

Teach Kids to Make Careful Media Choices

by Trisha Whitney

Children today spend a major portion of their days having experiences created for them by the media. Add together the effect of television, books, movies, radio, tapes, CDs, and videos. No wonder parents feel that OUR influence is like a drop in the ocean.

But it is possible to evaluate, choose, and limit these influences, and to teach our children to do this for themselves.

Every experience in our children's lives affects their view of themselves and the world around them. What they see and hear is real to them. Even a child old enough to assure you that a horror movie is "pretend" may be unable to sleep that night for fear of monsters.

A 3-year-old girl, after repeated viewing of the videos "Little Mermaid" and "Aladdin," went slinking around the house practicing "being sexy." When asked why she wanted to be sexy, she answered, "because then everybody likes you!"

We cannot take the media influence away from our children. It is part of all our lives, and it can widen our children's understanding of the world, but we must select which media events we want our children to experience.

Evaluate stories before you have your child see them. Watch television programs before you have your child become a regular viewer. See movies and videos first, or get detailed information from reviews. Look through books to evaluate them before checking them out from the library or buying them.

Remember that there are thousands of media offerings available to you and your children. If you cannot get information on one, there are plenty of others to choose from.

To evaluate any media offering, look for the message behind the basic plot. What did the characters learn? How did they solve their problems? Were both male and female characters involved and competent?

How much violence will your child live through while watching this? How much romance? Remember that your children will probably put themselves in the place of the main character of their gender. Is this a positive, age-appropriate role for them to take on?

If your evaluation tells you a story would not be good for your child, don't have him or her see it. If it is something your child has requested to see, be sure to explain why you have made the decision.

"That movie has lots of guns and hatred in it. It tries to make you think it's good to kill people. I really don't want all those ideas stuck in your head." This may be hard for your children to accept but it also gives them the message that making careful media choices is important.

If your evaluation tells you a story would be a good learning experience, be sure to make it available. These are the videos you want to buy to be watched over and over, the books worth owning, the shows worth recording from the television.

Television can easily become a major negative influence on children. Adult programs are inappropriate for them, and many children's programs are more violent and sexist than the adult shows. A few years ago a study found that the children's show "Power Rangers" let children experience more than 200 acts of violence in a single hour. Add the hypnotic effect of television, which encourages children to watch hour after hour, and you've got a real problem.

Establishing ground rules for television viewing when your children are first beginning to watch will help them form good watching habits, and save you many, many arguments later.

Some parents watch the current shows and make a list of the ones their children are allowed to watch, or limit watching to public television programs. Some put the worst shows off-limits. Some set a maximum daily time allowance for watching. The important thing is to decide what you think is best for your child and then stick to it.

Most young children cannot tell the difference between television programs and commercials. They take the advice to "Buy the whole set today!" seriously. They feel desperate when they can't get something because the commercials tell them, "EVERYBODY wants one!"

Eliminate the control commercials can have over your children. Teach them from the very beginning not to watch commercials. Turn the sound off during commercials when you are watching. Explain that they are made by people who want to convince you to spend your money. Praise children's ability to recognize when the commercials begin. Let them take control of the powerful MUTE button. Make turning off the commercials a condition of all television watching.

This is one simple way to demonstrate watching television intentionally. Watch what you decide to see. Don't just take in whatever comes along. To further reinforce this concept it is important to turn the television on only when there is something you want to see. Don't leave the set on while your family is doing other things.

Videos can have unexpected power in children's lives. When we purchase or record a video for our children, we are giving them a story they will see over and over again. Many children memorize every movement of the character they identify with. Be sure this is a positive, self-confident role before giving it to your child to practice.

Books can be a very positive influence if chosen carefully. With so many good books to choose from, why not read the best?

Look for picture books with strong girls, stories from many cultures and characters of many races. Use this type of media to open your children's eyes to more of the world than they experience each day. Reading with young children is the best way to insure that they will become lifelong readers themselves.

Whatever ways you choose to adapt the media for your children, remember to look at each experience through the children's eyes, and to discuss it with them. Explain your interpretation of the messages the media is trying to get across to them. If you do not agree with that message, tell them so. Then explain why. Ask their opinion.

Soon your children will be telling YOU to turn off the commercials. They will call out in the market, “This camel is just trying to get us to buy cigarettes!” They will watch their hour of television and then run outside to play. They will grow in their ability to evaluate and control the effect of the media in their own lives. And in today’s media-filled world, that’s a very important skill to have.

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