

Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens



In a matter of seconds, most children can mimic a movie or TV character, sing an advertising jingle, or give other examples of what they have learned from media. Sadly, these examples may include naming a popular brand of beer, striking a “sexy” pose, or play fighting. Children only have to put a movie into the VCR, open a magazine, click on a Web site, or watch TV to experience all kinds of messages. It really is that easy.

Media offer entertainment, culture, news, sports, and education. They are an important part of our lives and have much to teach. But some of what they teach may not be what we want children to learn.

This brochure gives an overview of some of the messages media send young people that could be negative or harmful to their health. You will learn how you can teach your children to better understand the media messages they see and hear in print, over airwaves, on networks, and on-line.

The power of media messages

Sometimes you can see the impact of media right away, such as when your child watches superheros fighting and then copies their moves during play. But most of the time the impact is not so immediate or obvious. It occurs slowly as children see and hear certain messages over and over, such as the following:

- Fighting and other violence used as a way to “handle” conflict
- Cigarettes and alcohol shown as cool and attractive, not unhealthy and deadly
- Sexual action with no negative results, such as disease or unintended pregnancy

Media messages: good or bad?

Whatever form they take (ads, movies, computer games, music videos), messages can be good or bad for your child. Just as you would limit certain foods in your child’s diet that may be unhealthy, you also should limit her media diet of messages. Some examples of these follow.

Use of cigarettes and alcohol

Messages about tobacco and alcohol are everywhere in media. Kids see characters on screen smoking and drinking. They see signs for tobacco and alcohol products at concerts and sporting events. Advertising and movies send kids the message that smoking and drinking make a person sexy or cool and that “everyone does it.” Advertising also sways teens to smoke and drink. Teens who see a lot of ads for beer, wine, liquor, and cigarettes admit that it influences them to want to drink and smoke. It is not by chance that the three most advertised cigarette brands are also the most popular ones smoked by teens.

Advertisers of tobacco and alcohol purposely leave out the negative information about their products. As a result, young people often do not know what the health risks are when they use these products. Sometimes TV broadcasts and print articles do the same thing. For example, a magazine might do a story about the common causes of cancer but not mention smoking as a top cause. Does your child know why? The answer may be that the magazine publisher takes money to publish tobacco ads or even owns another company that makes cigarettes.

Fatty foods and thin bodies

Media heavily promote unhealthy foods while at the same time telling people they need to lose weight and be thin. Heavy media use can also take time away from physical activity.

Studies show that girls of all ages worry about their weight. Many of them are starting to diet at early ages. Media can promote an unrealistic image of how people look. Often, the thin and perfect-looking person on screen or in print is not even one whole person but parts of several people! This “person” is created by using body doubles, airbrushing, and computer-graphics techniques.

Violence

Children learn their attitudes about violence at a very young age and these attitudes tend to last. Although TV violence has been studied the most, researchers are finding that violence in other media impacts children and teens in many of the same harmful ways.

- From media violence children learn to behave aggressively toward others. They are taught to use violence instead of self-control to take care of problems or conflicts.
- Violence in the “media world” may make children more accepting of real-world violence and less caring toward others. Children who see a lot of violence from movies, TV shows, or video games may become more fearful and look at the real world as a mean and scary place.

Although the effects of media on children might not be apparent right away, children are being negatively affected. Sometimes children may not act out violently until their teen or young-adult years.

Media education basics

Parents need to set limits and be actively involved with the TV shows, computer games, magazines, and other media that children use. But this is only one step in helping media play a positive role in children’s lives. Because media surround us and cannot always be avoided, one way to filter their messages is to develop the skills to question, analyze, and evaluate them. This is called *media literacy* or *media education*.

Just as a print-literate child learns to be critical of the things he reads, he should also be able to do the same with moving pictures and sounds. Your child can learn to understand both the obvious and hidden messages in all media. Once children learn media education skills, they will begin to ask questions and think about the media messages they watch, read, and hear. And they usually will enjoy doing it!

Following are basic media education points your child should know:

- **People create media messages.** Any media message, whether it's a magazine article or a TV talk show, is created by a team of people. Those people write it, decide what pictures to use, and what to leave out. All of these things give the message a purpose.
- **Each media form uses its own language.** Newspapers make headlines large to attract readers to certain stories. Media with sound may use music to make people feel a range of emotions. When children learn about these techniques they are able to understand how a message is delivered instead of only being affected by it.
- **No two people experience the same media message in exactly the same way.** How a person interprets a message depends on things unique to that person's life. These can include age, values, memories, and education.
- **Media messages have their own values and points of view.** These are built into the message itself. Children should compare the promoted values against their own values. It is important for children to learn that they have a *choice* in whether to accept the values that are being promoted in any media message.

Everyday media education ideas

Besides asking how and why media messages are created, children of various ages can do everyday activities with you or other adults to help build media education skills. Make a game out of the following:

- Play "Spot the Commercials." Help your child learn to tell the difference between a regular program and the commercials that support it. This may be tricky during children's shows because many commercials advertise toys based on TV characters.
- Do a taste test to compare a heavily advertised brand with a generic or other nonadvertised brand. Try products such as cereals or soft drinks. See whether your child and his friends can tell the difference and whether advertising influenced their guesses.
- Look at the headlines, photos, and placements of articles in a newspaper. How do these affect which stories your child wants to read? Read a few stories and compare their content with their headlines and photos.
- When you see a movie, video, or video game with your child, talk about whether what happens on screen would happen in the "real" world. For example, would a person *really* be able to drive a car super fast, down narrow streets, without crashing?
- While shopping, compare products with advertisements your child has seen. Look at the ingredients, label, or packaging. Is any of this information in the ad? Does the ad give any specific information about the product itself? How is the product different than it seemed from the ad or packaging?
- How many brands of beer, cigarettes, or other such products can your child name? If she can name even one, this is a great way to begin talking about the power of advertising. Discuss the health risks of using these products and how the ads leave out that information.

