



Media and Our Children

Did you know that children and teens spend more than seven hours per day with different forms of media—television being the predominant form? Young people between the ages of 11 and 17 spend on average four to five hours per day watching television. A television in the bedroom increases viewing by one to two hours per day, and the majority of youth watch television without parental oversight.

There are many positive aspects of television. One's world outlook can be broadened and it serves as a source of entertainment. It also provides educational programming through channels like PBS, Discovery, the History Channel, and National Geographic. Television is a medium by which families access new ideas, promoting critical thinking, collaboration, and networking.

However, there is a downside that every parent should be aware of before exposing their children to hours of television, movie, and computer screen time. Different forms of media can blur the distinction between fantasy and fiction, glamorize risky behaviors, and can also provide misinformation regarding health issues.

By the age of 18, the average teen will have seen 200,000 acts of violence on TV. Repeated exposure may desensitize them to resorting to aggression and/or violence to resolve conflict. Alcoholic drinks are the most common beverages on TV. Seventy percent of movies in the United States contain smoking and rarely show the negative consequences. It can also provide ideas on how to behave in relationships and normalizes certain behaviors.

As parents you have to be in tune with what your children are watching and with how they interpret it. Reality shows are scripted to a large degree and are meant to be dramatic in order to draw a large viewer audience. Shows marketed toward teens have plots that deal with all kinds of subject matter including murder, pregnancy and bisexuality.

Your children may not be allowed to watch these shows, but they may watch them at a friend's house or see clips online. You can't hide the subject matter from them; they see it all over the news, read it in magazines, and hear about it in the school. They are bombarded with all forms of media so you have to be able to help them process what they see and read.

My best advice is to use media as a teaching tool. Know what your children are watching and use the situations and characters to

teach them what and what not to do. If a teen on a show has trouble with a friend, after the show ask your child what she would do if she were in that situation. Parents often find it hard to bring up difficult topics like drugs and sex. Discussing the plots of the television shows are ways to introduce these topics in a non-threatening way. It allows you to reinforce your values while simultaneously showing interest in your child's favorite pastimes.

Limiting screen time on televisions, computers, and smart phones is important in order to provide opportunities for children to grow and develop in other areas. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting all screen time to less than 2 hours a day in order to encourage activities like exercise, reading, and the development of interpersonal communication/social skills.

Also, providing true role models and mentors for your children is truly important. Young people often relate to the fictional roles that actors play, but it's essential that someone in their lives serves as a positive image. It can be a teacher, family member, or family friend.

Media can be a great form of entertainment and provide a great deal of knowledge to our children if used responsibly. Be sure to sort through these images in order to provide for their optimal growth and development. ■

About Dr. Liz

Dr. Elizabeth Robinson Henry (Dr. Liz) has dedicated her life to providing youth with the knowledge and confidence to lead healthy and productive lives. She is the founder of Dr. Liz Consulting, a practice focused on making a difference in the lives of adolescents by addressing their physical, emotional, and mental needs. Teens, tweens and their parents can find resources on how to build self-confidence, manage anger and stress, and overcome issues such as bullying, emotions, fitting-in, and obesity at www.drlizforyouth.com.

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