

Don't Buy It

GET MEDIA SMART!

Parent's Guide

Introduction

Media have a tremendous influence on family life. Consider that 99 percent of U.S. homes have a television.¹ Ninety-eight percent have radios,² and 69 percent have computers.³ It's hard to imagine life without these media, and it's important to consider the messages they send. The messages educate, but what do they teach our children?

This guide helps families explore the effects of media in their lives. It can be used to stimulate family discussion on media. It provides information to help families understand differences in media entertainment and real-life values, and gives ideas for local advocacy action.

Media Consumption
Stereotypes in the Media
Violence
Advertising/Marketing
Additional Resources

Using Media

Media are such a part of daily life that they are often taken for granted. Take this opportunity to look at how media affect your family life. Are your children using media in healthy ways? Does media consumption interfere with your family life? Do your media choices make you happy?

Parent Action Items

TV Diary

Begin to explore how your family uses television by keeping a TV Diary. Use this TV Diary with your child to log all of the television programs viewed in a given week. After completing the TV Diary, look it over with your child and consider some of the following questions:

- How many hours is the TV on in a given day?
- What do you like most about TV?
- What do you dislike about TV?
- When did you watch TV the most?
- Did you do other activities while watching TV?
- Did you channel surf?
- Did you use television as background noise?
- How did you feel after watching TV?

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Television should be a choice, not a bad habit. If you think your family has some bad habits, creating rules with your kids can help. Rules aid children in making more selective viewing choices and can decrease the influence of television messages.

Rules may include selecting programs to view ahead of time, limiting amount of television, or having the television turned off at certain times of the day (i.e. dinner). This can be a family project that everyone contributes to. Take into account the different points of view about media usage, and try to come up with solutions to accommodate different points of view.

Talking Points for Viewing Media

Next to parents, television is among a child's most influential teachers. The problem is that television may be teaching messages parents find inappropriate or offensive. As a parent, you have the ability to counteract those messages.

Whenever possible, watch TV and other media with your children and start talking about it. Talk about your positive and negative reactions to what you see on the screen. Kids will be able to think critically about what they see on television if they are watching with an adult who talks to them about what they are seeing.⁴

Some things to keep in mind when talking to your kids about TV:⁵

- TV is not reality. It is interpreted by a team of writers, directors, editors, and actors.
- TV has a strong impact on beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.
- TV is commercially driven.

Ask your kids if they liked the show.

- What did they like or dislike?
- Listen to your kids.
- If they like a show that you dislike, share your opinion without belittling theirs.
- Use the points above when explaining how television is constructed. This information may be new to your kids.

Violence

Violence grabs viewers' attention. It can create emotional shock or set the stage for eye-catching special effects. It's a quick and easy way to show conflict. It's no wonder that it appeals to kids.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, kids see an estimated 10,000 acts of violence per year on television. By the time a child graduates from high school she or he will have witnessed 18,000 violent deaths on TV.⁶ Violence can be portrayed as glamorous on TV, in video games and movies. Television often teaches that violence is as a way to resolve conflict. It is well documented that kids who watch violent TV are more likely to act in an aggressive manner.⁷

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When you see violence on TV or in movies or video games, think about the consequences that would result from this violence in real life.

- Who will be hurt?
- What will the victim's family feel?
- Will their lives go back to normal?
- Who is sad, mad, scared?
- How much will it cost to pay for hospital bills, or damage to property?
- Explore different ways to resolve conflict, other than using violence.

Advertising/Marketing

All media have an underlining economic purpose. One way to think about this is that television programs exist solely to get viewers to watch the commercials. But television commercials are only one example of the 3,000 advertisements that people are exposed to on a daily basis. Media need advertisers to pay the bills. To fully understand media, one needs to look at the business of advertising.

With your family, explore advertisements and marketing techniques using the activities below.

Question The Commercial

Print out the Question the Commercial guide available at

<http://soup.pbskids.org/dontbuyit/buyingsmart/question.html> and use it to provoke discussion about commercials the next time you watch TV with your child.

Tricks of the Trade

Advertisers use many different tricks to introduce you to their product. Play advertising detective with your kids the next time you watch TV and look for some of the following techniques used by marketers:

- **Celebrities:** Do you spot any celebrities promoting a certain product in a commercial? Ask your child if she or he thinks the celebrity gets paid to sell this product.
- **Product Placement:** These are products that appear in a television program. If you can see the name of the product, it is likely that the company is paying for this product to appear on the program. Since these products are being “used” in the context of the show, sometimes they are harder to think about as ads.
- **Emotions:** Marketers often play on emotions to sell a product. It may be a Nike commercial that tries to convey excitement, or a Hallmark commercial that evokes sentimental feelings.
- **Cross Marketing:** Products that are linked with television shows and movies. The program that you watch on TV may be more like a half-hour commercial for the products.

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Go On An Ad Outing

Look beyond the television for advertisements in the real world. Take a pen and paper and go on an outing with your child. Make a list of all the different advertisements you see, such as billboards, logos, advertising on cars, in bus shelters, etc. Talk about the companies behind these advertisements and what they are trying to sell.

Additional Information

Media Awareness Network

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/>

A Canadian Web site that promotes and supports media education. This site has resources to help parents deal with the media influences in their children's lives. You'll find tips for talking with your children about media values and culture, information on media industries, and ideas for taking action in your school and community.

National Institute on Media and the Family

<http://www.mediafamily.org>

This organization is for parents and educators who are interested in the influence of media on children. Resources include media awareness programs as well as movie, television, and video game content ratings. You'll also find helpful hints for parents and families to evaluate use of media.

Endnotes

1. "The Silent Boom," Forbes, July 7, 1997, p. 170.
2. "The Silent Boom," Forbes, July 7, 1997, p. 170.
3. "Kids and Media @ The New Millennium," Kaiser Family Foundation, November 1999.
4. Axelrod, Lauryn, TV Proof Your Kids. Citadel Publishing, 1997, p. 39.
5. TV Proof Your Kids, p. 40
6. <http://www.aap.org>, American Academy of Pediatrics
7. "Media Violence and Children," National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998.
8. "Sell and Spin: A History of Advertising" The History Channel, 2001.