



# Educating with Character

By Victoria Q. Legg, Parent, School of the Arts at McAteer and Cathedral School for Boys



## Encouraging your child's personal best

In *The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have* (Scribner, 2002, \$26), authors Laura and Malcolm Gauld challenge parents, society and schools to reconsider an insidious message we give our children: that aptitude is more highly valued than attitude. It is their experience as educators for the Maine-based Hyde School Program for Character Based Education and Parenting that we have "created a system in which our students do not believe that their best efforts will be respected." As

"the kids feel good about themselves, then they will do great things" and attempt to solve our children's problems with feel-good solutions. Their rejoinder is that children must earn self-esteem by building honesty, integrity and character into everything they do. The Hyde School program centers itself on this premise, teaching parents how to foster a climate of healthy self-esteem for their children.

The authors challenge us to take a hard look at the messages we give

The book includes a number of exercises that families can do together to strengthen communication and understanding, such as occasionally swapping chores and keeping a regular journal. Some general suggestions for building character include:

- **Choose truth over harmony.** It's more important to deal with one another honestly than always to get along with one another.

- **Value attitude over aptitude.** An academically talented child may get straight As with little effort; another may have to work hard to earn Cs. Effort is as deserving of reward as achievement.

- **Value both success and failure.** We learn as much about ourselves from failure as we do from success.

- **Create a character culture within the family.** The Gaults encourage parents to build a sense of responsibility for each person's role in the family. Everyone should have chores, everyone should participate in regular family meetings, and everyone should be expected to participate in some regularly scheduled family fun.

- **Be an inspirational, not invincible, role model.** Parents aren't always sure of themselves or how best to handle a situation. It is healthy for

children to see that vulnerability, according to the Gaults. They believe parents can be inspiring models for their children by sharing their struggles and feelings and by taking healthy risks.

### The Coalition Mission

*To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.*

If you or your school would like to be involved or if you have comments or questions, please call Lynne Myers at (415) 668-0895.

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<i>Editors</i>	<i>Illustrator</i>
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<i>Layout</i>	<i>Circulation</i>
Setuko Yoshimura	Victoria Legg
	<i>Contributors</i>
	Victoria Legg Steven Pressman

Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves. Call Susan Wels at (415) 641-7694 for more information. To subscribe to *Parenteen*, call Victoria Legg at (415) 641-1528.

To learn more about the Parents' Coalition, check out our web site: [www.ParentsCoalition.net](http://www.ParentsCoalition.net)

## Parents can be inspiring models for their children by sharing their struggles and feelings and by taking healthy risks.

much as we tell our children that we only want them to do their best, what we really communicate is that best means high marks, high test scores, participation on winning teams and recognition for after-school activities.

### Not good enough

We do not simply accept children's personal best, write the authors. Instead, when our kids start to fail either at school, at home or with their peers, we too easily blame ourselves for either being too lenient or demanding. The authors suggest that we are fixated on the credo that if

our kids. Do we encourage healthy risk-taking behavior—for example, encouraging a child who is a star soccer player to try out for a part in the school play? Do we reinforce that message by stepping outside our own comfort zone—for example, taking emotional risks with another family member or professional risks when we feel our principles clash with what is expected of us? The Gaults assert that we have to build honesty, integrity and character into our own lives if we want to serve as successful models for our children.

### VERY IMPORTANT DATES

#### Parents' Coalition meetings

The Coalition meets once a month, September-June, from 7:30-9:00 p.m. at San Francisco Day School, 350 Masonic Avenue, (at Golden Gate Avenue). All parents are welcome. For more information call (415)389-9441.



**Monday, January 13 – Forum: Michael Riera PhD, on Right from Wrong: Instilling a Sense of Integrity in Your Child**

**Monday, February 10 – Teen Panel**



## Mirror, Mirror

by Susan Wels, Parent, Convent of the Sacred Heart High School

### Teens reflect on influences shaping their self-image

When it comes to matters of self-image and body image, few times of life are more sensitive than the teenage years. To explore these emotional issues and the influences that shape them, Catherine Hayden and Marilyn Friend, PhD—cochairs of the Coalition's Issues and Choices committee—hosted a panel of 10 boys and girls from five Bay Area high schools. Here's what the students had to say:

#### How much does the media affect who you are and who you want to be?

- Media has a heavy influence on what we find attractive. It influences what we think is good-looking or beautiful in appearance, clothing and manner of speaking.
- Watching MTV, especially, it seems like they're brainwashing you. MTV advertises everything—music, products, shows, college life, what you should be like.
- I totally agree. MTV tries to manipulate how we act. It's ridiculously popular with 12- to 25-year-olds. We're trying to figure out who we are, and many people think that something's cool or legit because it's on MTV. It shows a lot of stuff very quickly and explosively, so it's easy to get addicted. But MTV is paid to show what it shows. It's a tool for marketing, and teens are a big market.
- Your friends watch MTV and know the shows, clothing styles and new artists. If you don't watch it, you're not part of it. It's a way to find common ground with kids around you.

