

Teens Speak Out: The Influence of the Media

The Coalition's teen consultants met earlier this fall to discuss the influence of the media in their lives. The conversation touched on advertising, movies, television and music. Here's what the students had to say

Let's talk about the influence of advertising. Take a character like Joe Camel, for instance — does that have an affect on teens?

- I don't think ads are why teens smoke — it's because the people around you are doing it and you feel more comfortable doing what they're doing. Ads are not that much of an influence.
- I think the ads only appeal to younger kids — like Joe Camel is a cartoon character.
- It's true that they might send a subliminal message — there's a subconscious connection between having fun and smoking or whatever. But we don't think about it on a conscious level.
- The media affects your friends and you're around your friends, so...

What about fashion ads — what kind of message do those send about how a girl in this society should look?

- It's obvious that anorexic, thin models promote anorexia in girls.
- It's not just in ads, either — it's

everywhere. Ads, fashion magazines, movies, your friends — it's everywhere. Just seeing friends who are really skinnier has an effect. If I'm around three guys a they start talking about a girl, it always comes up — they'll talk about what someone was wearing and say whether it made them look fat. But I have one friend who really skinnier and they don't like that either — what they like is

You get the message that you should look like the perfect beautiful body.

very specific. You can't be fat, but you can't be too thin, either. We don't really associate it with the media, although there's obviously great pressure to look like that. You

just get the message that you should look like the perfect beautiful body.

- If I try to shop in the teen or junior section of a store, it's like there are only two sizes, and they're both tiny. It makes me feel bad — it brings down my self-esteem. Those clothes are for the Kate Moss people.
- But guys hate it when girls put themselves down for being fat — the guys in my school like girls with self-confidence.
- I've only met one girl, ever, who said she was totally comfortable with the way she looked. I was like, Whoa! Most girls are looking on the back of food boxes (trying to figure out calories and fat content).
- If you look at ads from 50 years ago, the supermodels then were really beautiful, but they weren't nearly as thin. Things have definitely changed.
- In the movies, you see boys

In This Issue:

Thoughts on the Media page 2

Management Tips page 3

Book Reviews page 4

Very Important Dates page 4

(ogling) the skinny girls, so you think that's what boys like. Some girls are chain smokers to keep their weight down. You kind of have sound-bite media — you turn on the TV and get the easy answer quickly. It's much easier to just stop eating than to change your diet and get fit. We're all looking for the quick fix.

continued on page 2, col. 1

Parents, Kids And the Media

By David Kline
Parent, Presidio Hill School

Nothing in society seems to so excite the imagination of teenagers — or fill their parents with so much anxiety — as the media today.

From sexploitation TV and nihilistic, heavy metal rock to mindless action movies, video game bloodfests and the constant barrage of sex-drenched commercial come-ons — and now, of course, the anything-goes, free-for-all known as the Internet — kids today are constantly bombarded with images and messages that parents

often find deeply disturbing. It's no surprise, therefore, that some parents go to great efforts to try to restrict the amount or kinds of media that their kids read, see or listen to.

But it's worth remembering that TV, movies and music only reflect social trends and ethical values — as well as the conflicts now raging over these trends and values — that already exist within our society. In other words, what good does it do to smash the mirror because we don't like what we see in it? Far better to help our kids understand and evaluate what they see.

continued on page 3, col. 1

Teens Speak Out (continued from page 1)

What about boys' images?

- The messages are sent out, but it doesn't affect males as much as females.
- I have a male friend who runs six or seven miles a day, and is always working out. Where a girl might starve herself, boys go the opposite way and buff themselves up. It works both ways — it affects their self-esteem too. It's not that boys don't have pressure.
- It's more dangerous for girls, though — starving yourself is not the same as working out in the gym.
- Boys have more options for how to look, and it's based more on clothes. With girls, it doesn't matter what look you want or what group you're in, skinny is good.

What other messages do the media send? What about sex, or drinking?

- There's pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend in high school. You feel from the media that that's the way it's supposed to be, so if you don't have one, you think, "Where did I go wrong?" and you come up with weight.
- There's a misconception about high school in the media, that it's all supposed to be perfect, people have boyfriends and girlfriends, they drink but they never get drunk, it's the perfect scene. From *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Sweet Valley High* — that's

the message from everything we've ever been exposed to.

- TV shows all eventually address (the issue of drinking). Whether it's everyone getting in trouble or everyone thinks it's cool, it promotes awareness that it's out there and it seems like everyone does it. People aspire to be like those actors so they might try it, even if it gets people in trouble.
- It makes people feel older — drinking is associated with college, and in high school you want to be like that.
- Drinking is something to do until you can drive — otherwise there's nothing to do, unless your parents take you



There's a misconception about high school in the media, that it's all supposed to be perfect, people have boyfriends and girlfriends, it's the perfect scene.

have these beautiful apartments, they're beautiful themselves — it's like they have these perfect lives. It's just an escape — I don't get too many messages from it. I watch *Party of Five* — they all have boyfriends or girlfriends at the moment. With something like that, which seems like it's close to real but not quite — that's when I start putting my life down in comparison.

