FYI: A Hand-out For Parent Seminar Participants

TV: FRIEND OR FOE? AN OVERVIEW

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TELEVISION CAN BE A WONDERFUL SOURCE OF EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT....OR A TERRIBLE INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN

Excessive viewing takes time from playing reading and sleeping.

Constant exposure to violence (real or pretend) may frighten younger children or encourage violent behavior. Eventually, children (and even adults) become hardened to violence of all forms. Heavy viewers often adopt a "mean world" view of life around them.

Exposure to adult programs, including a lot of sexual material, is overly stimulation and often confusing. Children generally cannot understand and absorb most of the sexual content they see on TV.

Watching thousands of toys commercials encourages children to beg and whine for items which might put a financial strain on families.

Commercials for sweets or fat ladened fast food gives children faulty ideas about nutrition. Other commercials teach that alcohol or pills can make life better or that cosmetics and the "right" brand named clothing will make us perfect. Possessions become the major goal of life. These are not lessons we want to teach our children!

Heavy viewers are often overwei ght...from snacking while they watch, and from insufficient physical activity.

From sit-coms, children learn that most of life's problems are easily solvable in 1/2 hour.

School work usually suffers among children who are heavy viewers.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Help children become discriminating viewers!
Try not to use TV as a baby sitter.
Suggest that children "go out and play" instead of "go watch TV."
Let children help make the choices of what to watch. (Parents retain veto powers!)
Help children find other ways to spend their time. TV should be a last resort.
Limit TV...
- Limit viewing hours...beginning when children are young. It's harder later on.
- Limit locations..try to have one central location for viewing.
- Avoid viewing at meal time.
- Do not allow viewing when friends are over to play.

Watch TV with your children....
- Discuss sensitive material....alternatives to violence etc.
- Explain commercials. .how they are made, and how they aim to sell.

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL! PARENTS WHO ARE "HOOKED ON THE PLUG IN DRUG" CANNOT EXPECT THEIR CHILDREN TO BE OTHERWISE!

Children are vulnerable

All children are impressionable. But children younger than 7 are especially influenced by what they see on television. Young children are not yet able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They cannot think critically about people's motives and they have difficulty understanding subtle behavior. Therefore, young children are especially vulnerable to the powerful images of violent behavior portrayed in the media. Adults—parents, teachers, and broadcasters—must assume responsibility for protecting children from the potentially harmful effects of exposure to violence through the media—television, movies, and videos.

Television teaches

When children watch television, they are physically passive but mentally they are very active. They absorb information, ideas, and values from television. Because television is such a powerful teacher, adults must be sure that the lessons children learn from television are desirable.

Children may become less caring and more fearful

Research consistently identifies three problems associated with repeated viewing of television violence:

1. **Children are more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.**
   Children begin to see violence as a normal response to stress and an acceptable means of resolving conflict. Children who repeatedly observe aggressive problem-solving behavior tend to replay what they have seen in real-life situations.

Did you know?

- Children in the United States watch an average of three to five hours of television daily.
- Prime-time television depicts an average of 5 to 6 violent acts per hour, and Saturday morning children's programs show an average of 20 to 25 violent acts.
- Only 10% of children's viewing time is spent watching children's television. The other 90% is spent watching programs designed for adults.

2. **Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.**
   Viewing violence stimulates children to view other people as "enemies" and to be unconcerned about their welfare. Children show less remorse about their own aggressive behavior and less concern about the aggressive actions of other children.
3. **Children may become more fearful of the world around them.**
   Exposure to media violence may compound some children's natural anxieties.

Some effects are subtle

There are other, more subtle effects of overexposure to television violence.

- **Media violence can harm children's social development.**
  Viewing violence reduces all forms of positive human interaction and reinforces antisocial behavior.
- **Violent television programming presents limited models of language development.**
  The repetitive scripts of violent television programs narrow the range and originality of children's verbal expression at a time when the development of language is critically important.
- **Viewing television violence limits children's imaginations.**
  Programs that regularly depict violence often promote toys that encourage children to imitate the actual behaviors seen on TV or in the movies. Young children have a natural tendency and need to explore many make-believe roles and play imaginatively to learn about themselves and their world. Constant viewing of television violence can rob children of the benefits of play.

Parents can help

1. **Plan your family viewing.**
   Include your children in deciding what they watch by using a television listing. Give your children choices within certain guidelines. Let them choose from a list of shows that you know are nonviolent, informative, or entertaining.
2. **Monitor your child's television viewing.**
   Move the television to a room that is not at the center of family life. Eliminate continuous viewing by watching only one show at a sitting. Limit children's viewing to one to two hours daily.