- So much in school and life is based on looks. That's such a negative thing. It's a TV culture where everything has to be incredible in 30 seconds or less.

#### What other kinds of influences shape the way you act and feel about yourself?

- I think your peer group is more of an influence than media. If people around you don't approve of something, it affects how you think of it.

- Friends influence you, but the media influences your friends.
- A lot of times it's you giving yourself negative feedback, not other people.
- My friends really influence the kind of person I want to be. I try to stick with people who make me feel comfortable about myself.

#### Do both boys and girls feel pressure to look a certain way?

- The pressure on guys isn't as

noticeable as it is on girls, but it's becoming a lot more apparent with the huge explosion of Abercrombie & Fitch and American Eagle advertising showing rock-hard guys.

- There's pressure on boys' body image, but it's still nowhere near what it is on girls. Even as a guy, I sense the pressure that a lot of girls are under.

- There's a double standard. You're supposed to care a lot about how you look, but you're not supposed to have an eating disorder. Sometimes what's healthy and what's not gets blurred.

- For girls, I think it's becoming better. There are some bigger actresses on TV, although they're never put in romantic, sexy roles.

- Girls can be really judgmental about each other. That's why it's important to have a good group of friends who give you confidence and believe in you.

- A lot of girls can hide eating disorders from their parents, but not their friends. Your friends see it faster, and sometimes the friends have to talk to the parents.

- My friend has eating problems and a bad image of herself. But her mom is okay with her eating problems because the girl is thin.

- Parents' judgment can be distorted by their own body image and memories of how their parents were with them.

- There's always negative pressure because no one's perfect. You can never look the way you want to look. For some people, that's a very big problem. But hopefully you just learn to accept the way you are, and you don't try to be something you're not.



2 Media Influence

Eating Disorders

3

4 Building Character

# Media Madness

by Leslie Woodward, Parent, San Francisco Day School

## The world of media is the "other parent"

Most parents would never let their children physically disappear for hours on end with no idea what they were up to. Yet we allow our kids to run unsupervised through a vast media landscape on a daily basis, according to author and child advocate James Steyer. As a result, the popular media has become "the other parent," he argues, shaping our children's values, self-image and consumer habits in ways that we don't fully appreciate.

Steyer, whose book *The Other Parent* provides an inside look at the media's effect on children, spoke at a recent Parents' Coalition Forum. Research shows that the average American child spends more than 40 hours a week with some combination of television, movies, music, Internet use and computer games. Parents, in contrast, rate only 17 hours a week with their kids, Steyer observed.

### Bottom lines and big business

Too many parents, he added, have failed to realize that today's media is not the relatively benign force it was when they were children.

Beginning with the Reagan administration, Steyer contends, the FCC has deregulated the telecommunications industry so that it now runs as a free-market system. Requirements for stations to air educational and information shows for kids have been dropped, as have limits on advertising on children's shows. "It all boils down to money," he said. "FCC regulation today is like Arthur Anderson auditing Enron."

A wave of media mergers, he added, has resulted in an industry intent on stock price and returns on investment, with no concern for the

public interest. There is no political will to do anything about the problem, in large part because media companies are big donors to candidates and campaigns.

### No public interest

Steyer finds fault with the media in three areas.

- **Commercialism.** Media companies view children—even toddlers watching TeleTubbies—as consumers, and teens are a prime target of MTV, movies, music labels and other media marketing companies.

- **Sex.** Last year, the average American child was exposed to 14,000 sexual references on TV alone, and these references permeate prime-time programming in what used to be the 7 to 9 p.m. family hour. As a result, parents have a hard time functioning as effective gatekeepers of the sexual imagery and messages their kids are exposed to. Televised sports events are some of the worst offenders, with

suggestive advertising interrupting the action on the field.

- **Violence.** The average middle school student has seen 8,000 murders on TV, and many studies have shown that, over time, exposure to violence in the media results in desensitization, fear and increased aggression. But "the media is like the tobacco industry," Steyer stated, "with no sense of responsibility for their part in the problem."