Do movies suck you in?

- Violent movies seem glamorous — that's just the way it is. The heroes seem sexy and brave.
- It's easy to watch — there's no plot, no thinking involved and usually there's a good end. But sometimes I like movies that make me think.

Do violent movies desensitize you?

- I think it might have more of an effect on younger kids. This kid I baby-sat was really mellow all day, and then after he watched *Power Rangers* he wanted to karate chop me and he just got all energized.
- We always have an idea of what's real and what's not. When I saw *True Lies* with Arnold Schwarzenegger, I laughed when this guy got torn apart by an alligator.
- I saw *Escape from L.A.*, and it was like watching a comic book. It was really violent, but it was so stupid it was funny. You don't take it seriously.
- Just plain violence is not appealing. *Pulp Fiction* was great — it was ridiculous, like a satire. They took it a step further than usual. Usually they just shoot someone and that's that, but this time they had to clean up the car afterward. They had to deal with the unpleasant after-effects.
- My mom knows I can sort these things out. She doesn't worry if I say I'm going to an R-rated movie.

What about the influence of music? What about some of those lyrics?

- Some people are against gangsta rap because it seems to make profanity an acceptable part of the language, but if everyone uses it, it won't be shocking any more.
- I don't think the impact is that much — it's just music. I don't know anyone who's going out and doing any of the stuff they're singing about. It doesn't desensitize us.
- In rap, I don't like the derogatory

comments about women.

- Bitch, 'ho,' even nigger — these words are in the music and you hear people using them. You hear them from all different types of people — they're just around in school.
- We're capable of making our own decisions, but putting people down in music is not necessary.

Thoughts on the Media

No parents in their right minds would invite a stranger into the house to teach their kids about such sensitive subjects (sex, alcohol, violence) for three to five hours a day, yet television is doing precisely that."

— Victor Strasburger, M.D., *Getting Your Kids to Say "No" in the '90s When You Said "Yes" in the '60s*



"The media have become three-dimensional, inescapable, omnivorous and self-referring — a closed system that seems, for many of the kids, to answer all their questions." — David Denby, "Buried Alive: Our Children and the Avalanche of Crud," *The New Yorker*, July 15, 1996



"George Gerbner (professor of communications and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement) says that to control a nation, you don't have to control its laws or its military, all you have to do is control who tells the nation its stories. Television tells most of the nation most of its stories most of the time."

— Duane Elgin, *Yes: A Journal of Positive Futures* (Context Institute), Summer 1996



"In this country, people possessed solely by the desire to sell have become far more powerful than parents tortuously working out the contradictions of authority, freedom, education and soul-making." — David Denby, "Buried Alive: Our Children and the Avalanche of Crud," *The New Yorker*, July 15, 1996

Parents, Kids and the Media
(continued from page 1)

Let me give an example from personal experience.

Four or five years ago, when my son was into rap music, his mother and I debated how to deal with the misogynist messages in so much of this music.

Would our son get the idea that women were either "bitches" to be slapped down or "whores" to be used?

We briefly considered banning the music from home — but, thankfully, we resisted the temptation. Why do I say thankfully? Well, for one thing, censorship simply doesn't work — especially with teenagers!

Parents can certainly forbid behaviors such as using drugs or drinking while driving, but attempting to forbid ideas is basically hopeless. To try to "manage" the hundreds of messages and images that bombard young people every single



His mother and I came up with a rather old-fashioned solution: we talked with him about it.

day would be akin to trying to herd hundreds of cats. Good luck!

But even if somehow censorship worked, it would still miss the real point — which is to help young people learn to critically evaluate the media from the standpoint of their own developing moral and ethical framework. If kids don't learn to think critically about the media when they're young, what's going to happen to them when they leave our safe little nests and go off on their own in the world?

So in the end, his mother and I came up with a rather old-fashioned solution: we talked with him about it. His final comment on those lyrics, uttered as he rolled his eyes: "Dad, just cuz I hear something doesn't mean I believe it."

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been

surprised that he had already come to his own (rather nuanced) moral approach to rap music. After all, he's spent his whole life with parents who value diversity of thought while still believing that some things are right and some are simply wrong.

As for the Internet, let me offer a few thoughts on both the positive and negative role this fast-growing new medium can play in young people's lives.

First, the positive: The Internet is a democratic, participatory mass medium that offers young people access to a whole universe of people and ideas that they very likely would otherwise never have come in contact with. More than that, it's safe to say that any young adult tomorrow who is not accustomed to using computers and the Internet is going to find himself or herself at a major disadvantage, economically and culturally.

But there's also a negative side to the Internet — and I don't mean the much talked-about pornography issue. Yes, there's some porn on the Net, but studies consistently show that only about one-half of 1 percent of all Internet content is devoted to sexual images or messages. I guarantee you that you'll find a far higher rate of pornography at your local magazine store. In any event, software programs such as SurfWatch can screen out much of the most clearly pornographic material that your child can access.

