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Things were simpler when today's parents were kids. The Media menu back then was pretty limited - a few Saturday cartoons; Lamb Chops; Kookla, Fran and Ollie; Captain Kangaroo; and occasional Saturday matinees. But these amusements represented a manageable punctuation in the lives of kids. Now, forward to the year 2003, and we find kids being constantly bombarded with a plethora of options including VCRs, DVDs, 100 plus cable channels, countless web sites and chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, Satellite television, MTV, WebTV, Playstation 2, Nintendo Game Cube, CD-Roms, cell phones, text messaging, and the list grows almost daily! Instead of punctuating the lives of our kids, media is now a central presence and coalescing force.

This unreal explosion of electronic innovations represents an amazing stride forward in the realms of entertainment, communication, and education. And yet, many parents, educators, child advocates and researchers have legitimate reservations about the overwhelming level of involvement on the part of American children of all ages. The two chief concerns are centered around content and time, i.e., quality and quantity. Content is perhaps the more obvious of the issues – any 4-year old armed with a remote control can now jump from the Disney channel to Hitchcock reruns, to devastating scenes on the news channel with just a press of a button.

Every parent knows that putting a child in front of the T.V. has become an increasingly 'dicey' move. In addition to paranormal sleaze and profanity, televised violence is a topic of particular concern, even with programming aimed at the very young. For example, when the Power Rangers was first aired, it stimulated a rash of aggressive behavior in preschools and elementary schools across the nation to such an extent that parents were asked by administrators to restrict their children from viewing the show. According to the American Psychological Association, decades of research have shown that TV violence can influence children to be less sensitive to the suffering and pain of others – and more likely to behave in aggressive and harmful ways toward others. A certain percentage respond by becoming more fearful of the world around them. And children themselves have reported that TV makes them think that people are dishonest, selfish, and care more about money than other people. Some confess that some TV, such as the Simpsons, encourages them to talk back to adults.

In addition to the issue of content - the dimensions of electronic entertainment of all kinds also presents the more subtle but crucial problem of time. Recent research by Dr. Leonard Jason, Ph.D. confirmed that American children spend an average of 4 hours a day in front of the TV – that's 28 hours per week. By age 18 they have watched 22,000 hours of TV – more time than they've spent in all the classrooms during that same period. Add to these totals the time kids are involved with video games and computer activities, and the total becomes phenomenal. The result: a generation of kids who become very media savvy. The price: poor social skills, a lack of meaningful family interaction and positive relationships, a sacrifice of reading time (which affects cognitive development and academic achievement), little physical and imaginative play (which affects physical health and creativity). On top of all this is the common perception that life should deliver easy, instant entertainment and gratification – a serious distortion of reality that can impede learning in a traditional classroom.

Television, video games, and computer activities are not all bad. On the contrary – quality games, software programs, and web sites can provide an entertaining and educational part of a child's day - ***when balanced with a combination of social, physical and creative pursuits***. But the key word is "balanced" - when used as a 'baby sitter', in excess, or in doses inappropriate for the child's age – TV and electronic entertainment options create an unprofitable condition for children. Based on a parent survey and study of family media habits by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children's Digital Media Centers – many young children who live in homes where the television is on most of the time have more difficulty learning how to read than other kids their age. Six year olds who spent two hours a day watching television, playing a video game or using a computer were involved in those activities three times as long as the time devoted to reading or being read to.

Experts agree that there are benefits for kids in watching some TV, using the computer, or playing some video games – but they emphasize that parents need to be aware that there are pitfalls, too. Dr. Henry Shapiro, chairman of developmental and behavior pediatrics at the American Academy of Pediatrics said, "Watching TV without a parent is a junk experience, especially for young children." He continued by saying that use of the TV, computer

and video games gives kids access to information, and therefore learning. “But there is a downside – so much time in front of TVs can cause kids to become fat, eat junk foods, and not get enough sleep or adult interaction.”

Many parents are experiencing an increasing sense of powerlessness, they feel at a loss to control the tide of information and media images flooding over their children. This is especially true in electronically advanced homes, complete with cable TV on a big screen and internet in multiple rooms. The first reaction of parents may be to blame the media industry – the source of the flood. And while the industry does bear guilt, finger pointing does nothing to improve conditions in our homes for our children. Parents must step in and do what is needed to tame the media monster for the sake of their own children, in spite of what the industry does – or when.

The concern about media content is usually based on the assumption that kids are at the helm of the ‘on’ switch and the remote control. Think about that for a minute – children are intelligent and have great potential to learn, but they are not born with good judgment or self-restraint – those qualities take time, experience and guidance to develop along the path to young adulthood. How, then, can we feel comfortable with children being in charge of mediums that absolutely demand judgment and restraint? Just as it is imperative that parents be in charge of their child’s health care – otherwise few would opt for booster shots - it is equally important that the parent be in charge of the media environment in the home.

Where to begin? Well, it’s a good idea to start by finding out how much time your children are spending on media including the TV and computer, and then deciding how much TV time and computer time is acceptable to you. (For some families that might be two hours; for others it might be none.) Then take a deep breath, and start planning how you will proceed to develop a proactive plan for positive changes in the media environment in your home. Set up some rules with clearly defined time limits for week days and week ends. Determine (in advance) the logical consequence of not adhering to the time limits. Children from the age of about eight on up can suggest a consequence to be agreed to by the parent – when kids have an investment in the decision they are more likely to adhere to it. Scan the TV listings with the kids, and let them determine in advance what they plan to watch during the week. Then watch the shows with them, and become the interpreter, translator, and even censor if necessary. Not only does this keep TV on the level of a family activity, it also serves as a forum for discussing consequence-free violence, sexual behavior, and other difficult topics. Rather than tyrannically declaring certain shows off limits, modeling and teaching them *why* you consider the production inappropriate promotes judgment, values, and decision making skills for them and content limits seem more logical and less punitive.

A crucial part of your proactive efforts can be very profitably spent by establishing a home environment that de-emphasizes TV and encourages music, art, story telling, reading, imaginative play, nature, crafts, cooking, writing, and sports. Getting involved with your kids in those activities strengthens family bonds as it enriches lives while giving children something else to focus on besides media. Encourage their progress and celebrate it with them.

Working parents and single parent homes find it more difficult to monitor media habits. Those parents who are unable to keep track of the use of the TV, video and computer consumption might think of finding quality afterschool programs, or making certain homework or chore requirements are met, and developing a level of trust that TV privileges won’t be abused. They might also investigate available products designed to limit and/or monitor kids’ TV consumption in the absence of adult supervision. When parents are successful in limiting the time spent with TV and computer games that also automatically reduces the problem of content quality by limiting the time of overall exposure.

Parents who want to be involved in content on a wider scale can contact their local stations and national networks. They can also follow up with boycotts and letter-writing campaigns and contact their federal Congressmen and women for a voice in content-based ratings. But though content is a key issue – even if every program aired on TV was suddenly stellar in content and motive – it would not benefit kids placed in TV’s care hour after hour each and every day. There are trees to climb, friends to meet, books to read and a wide, wonderful world of experiences to explore. But that’s only possible when parents do what is needed to tame the media monster in their homes.