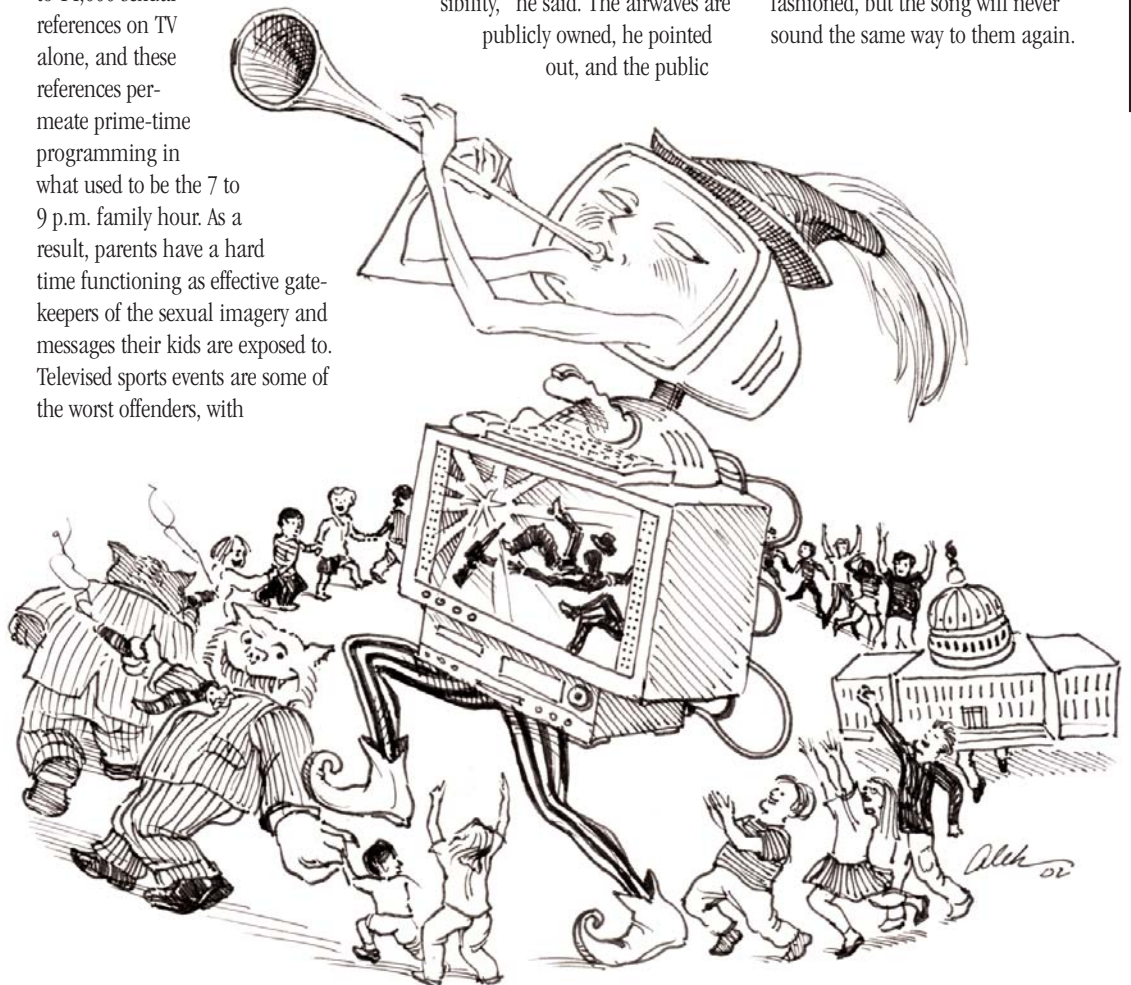
As a teacher of civil rights and civil liberties at Stanford University, Steyer stressed that he is not advocating any loss of media's first amendment rights. "We're not talking about censorship, but about sanity and corporate responsibility," he said. The airwaves are publicly owned, he pointed out, and the public

has a compelling interest in how they are used.

### What parents can do

Although good media habits are easiest to instill when children are young, there are things parents can do to encourage preteens and teens to consume media more wisely:

- **Talk to your teens about what they are watching and listening to.** They might not be caught dead at a movie with you, but ask them about what they have seen. If they tune in a radio station that's playing something you find objectionable, say so. They may dismiss your comments as old-fashioned, but the song will never sound the same way to them again.



