

Media Entertainment and Your Family

We need convictions and a personal, proactive plan for handling media wisely.

by Dennis and Barbara Rainey

It really doesn't matter what the media culprits are. Men often struggle with the sports monster and, increasingly, the personal computer. Just how many great match-up basketball games do we need to watch between Small Potatoes U and Obscurity Tech? Are we surfing the Internet so much that our hand is looking like a claw from gripping the mouse?

Women may be more inclined to invest too much time in television dramas, entertainment talk shows, novels, and special-interest magazines.

We need convictions and a personal, proactive plan for handling media wisely. Then we can move on to help our teens make their own solid choices.

1. We have the responsibility and right to screen and set limits to all forms of media consumed by our family.

Here's a suggestion: Make it clear that as long as your child resides in your home, the parents will have the right to screen—and bar—all media consumed by anyone in the family. Ideally, you will be involved in helping choose the media in the first place. As your child gets older, however, he will begin making many of his own decisions. Brace yourself. Some of those decisions will not be good ones. That's why if some media item that violates the family's standards sneaks into your home, you should retain the right to eliminate its use.

Such a stand will not be easy. But if you have a baseline policy like this, you will have a chance to keep your head above water when the waves of media hit.

2. Use of media by parents must set a high standard for media use by children.

If we sit on the couch watching so much television that our nickname is Spud, we can't expect to easily confine our 12-year-old's viewing to a few selected PBS specials each week.

It would be good if every family in America adopted its own media use policy. Ask, "Just what and how much media are we going to devour inside the four walls of our home?"

Americans devote, on average, 15 of 40 free time hours per week watching television. That compares to 6.7 hours socializing, 2.8 hours reading, and 2.2 hours engaging in outdoor recreation.⁽¹⁾ That's a lot of time spent in a passive activity. Important, meaningful activities, such as physical exercise, prayer and Bible study, hobbies, volunteer work at church or in the community, and so on, will never be enjoyed while we vegetate.

3. Media consumption must not replace relationship building.

Perhaps the saddest outcome of having your time eroded by waves of media is that key relationships are shortchanged. Although sitting next to your spouse or child while watching one TV sitcom after another may seem like an intimate encounter, normally this is just communal “couch potato-ing.” Not much relating occurs while the mesmerizing tube does most of the talking.

With media issues, you will have a daily opportunity to observe and be involved in your child’s choices and habits. Since you share involvement in a certain amount of media use (watching TV, going to a concert, viewing a video, etc.), this gives you an ongoing opportunity to ask questions and discuss content. Make good use of these training times.

And don’t forget to ask our favorite question: “Have you been looking at or listening to something that’s not good for you?”

Here are some ideas for guiding your child’s media entertainment choices:

Listen to his music. On a regular basis, ask your child to play you a song or two from a favorite music group. Keep tuned in not only to what your child enjoys in music, but form your own impressions of the group and the lyrics of their songs.

Be proactive in selecting reading material. Visit a public library. Explain to a librarian your standards for books your child might read, then have the librarian suggest possible authors and types of books. Check out two titles. Give your child some things to be looking for that might signal objectionable content. Each of you read one of the books and report back. Discuss what you found.

Do some interactive media together. Get on the Internet with your child and do some surfing. Show your child how to navigate toward acceptable materials and away from questionable Web sites. While still on the computer, *play with your child some of the computer or video games that he enjoys.* Discuss any messages or themes that are portrayed as you play the game.

Play the media Decide in Advance game. You can play some great Decide in Advance games related to media. Try some of these:

- You are watching TV at a neighbor’s house when a bad video or cable show comes on. Your friend says his parents don’t mind. What would you do?
- You are watching one of your favorite TV shows at home when the story becomes dirty—but the story is really great. What would you do?
- You are in a friend’s room listening to music. The radio is tuned to a popular music station and a song about sex comes on. What would you do?
- You’ve just downloaded your messages from your browser and you notice a message that mentions something about sex in the title. What would you do?

When it comes to media entertainment today, no matter what form, we realize that as parents, we can't let down our guard.

For Single Parents

If you share custody of your child, you will need to do all in your power to influence media choices when the child is with your ex-spouse. This may be difficult, but it is certainly worth your effort.

If the media choices allowed by the other spouse do not reflect your standards, don't give up and give in. Keep the bar high and press on, bathing the situation in prayer.

Without tearing down your former spouse, talk about why you have established certain standards. Your child may never say it, but he will respect you for your standards. even though he may resist them.

Another issue for many single parents (it certainly happens in other types of homes, too) is the tendency to allow TV and the VCR to be a live-in child-sitter. Although it's understandable, it's not a good idea. Do everything you can to minimize tube time. We've actually paid our children to read good books.

1) Marc Peyser, "Time Bind? What Time Bind?" Newsweek, May 12, 1997, p.69.
