

Five Important Ideas to Teach Your Kids About TV



Everybody tells you to "watch TV with your kids. " "Talk to your kids about what they see." But what do you look for? What do you say? Where do you start?

The following five points give you a foundation for helping your children become more aware of how television works and what role it plays in our own lives and in our modern world. This is called media literacy.

As children grow, they will be able to understand more and more about these five ideas. But the underlying principles are always the same.

1. We Help Create TV As We Watch It.

This fundamental principle turns the tables on the common assumption that TV just entertains us and all we do is watch it. Actually we are very active as we watch. Our bodies may not be moving but in our heads, we're trying to connect what we're seeing on the screen with everything else we know.

And each of us, whether adult or child, gets involved in TV programs with different levels of understanding because of who we are and what life experiences we bring to our TV viewing.

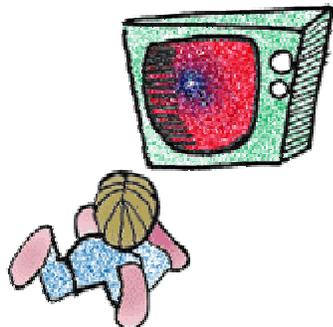
Thus we can filter and change what TV presents by the way we watch it. We can question, challenge and contradict - or support and reinforce - what we see and hear. It's especially important to talk back to TV (as well as cable and video) in front of children. If you don't say anything, they'll assume what they're seeing and hearing must be ok with you. The other four ideas help us filter and change our media use by reminding us of several important ideas to remember as we watch.



2. TV's World Is Made Up.

We all know that nothing on TV-whether cartoons or movies or commercials - is "real." But even adults still fall for the images and illusions that TV creates. Think, for example, how "perfect" everything looks on TV. Do flowers ever fade? Do clothes wrinkle? Does cereal get soggy? Maybe that's because in the TV studio, the "milk" is really white glue.

Media-makers are our modern-day storytellers. Even a news program is "constructed" by very talented photographers, writers and editors who select certain pictures and reject others. Like you, they are sometimes fair, sometimes tired, sometimes brilliant. And like every good storyteller, they have all kinds of ways to keep their audience interested and involved. How do they do this?



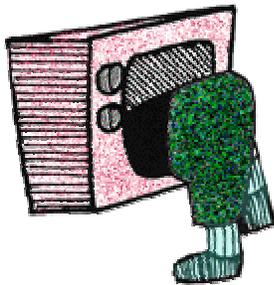
3. TV Makers Use Their Own Language

We can take apart the world that media makers construct by identifying the camera angles, music, special effects and symbols

that make scary scenes more scary, tyrants more evil, or advertised products more alluring

Without knowing it, children pick up on these techniques very early. Kids who make their own videos, for example, instinctively use close-ups or fade-outs to imitate TV. Yet they do not always realize how they are manipulated by the power of these techniques when they are watching TV. Counting laugh tracks in a sitcom or the number of times the music changes in a favorite video are revealing ways to de-mystify TV, enhance appreciation of these techniques and help your child be less susceptible to manipulation.

Another way to identify how media construct a world that's not completely "real" is to ask certain questions of the media. The final two ideas suggest important questions we can ask:



4. TV is in Business to Make Money.

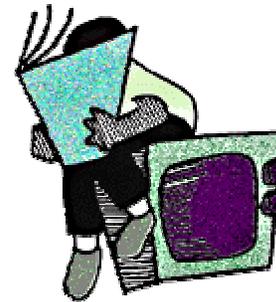
In the U.S. and increasingly around the world, media are big business. Producers sell programs to networks. Networks sell time to advertisers. Advertisers sell products to viewers. And the viewers are sold too!

You've heard the phrase: "This program is brought to you by your sponsor." Not really. You are brought to the sponsor by the program.

It's important to teach our kids (and remind ourselves) that commercial television is not "free" entertainment. Its primary purpose is to sell the product, it teaches us to buy, period. And to feel dissatisfied unless we have the newest, the latest. A useful question to ask is "Who's making money from the news tonight? Or who's making money from this sponsoring event? The point is not that making money is wrong but that almost everything we see and hear on TV is subject to influence by a profit motive.

5. TV Teaches Us that Some People and Ideas Are More Important Than Others.

All media carry subtle messages about who and what is important. Some people are typically cast as victims; others get to be heroes and heroines. Some characters are glamorized; others are treated with contempt. Some ideas always get headlines; others get left out completely. Nothing we read or see in the media, even in the news, can ever be completely "objective." Sometimes, like us, media makers use stereotypes carelessly. We should expect them, however, to strive for fairness and balance between various ideas and viewpoints.



In the U.S., the First Amendment protects the freedom to express diverse points of view. At the same time, less popular or new ideas can have a hard time getting aired, especially if they challenge long-standing assumptions or commonly accepted beliefs. To uncover these underlying viewpoints in the media, ask "Who benefits?" or "Who loses?" Who benefits from the way older persons are portrayed in this sitcom? Who loses when a news show only interviews white persons?" Answering this question helps us teach our children to think critically about what they see and hear. That's important for citizenship in a democratic society.

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Parenting in a TV Age, a parent-education program published and distributed by the Center for Media Literacy, 3101 Ocean Park Blvd. #200, Santa Monica, CA 90405. 800-226-9494 or www.medialit.org
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