reflect the views of UK audiences. Here's what we found:



## Classification Guidelines

To read the latest edition of the full BBFC Classification Guidelines, visit our website at [bbfc.co.uk](http://bbfc.co.uk)

**87%**

of parents agree with BBFC age rating decisions all or most of the time

**85%**

trust BBFC age ratings to indicate whether content is suitable for themselves or their family

Trust in BBFC age ratings has grown to

**90%**

among parents/caregivers in the last five years

**97%**

of people see a benefit to age ratings for some or all audiences

**81%**

of people want consistent age ratings across cinema, DVD and Blu-ray and Video on Demand/streaming services

**99%**

recognise at least one BBFC age rating symbol (78% recognise them all)

# About the BBFC



**The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) is the independent film and video regulator for the UK. We are here to help everyone choose age-appropriate films, videos and websites, wherever and however they watch or use them.**

We do this primarily through our widely recognised and trusted age ratings and content advice.

Every BBFC age rating decision and every piece of content advice is based on our Classification Guidelines, which we refresh every four to five years through an extensive consultation with thousands of people across the UK. This gives us an unmatched insight into what audiences find acceptable for different age groups.

The result is a transparent, well-understood and trusted classification system that gives people the best information to help them choose what to view and to protect children and vulnerable adults from harmful content.

We are not-for-profit and are funded through the fees we charge for our services.

We classify:

- films, trailers, advertisements and other content for theatrical (cinema) release on behalf of local authorities who licence cinemas under the UK's licensing legislation<sup>1</sup>
- video works distributed on physical media under the Video Recordings Act 1984 (VRA)
- video content distributed on Video on Demand and streaming services (VoD) under a voluntary, self-regulatory service
- commercial and internet content distributed via the UK's Mobile Networks under a voluntary, self-regulatory service

As well as being based on consultation with thousands of people across the UK, our guidelines incorporate other relevant research, expert advice and our accumulated experience. The guidelines, and our practice in applying them, pay particular attention to changes in audience expectations, attitudes and concerns and to changes in the law.

Here, and throughout the guidelines, we take video content to include films, programmes and other content released on DVD and Blu-ray and on VoD services.

We take responsibility for applying the guidelines to all content submitted to us, to ensure their application and interpretation is consistent, fair and reasonable. From time to time, issues may arise that are not addressed directly in the guidelines. Where such issues occur, we will deal with them in line with the standards expressed and implied in these guidelines. The guidelines are not a legal document and should be interpreted in the spirit of what is intended as well as in the letter.

We will provide, on request, guidance on the interpretation and application of these guidelines.

<sup>1</sup>Since 31 March 2016 the BBFC has sub-contracted the assessment of cinema advertisements for commercial goods and services to the Cinema Advertising Association, while retaining responsibility for classifying, on behalf of local authorities, films, trailers, public information films and charity campaigns, and other cinema content.

## Our guiding principles

To protect children and vulnerable adults from potentially harmful content

To empower consumers, particularly parents and those with responsibility for children, to make informed viewing decisions

To enable content to reach the widest possible audience appropriate for the theme and treatment

To support the right of adults to choose their own entertainment as long as it remains within the law and is not potentially harmful

**British Board of Film Classification**

3 Soho Square

London

W1D 3HD

T 020 7440 1570

[bbfc.co.uk/about-classification](http://bbfc.co.uk/about-classification)