

Media Influence

Question: How has your exposure to modern media affected you and your family?

Teens and parents in conversation HomeWord

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Teen Talk *by Brian Buell*

I like the media. I have a TV, VCR, stereo, portable CD player, and computer in my room. Most of these are hand-me-downs, but they suit me just fine. The most popular electronic media in our home are the computer and the television. My brother and I also play a lot of video games. We just got hand-held systems.

These are the rules about using the media in our home

- Do a variety of non-electronic activities.
- Do not say bad words or display negative or violent behavior.
- Stick to the time limits that Mom and Dad set.
- Respect the fact that some shows and games are off-limits.
- Do not rent or buy movies, video games, or CDs that contain violence.
- Use appropriate Internet sites.

My parents loaded a filtering program that blocks certain Internet sites, but I needed more sites in order to do my homework, so they eventually lifted the blocks. They trust me to stay away from sites that they wouldn't approve of.

I learned that I don't have to like what everyone else likes.

I like these rules because they are reasonable, and they encourage me to do things that are not related to electronics. I think that rules should depend on the person they are made for.

Since I have started using the media, I have noticed that I have changed. I learned that I don't have to like what everyone else likes. For example, I used to listen to popular music stations. I never paid attention to the lyrics of the songs. I just liked the background music. Then rap became popular. One artist who was popular with many teens had lyrics like, "Ask the devil." Whenever I heard that type of thing, I tried to ignore it.

Once, my friend and I checked out a Christian rock CD from the library. I knew that it wasn't the most popular music, but I told myself to be open minded and try it. I realized that it was great and soon started learning the lyrics.

Video games are another popular form of media for kids. Many people think that all video games are violent, ▼



Parent Talk *by Jean M. Buell*



T is for *technology*, and it's for *toys*, *temptations*, and *teaching my boys*. There are so many choices, and the boys want all of them! Sometimes I feel like a T. Standing straight, my body forms the fulcrum. Stretching out, my arms form the lever. My hands hold the options.

When decisions are hard to reach, I seek a more sensitive balance. Stretching my arms outward, I weigh the heavier elements of the decision. Invariably, I am stretched by a scale of trust versus control. Tipped by trust, I let my boys



make their own decisions and experience their own consequences. Tipped by control, I keep my sanity.

One Saturday morning, my younger son's money got stuck inside a vending machine.

"Well," I gloated, "that'll teach you how not to spend your money."

"Mom," he pleaded, "I want to get it back." Sure enough, a cashier refunded the money but warned that he would do it only once.

"You were lucky," I said. "Now let's go."

Then I gave the best answer I could: "I'll talk to Dad."

"But I want to try again!" My arms stretched outward. Stay or go? "Are you sure?" I said. "The machine is broken. You'll probably lose your money again. Why don't you just save your money?"

"Because I really want that plastic skeleton."

"Okay," I said as trust tipped the scale. He would learn a valuable lesson, and I would still have my sanity. In a few moments, though, he returned with an ugly skeleton dangling from his fingertips.

"I'm glad I took the risk!" he said as he scampered off to show his brother. I learned a lesson from his insight: I don't like to take risks!

Later, he asked if he could buy a friend's old game gizmo—cheap! Naturally, my older son tuned in; permission for his younger brother to have a game gizmo meant automatic permission for him to get one too. My arms stretched outward. Game gizmo or not? I stretched them farther. Spend or save? And farther. Want or need? Then I gave the best answer I could: "I'll talk to Dad." ▼

Teen Talk *continued*

but there are non-violent genres like sports and adventure.

When I found out that my neighbor got a new video game, I was excited to try it. At first, I didn't mind that it was violent. In fact, I really liked it.

Later on, my friend rented a game that was even more violent. In this game, the player trained to be a cop, but the only thing the cop did was shoot people. My dad has been a cop for twenty years, and I know for a fact that he has never shot his gun at anyone. That made me realize how excessive some violent video games

are. I rarely play violent video games anymore, but occasionally I will play a violent game and try to just ignore the violence. I've learned that I decide what is real and what isn't. I set my own limits.

I think the media is both good and bad. It is good because it provides information and entertainment. It is bad because the information and entertainment aren't always appropriate.

Brian Buell is a successful junior high student in Minneapolis.



Media Literacy

Five basic questions can be asked about any media message:

1. Who created this message and why are they sending it?
2. What techniques are being used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?
4. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
5. What is omitted from this message?

Usually the questioning process is applied to a specific media "text"—that is, an identifiable production or publication, or a part of one: an episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, an ad for Pepsi, an issue of *Seventeen* magazine, a billboard for Budweiser beer, photos and articles about a bank robbery on the front page of a newspaper, the SuperBowl telecast.

Uncovering many levels of meaning in a media message and multiple answers to every question is what makes media education so engaging for kids and so enlightening for adults.

(Elizabeth Thoman, *Skills and Strategies for Media Education*, from the Center for Media Literacy, 800-226-9494, www.medialit.org)

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Parent Talk *continued*

So we talked. We talked about our spending and saving habits. We talked about our best and worst purchases. And we talked about our rules, specifically, doing a variety of activities and not being violent.

That evening, we gathered for dinner. "There is a matter before us," I announced. The boys perked up. "Dad and I will let you each get a game gizmo. . . ."

"Yesssssss!!!"

"And we will help you pay for it."

"Yesssssss!!!"

"In case it sounds too good to be true, here's the big 'but.'"

The sound of my words sent their eyebrows to the ceiling and their smiles to snorts and laughter. Unexpectedly, I was the "butt" of my own joke!

"But . . . as I was saying, we want you to get the gizmos you really want, not the cheap ones. Choosing

carefully is part of spending wisely." The boys were elated.

The next day, we went shopping. Selecting the gizmos was simple; selecting the games was not. There were so many choices, and my boys wanted all of them. To complicate matters, the violent games were significantly cheaper than the non-violent ones! I trusted my boys, but something tugged at me. My arms reached for a decision. Big bargain or big bill? I stretched them farther. Value or values? And farther. Violence or virtues? I was stretched by a new scale of self and society. I felt my body forming the holy symbol that is shaped like a T. Temptation or transformation? What would Jesus do?

Jean Buell lives with husband and two sons in Minneapolis.

Tips for Internet Literacy

The Internet can be a helpful research tool, but it can also expose your teens to things you may not want them to see or hear. Here are a few helpful tips for integrating the Internet into your family life.

- Surf the Internet together. If you happen upon a site that is offensive, explain why you view the material as harmful.
- Remind your teens never to give personal information to a stranger or answer e-mail from people they don't know.
- Tell them never to give out a password, send a picture, or fill out questionnaires without your permission. They should always use a nickname in a chat rooms or on bulletin boards.
- Above all, communicate. The best protection is strong relationships and a healthy Christian family life in which family members talk and pray together.