Screen Time, Quality Time

Five tips to help parents pick the right media for their child.

BY BOBBIE EISENSTOCK, PH.D.

EVEN BEFORE SUMMER arrives, most children are already spending more time every day using TV and other media than doing almost anything else. Add up the hours for the week and the amount is equivalent to a full-time job with overtime! At least that's what the recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found when they surveyed more than 2,000 eight- to 18-year-olds about their media use.

That's a lot of TV watching, music listening, Web surfing, video-game playing, magazine and book reading. Chances are that some things children are exposed to via these media are valuable for their development, while others are not. Parents can make a difference in how media affect their children by helping them make good media choices.

There are a lot of quality media choices, but how do you pick good media that's right for your child? Finding media that your child will benefit from and enjoy just takes a little patience, previewing, and planning. Summer vacation is an ideal time to sift through the media clutter and make a media plan that is appropriate for your child for all seasons.

Take the First Step

When it comes to making the right media choices, the first step is to become a media-literate parent. Know what media your kids are using and help them understand and question what they view, hear, and read. Watch the TV shows and movies they watch, play the video games they play, surf the Web sites they surf, and listen to the songs they download. This takes a little time, but a few minutes of screening is well worth the effort.

Think of it this way: you would not let a complete stranger whisper into your child's ear or show your child images without listening in or looking over his shoulder. Yet that's precisely what you allow media to do when you don't know what programs your kids are watching or Web sites they're surfing.

The best way to check out your kids' media is to use it with them. Help them interpret media messages and share your values alongside those of their favorite characters or online pals. When you can't use media with your child, use a VCR or DVR to record an episode and watch it yourself, or check the history on your browser to see where your child has been and visit the sites.

Once you're savvy about the media landscape, you and your child can decide together which selections are good ones and talk about why. You may even find some storylines that provide the springboard to talk about a sensitive issue with your child.

Be a Picky Parent

Parenting in a media-saturated culture is a challenge. The bottom line is: be a picky parent. Don't let kids just turn on the TV or the computer. Don't assume that a PG rating is okay for your child, or that fantasy violence should always be off-limits. Don't count on your V-chip to block everything you deem inappropriate, and don't rely on Internet filtering software to keep kids safe online. Ratings and blocking technology are good starting places, but don't stop there. Go beyond the ratings—read reviews and recommendations to find quality media. And most important, remember that there's no substitute for parental supervision.

Choose the Right Media for Your Kids

1 Pick TV shows and Web sites that match your child's age and stage of development. The best children's media are developed for a specific age group. At different ages, children use, understand, and react to media in different ways. A five-year-old and an 11-year-old may enjoy the watching same TV program or visting the same Web site, but they don't get the same meaning out

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of it. Consider your child's emotional nature and stage of development. A show with a TV-Y7 rating labeled FV may contain action too intense for young viewers, especially under the age of seven, because they can't tell the difference between what is real and what is make-believe. Character portrayals, special effects, and techniques such as flashbacks may make a story more confusing or upsetting to a younger child, or to a more sensitive child, regardless of age. Check that the language, story structure, and messages are appropriate for your child's learning level; Web site features are clearly labeled and easy to navigate; and the amount of information is not overwhelming. When children of different ages use media together, make sure the content is appropriate for all of them.

2 Pick media content that your children can trust. Children generally accept as true what they see in the media. They trust advertising claims, Web pages, and online strangers. Kids can be easily exploited by advertisers if they don't understand that the purpose of a commercial is to get them to buy a product, or that product placement in a TV show or video game is a form of advertising. They are particularly vulnerable to online requests for personal information in contests and quizzes, deceptive e-mail spam and phishing scams,

pop-up screens, and people they meet online who may not be who they say they are. Consider whether children have the maturity and ability to deal with certain content before they see it on TV or encounter it online.

3 Pick media content that builds on your children's interests. Children who watch a TV show or visit a Web site related to their interests or hobbies are more involved and challenged by their media experience. A quality program can help them better understand what they learn in school, encourage them to explore their ideas, and inspire interest in new subjects. Many teachers believe that children learn best when they connect what they are taught in school to what they learn outside of school. Help kids enrich their learning by selecting media linked to schoolwork and to fun activities like art projects, playing an instrument, visiting museums and zoos, attending plays and concerts, even creating their own media with photographs, home movies, or Web pages.

4 Pick media stories with good role models who support the values you want your child to learn. Children learn by imitating what they see. They mimic the actions of superheroes, princesses, and athletes when they play. They want to dress, talk, and act like their

favorite characters and pop stars. Media personalities can be positive role models, but celebrities who behave badly can be negative role models when they engage in unhealthy or risky behaviors. Encourage kids to pick good role models and interpret media messages and images using the values you've taught them.

5 Pick media content that actively engages your child and develops critical-thinking skills. Media choices that encourage interactivity can transform your child's screen time from a passive to an active experience. Find educational shows and sites that facilitate learning language and reasoning skills by inviting children to participate in sing-alongs, movement, quizzes, and other activities. Encourage them to watch shows in which characters solve problems and evaluate the consequences of their actions. Suggest specific shows and sites that get kids to question what they already know about issues you want them to think about. Children who can think critically have more confidence in their opinions, more assurance in their abilities, and more control of their lives.   **<**

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