3. **Offer alternatives.**
Use good children's videotapes as alternatives to network or cable television. Substitute open-ended activities such as playing games, reading books, or helping with household chores that offer opportunities to be active and creative.

4. **Watch television with your child and talk about the shows you view together.**
Point out when you disapprove of a character's violent acts and when you think there are better ways to solve a problem. Talk about what is real and pretend. Children do not interpret programs in the same ways adults do. Adults need to talk with children to find out how they are interpreting what they see and hear and to clarify misunderstandings.

5. **Help children resist commercials.**
Advertising is one of the most sophisticated forms of communication that exist, and young children cannot distinguish advertising from programming. Discuss commercials with your children. Point out when advertisers make false or exaggerated claims.

6. **Support regulation of children's television.**
Encourage your legislators to support legislation that promotes educational, nonviolent television programming and restricts advertising on children's television.

7. **Call or write television stations (network and cable) and advertising sponsors to express your opinions about programming.**
Inform them when you are offended and also when you are pleased by a program

For more information

American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth. 1993. *Violence and Youth: Psychology's Response.* Vol. 1. Washington, D.C.

Donnerstein, E., Slaby, R., and Eron, L. 1994. The Mass Media and Youth Violence. In *Violence and Youth: Psychology's Response.* Vol. 2, ed. L. Eron and J. Gentry. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Levin, D.E. 1994. *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom.* Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility.

NAEYC. 1993. Position Statement on Violence in the Lives of Children. *Young Children* 48 (6): 80–84.
Also available as brochure #588. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are $10.

Coalition for Quality Children's Video, 535 Cordova Road, Suite 456, Santa Fe, NM 87501. 505-989-8076; FAX 505-986-8477. Publishes *Kids First!* newsletter and *Kids First! Directory,* which contains a complete list of all titles endorsed by a screening jury—and by children—with information on where the titles are available.

National Foundation to Improve Television, 60 State Street, Suite 3400, Boston, MA 02109. 617-523-6353. The foundation has developed a number of initiatives which, if adopted by the FCC, would reduce the amount of dramatized television violence viewed by small children. In addition, the foundation is active in a number of projects to use television as a powerful tool to reduce television violence.

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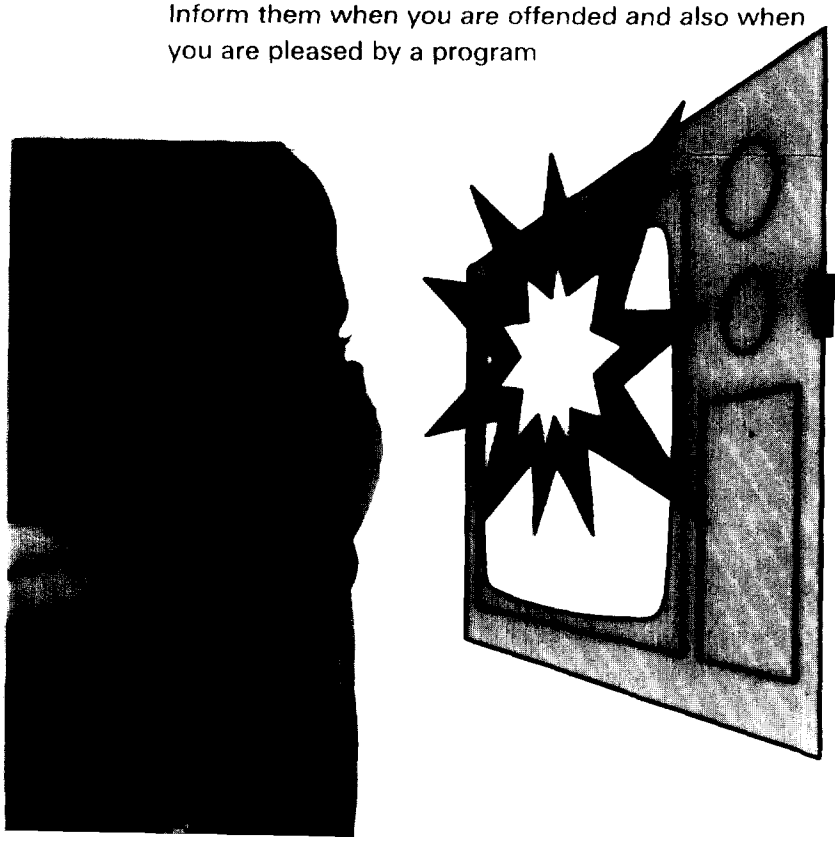

Media Violence and Children

A Guide for Parents

by **Joan Horton and Jenni Zimmer**