- Watch a music video with your child. What stories are the pictures telling? Does the story on screen match the meaning of the words in the song? How does the video make your child feel? Can your child note any stereotypical, violent, or sexual images in the video? Is there any tobacco, alcohol, or drug use? Watch a music video with the sound off and see how it is different.

How a media message is created

The exercise that follows is a fun way for older children to think about who puts together a media message and why.

Have your child choose a media message and then answer the following questions about it. Television commercials are easy to practice with because they are short and often contain powerful words, images, and music. You could also pick a video game, the packaging for a children's toy, or a music video. The choices are endless.

1. **Describe the kinds of people involved in creating the message.** These can include writers, photographers, designers, special effects people, or stunt people.
2. **Depending on the media message you choose, talk about the visual effects that were used** (lighting, camera angles, computer-generated images, etc). Also discuss the sound (the words that are spoken, who says them, music, special effects, and other sounds). How do these different things affect the power and meaning of the message?
3. **Discuss the purpose of the message.** Are the people who made the message trying to give you information? Do they want you to do something (such as buy a product)? Or is the message just to entertain you? Many times the true meaning of a message is hidden below the surface—it is not always stated in the message. As children gain more experience questioning how messages are put together, they will be able to get at the true meaning of any message.
4. **What does your child think about the message?** Does she agree with it or disagree with it, and why? One reason to accept or reject a message could be to decide whether it is realistic or agrees with her values.

Set the home stage for media education

Starting when children are very young, most of their media use takes place in the home. Parents can help their children make better use of media by doing the following:

Make a media plan. Schedule media times and choices in advance, just as you would other activities. A media plan helps everyone to choose and use media carefully.

Set media time limits. Limit children's total screen time. This includes time watching TV and videotapes, playing video and computer games, and surfing the Internet. One way to do this is to use a timer. When the timer goes off, your child's media time is up, no exceptions. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than 1 to 2 hours of quality TV and videos a day for older children and no screen time for children under the age of 2.

Set family guidelines for media content. Help children and teens choose shows, videos, and video games that are appropriate for their ages and interests. Get into the habit of checking the content ratings and parental advisories for all media. Use these ratings to decide what media are suitable for your child.

Be clear and consistent with children about media rules. If you do not approve of their media choice, explain why and help them choose something more appropriate.

Keep TV sets, VCRs, video games, and computers out of children's bedrooms. Instead, put them where you can be involved and monitor children's use. If children or teens are allowed to have a TV set or other media in their bedrooms, know what media they are using and supervise their media choices. If you have Internet access, supervise your children while they are on-line.

Make media a family activity. Whenever possible, use media with your children and discuss what they see, hear, and read. When you share your children's media experiences, you can help them analyze, question, and challenge the meaning of messages for themselves. During a media activity, help children "talk back," or question what they see. Do this during a violent act, an image or message that is misleading, or an advertisement for an unhealthy product.

"Talking back," or asking questions about media messages, builds the life-long skills your child needs to be a critical media consumer. Discuss how the media messages compare with the values you are teaching your child.

Look for media "side effects." Unless they come clearly labeled as containing violence, sex, or graphic language, parents often overlook the messages children are getting from media. Instead, be aware of the media children and teens use and the impact it could be having. This is especially important if your child shows any of the following behaviors:

- Poor school performance
- Hitting or pushing other kids often
- Aggressively talking back to adults
- Frequent nightmares
- Increased eating of unhealthy foods
- Smoking, drinking, or drug use

Talk to your child's pediatrician about any behavior that is a concern. Your pediatrician may take a media history of your child. This can help uncover whether certain behavioral problems exist or could develop based on how much and what kind of media your child uses. If there are problems or you think they could develop, work with your child to change his media use.

Voice your opinion. Let people who profit from the media and set guidelines about content know how you feel about media messages.

- In a phone call, letter, or e-mail message, tell companies and advertisers what you like and what you do not like. Have your kids voice their opinions too. One letter or call can make a difference.
- When media content and advertisers do not support your family's values, voice your opinion with your buying power. Do not buy their products, and tell them why.
- Support media literacy education in your child's school.

It's up to parents like you. You can learn more about media's impact by talking with your child's pediatrician and reading about media education. Schools, hospitals, and community groups may hold free workshops on topics such as taking control of kids' TV watching.

You can make a difference in the way media impacts your kids. If you limit, supervise, and share media experiences with children, they have much to gain. When you help your children understand how their media choices affect them, they actively control their media use rather than giving in to the influence of media without thinking about it.

Visiting the on-line world

Spend time with your child on the Internet and monitor where she goes and who she "talks" to on-line. Children need to be protected on-line. They are "clicks" away from being exploited by advertisers and exposed to violence, sex, adult language, and substance use.

Check for on-line ratings to help you assess violence, sex, language, and "adult" material. Use Internet-blocking programs as one way to protect your child on-line.

Make it a rule to never give out personal information on-line. This includes your child's name, address, phone number, school name or location, facts about parents and siblings, or favorite products.

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