

Survival Skills:

Parenting Around Electronic Media

Recent surveys of parental concerns have found media at the top of the list, surpassing drugs, alcohol and premature sex as the chief social worry parents have for their children. Parents intuitively know that our commercial media system is designed to exploit children and teach them to live addictive, destructive lifestyles. The fact that so many kids drink is a testament to the nearly \$5 Billion media companies take from alcohol distributors in exchange for encouraging excessive drinking.

New technologies are even more insidious. One million children a year have an adult aggressively ask them to have sex while they are on-line. And rather than protect our children by keeping information about them private, the media companies that own major internet sites actively seek to collect personal data from children by enticing them with games and prizes. They then turn around and either freely provide or sell this information to anyone seeking to exploit children—including sex offenders. All the while, these same companies promote the artists and entertainment venues that glamorize acting out drunkenness and emotionally damaging sexuality as a form of social status.

The suggestions provided below apply to all media. TV, videos, computers, and other hand-held or virtual devices rely on viewing “passive screens.” Research is conclusive that children exposed to passive screens below age 2, or exposed for more than 1 hour a day to fast paced media below age 7, are virtually guaranteed to suffer Attention Deficit Disorder, as well as grow up more anti-social and more likely to drink; smoke; use drugs; and suffer weight and eating disorders. It doesn't matter what the content is of the media children are exposed to. Their brain development is damaged simply from consuming passive screens. To protect children, consider the following suggestions.

Prevention



Critical Thinking



Self Esteem



Cut Your Media Consumption In Half. Spend that extra time talking to and playing with your children. The average 5th grader will spend more than 3 hours a day watching TV, playing video games, or using the internet. Average parents spend about 1,000 minutes a week doing the same, which is nearly 2 hours a day. By simply cutting your own media consumption in half, to 1 hour a day, you'll free up quality time for your kids. If you want to have quality relationships with your children, you need to take the time to create them. By doing so, you'll also be limiting your child's exposure to the constant media messages corporations produce undermining parental authority.

Set Up a No Media Zone. I recommend you make dinner a media-free time. Set an example for your children by not answering the phone while you're eating. It may be difficult at first, but turning off the tube during dinner will allow you time to talk. Your kids may not be used to this, so you'll have to outsmart them to get them talking. Try asking questions. Ask them what they did today. When they reply "nothing", ask them if they did nothing when they woke up, if they did nothing after school. In a couple of days you should be able to wear them down. Let's face it, kids love nothing better than knowing there is an adult interested in them. Be that adult. And be patient as you take the time needed to break through the media conditioning your children have received telling them that adults are lame and they should sneak around behind your backs.

Screen and Select Media. Would you let a complete stranger come into your home and allow that stranger to make lewd sexual remarks or teach your children values that run counter to your own? You do if you let your children consume media unsupervised. In fact, most of you pay for this, because you buy cable TV! Make sure the programs your children watch reflect your values. Have a sense of the music your children listen to and set limits. Most parents understand the value of an internet filter that blocks access to offensive web sites. You need to be the filter for all other media. Do you want your sons to become heartless and learn to enjoy grotesque violence? Because that's how you train them to be when you allow them to play games built around killing.

Consume Media with Your Children. Or at least sample it from time to time. Watching programs together allows you to talk to your children about what they're viewing—but it does not replace screening and filtering media, because the visual and emotional impressions media imprints can not be erased no matter how much

you explain it to your child. The more time you spend talking with and listening to your children free from the media, the more influence you'll have when it comes to mitigating the negative impressions it can leave.

Learn to Point Out and Avoid Commercials and Marketed Behaviors. For example, if you tape a program, your child can't complain when you're talking to them during the program—hopefully pointing out things like how actresses get paid to dress inappropriately and act as if they enjoy being sexual objects; or how violence is used in a program as an inexpensive way to keep the plot from being boring because the writers and producers were too cheap to film a better story. You can always rewind the tape and view a scene again, if your child complains they've missed the "good part." At first, children will gripe how they don't like viewing programs this way. It's important to stick with it, however, because your aim is to teach children the skills to see through and understand how media is designed to suck them in and prevent them from thinking about what they're consuming. Once your child has the mental clarity to view media this way, then watching a program segmentally can become a game where you and your family enjoys exposing the artful deceptions in media as much as you enjoy the entertainment content. Remember that commercials break up programming intentionally. Understanding why they do it and how it impacts us emotionally is the most important media literacy.

Once you've mastered this skill, begin to apply it to all media. Point out examples of product placement during programming or how ads or other products and programs intruded into TV and movies. Be alert for how products (including entertainment programs) are cross-promoted through the internet. When you can, skip the commercials. This is helpful in order to increase control of what values your children are learning. Remember, even the V-Chip doesn't regulate the content of ads. Advertisers regularly target younger children with ads selling products for adults, particularly alcohol and sexual lifestyles. This creates rebellion in kids and makes them feel more grown up when they get the products being glamorized.

Take Media Out of All Bedrooms. Computers, video games, TVs and all other types of electronic media should be allowed only in your living or family rooms. This will enable you to keep an eye on the content your children are being exposed to, as well as limiting how much total time is spent consuming it. You don't want to

be nosy, but just as you know who your child's friends are, you should also know what types of media they are being immersed in.

Computers pose one of the biggest media threats your child will face. You wouldn't allow a 20 year old to go alone to your child's bedroom and talk about sex. So why would you allow an internet connection to do the same? TVs are also a huge problem when placed in children's bedrooms. The #1 indicator that a child will grow up obese is having a TV in their bedroom. A TV in your child's bedroom is giving them license for unlimited viewing. It is like asking your daughters to please grow up anorexic and begging your sons to become addicted to tobacco and alcohol, as well as become more violent. Laying down the law about TVs in the bedroom means taking the TV out of your bedroom as well. Remember that you're the #1 role model for your child, so if you're not walking the talk, good luck expecting them to do so.

Teach your Child Internet Safety Skills Installing safety software is a good start, but won't be enough to keep kids from being commercially or sexually harassed. Kids need to know that they should NEVER give out any personal information on a web page, blog, e-mail or instant message. Sites like MySpace are designed to get information about kids and then sell this data. Kids need to know how they're being exploited and how to prevent it. Visit isafe.org to take internet safety lessons on-line. While you're there, consider volunteering in your child's school to teach other's what you've learned. Curricula is provided free once you complete their on-line courses.

Good luck and God bless you on your journey to protect our children from consumer madness and addictive lifestyles.

— Peter DeBenedittis, Ph.D.