• **Teach your child media literacy.** Teaching kids how to think critically about what they see and hear will help protect them from many of the harmful effects of media. Media literacy should be part of the school curriculum in the United States, Steyer said, as it already is in other countries. Parents can help kids analyze what they see and what they are being sold in the process. Steyer argued that the industry should take an active role in

funding these programs, and that government should encourage them.

• **Don't allow TV or a computer with Internet access in your child's room.** Keeping the TV in a communal area makes it easier to monitor what your child is watching. It also reinforces that watching should be a choice and not a habit. Steyer said Internet access should be kept out of the bedroom for the same reasons. Even AOL Chairman Steve Case, he

noted, doesn't allow computers in his kids' bedrooms.

• **Set a family media diet and stick to it.** There are "nutritional" programs and "junk food." Teach your child to mix them wisely, and don't be afraid to set limits on intake, such as no TV on school nights.

• **Teach your child to ask permission to use media.** This is an important way to teach younger kids,

especially, that media use should be a thoughtful choice and not a habit.

Steyer has established a new nonprofit organization, Families Interested in Responsible Media (FIRM), to serve as an advocate for child-friendly change in the media industry. For information about membership, check out the FIRM Web site at [www.firmonline.org](http://www.firmonline.org).

## Media Savvy

• **Number of hours a day the average American child spends with media: 5.5**

• **Kids aged 8 and up who have a TV in their own bedroom: 65%**

• **Families who have TV on during all meals: 58%**

• **Kids aged 6 and up who watch TV without their parents in the room: 95%**

• **Favorite medium of kids aged 10 and up: the Internet**

• **Kids aged 10 and up who admit their attitudes about sexual activity are influenced by the media: 75%**

# Pressure To Be Perfect

by Steven Pressman, Parent, Hoover Middle School

## Model-thin media images fuel rise in teenage eating disorders

Warning: Some teen-oriented magazines can be harmful to your son's or daughter's health. No, it's not because of the junk food ads sandwiched between the articles on dating or music. Instead, the danger in some of those glossy magazines comes from unhealthy body images that are being marketed to highly impressionable kids.

"Depriving your daughter of teen magazines is probably one of the healthiest things you can do," said Dr. Lynn Ponton at a recent Parents' Coalition forum. A professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, Ponton is the author of *Risking the Body*, a book that examines eating disorders and other dangerous behavior by adolescents — mostly girls — who become obsessed with their appearance.

### Physical culture

"We're very much a culture that is

body-obsessed," said Ponton, who points to studies showing that more than 80 percent of adolescent girls think they are overweight, even those who are thin or normal-weight.

That's where teen magazines do the most harm, she said. The pages are often filled with pictures of model-thin girls, convincing teen readers that they should look just like those in the publications. It's no coincidence, added Ponton, that eating disorders and other related unhealthy behaviors are on the rise.

Magazines, of course, aren't the only culprits when it comes to feeding into body image problems among teenagers. Movies, television, music videos and other forms of teen-oriented mass media also help to fuel the perception among adolescent (and younger) girls and boys that they should look a certain way in order to be popular and accepted among peers. "The media projects these body images, and then girls

develop the problems," said Ponton.

### Dangerous behavior

One of those problems can be self-mutilation, in which girls cut or burn themselves as a response to emotional pain. According to Ponton, girls who cut themselves typically do so not as a suicide attempt but because they're unhappy with their physical image.

Ponton advises parents to listen carefully to what their teen says when the subject turns to physical appearance. Particularly with girls, Ponton recommends that parents avoid using the word "diet" and instead focus on healthy eating habits. The risk of developing an eating disorder, she pointed out, is eight times higher in girls who are dieting.

It can also be a warning sign if your daughter complains, "I'm fat!" while trying on clothes, particularly apparel that bares part of her midriff. "The Barbie body is definitely back in vogue,"

lamented Ponton. In other words, obsession with slender waists, thin arms and legs — in short, a fantasy image of a woman's body — can easily lead teenage girls into unhealthy behavior.

Ponton offered other tips for parents who want to help their teens develop a positive body image:

• **Avoid making negative comments** about teens' bodies.

• **Be especially watchful** if your son or daughter participates in activities that emphasize body appearance (i.e. ballet, gymnastics, modeling).

• **Poor body image is often associated with depression** and other psychological symptoms. Provide help at the first sign of such problems.

• **Encourage tolerance** and acceptance of those with different kinds of body types. Stress that there's no such thing as a "perfect body."