On April 6, 2016, the U.S. CDC posted its annual report on smoking in the movies. Behind the data? Evidence that PG-13 films with smoking may also be unhealthy for a film studio’s balance sheet...

The more smoking that kids see on screen, the more likely they will become addicted smokers. In 2015, nearly half of PG-13 films still featured tobacco imagery, says the CDC’s latest tracking report. Overall, there’s been no substantial improvement since 2010.

So how could audience exposure to smoking in PG-13 films drop 75 percent in 2015, compared to 2014? Mainly because the amount of smoking in PG-13 films declined by half, back to 2010 levels. But there was another factor: fewer people saw the films.

Over the past five years, the average PG-13 film with smoking has sold 20 percent fewer tickets than a smokefree PG-13 film. In 2015, PG-13 smoking films sold 57 percent fewer tickets—and one out of three of them just plain flopped (see box). If those ten PG-13 films had performed at par, they would have delivered about a billion more tobacco impressions to domestic audiences.

We shouldn’t need a string of box office failures to protect kids’ health. Yet business as usual isn’t working, either. The CDC’s report makes clear what won’t safeguard kids—and what will:

“[I]ndividual movie company policies alone have not been efficient at minimizing smoking in movies. Movie companies with tobacco depiction policies included tobacco in as many of their youth-rated movies in 2015 as they did in 2010 and each of these movies included nearly as many tobacco incidents, on average...

“Giving an R rating to future movies with smoking would be expected to reduce the number of teen smokers by nearly 1 in 5 and prevent 1 million deaths from smoking among children alive today.”

See CDC’s “Smoking in the movies, 2015” at bit.ly/cdc-filmfacts.