What I'm really more concerned with is the *uncritical* use of the Internet as an educational resource. For example, say your teen is doing research on cancer treatments, and logs on to one of the searching sites (akin to library card catalogs) on the

Net. Searching for "cancer treatments" will yield thousands of separate sources of information pertaining to this subject — the only problem is, how does one know if any of that information is true or accurate?

Unlike textbooks or encyclopedias, which are fact-checked and peer-reviewed and vetted by responsible academic authorities, the Internet is (among other things) the greatest vanity publishing medium in history. Any crackpot who believes that eating bird droppings cures cancer can (and probably already has) put up a page on the Net to promote his views.

The Net is the first technology in a hundred years that significantly expands the educational resources available to students. It's a tremendously powerful learning tool — but only if we help our kids develop the critical thinking skills necessary to use it wisely. What is the source of

this information? Is that source reliable? Are there covert commercial or political interests motivating the dissemination of this information?

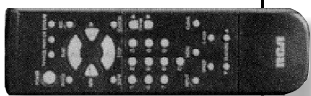
In short, just as with all media today, the Internet requires young people to think critically about the images and messages they receive from it. We should therefore make sure that our schools give kids not only the technical skills needed to use the Net, but the intellectual skills needed to use it wisely.

Ultimately, however, the best way to help kids develop ethical values and critical thinking skills — whether about the Net, or media in general, or anything else in life — is the good old-fashioned way: through parental involvement.

David Kline is a contributor to Wired magazine, a commentator on National Public Radio and co-author of Road Warriors: Dreams and Nightmares Along the Information Highway.

Media Management Tips for Parents

- ★ Be present when your teen watches TV. Explain your own views of shows and ask for theirs. It can be educational and takes time away from viewing.
- ★ Teach kids to be savvy about advertising appeals, stereotyping and discrimination and make it a game when watching — count commercials, number of appearances by women, elders, people of color and their roles.
- ★ Set a good example with your own television habits.
- ★ Reduce or eliminate TV for a period to see if it improves your family life.
- ★ Have books around about teens who have struggled with something in their lives (for resources, see *Parenteen*, Spring '96). High-interest books may make reading an appealing alternative to television.
- ★ Continue to reinforce your values about drugs, relationships and sex so values presented in the media will be less influential.
- ★ Increase the time that your family spends doing things together, preferably away from all media.
- ★ Make it a point to show your kids your enthusiasm about books you read and other non-media activities that excite you.
- ★ Tell your teens exactly what you don't like about certain movies or music and ask them why they do like them.
- ★ Become proactive. Express your views. Write to the networks, the Federal Communications Commission and your congressional representative about what you see (or don't see) on television. For addresses, see appendix in Victor Strasburger's book, *Getting Your Kids to Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s* or his article, "Children, Adolescents, and the Media: Five Crucial Issues," available on the Internet.



R E V I E W

Media Kids Need Help

By Marsha G. Torkelson, MFCC

Adolescents who watch TV, have a VCR or have access to the Internet need help from their parents. The average amount of time adults or teens watch TV is four hours per day — and this doesn't include time spent on computer games or "chatting" on the Net. Not only does this take time away from the family, studying and reading for fun, but the influence of what is viewed can be very negative. Three highly informative parenting books emphasize the need for increased parental consciousness about the effects of media on young people.

Mary Pipher suggests in *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding America's Families* that parents turn off the TV, radio, VCRs, and computers for one month and record how their time is spent. Afterwards, they can decide what role they want media to play in their families.

Mike Riera, in *Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers*, feels parents can model their own TV-watching behavior to influence that of their teens. He also suggests locating the TV in an out-of-the-way place and getting rid of the remote control.

And in *Getting Your Kids To Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s*, Dr. Victor Strasburger recommends that when parents are concerned about what their kids are watching, they watch TV with their teens, ask for their views and provide their own. This diminishes the full impact of the shows and can be a positive learning experience as well. Help teens be conscious of the motives behind ads and programs.

The authors agree on the power of TV to educate and shape the values of teenagers whose identities, according to Strasburger, "are just jelling and are still malleable." He feels TV subtly informs about the roles and scripts of men and women — there tends to be an absence of women, older folks and minorities in commercials and shows, or stereotyping if they do appear. Teenage girls are often shown as shopping and boy-crazy.

Pipher says "produced" relationships of television families become (kids') models for intimacy." She believes TV "trivializes the important and elevates the trivial." The focus on action in TV shows, rather than the underlying emotional processing, deprives teens of information that would help them grow. Riera says,

Strasburger advocates parents' edu-



TV trivializes the important and elevates the trivial.

ating their kids about sex, drugs and relationships, otherwise the media will. In ads, TV and movies, people who drink, have sex and smoke are usually shown as having fun, being more successful and not having to take any responsibility for their actions. Even violence is usually portrayed as cool, but in real life, kids suffer consequences. Just in the sheer number of sexual situations shown, American TV has elevated the importance of sex with almost no education or ads about sexually transmitted diseases, condoms or pitches for abstinence. Pipher feels that "with the mes-

sages of ads, we are socializing children to be self-centered, impulsive and addicted." Going to the movies, Strasburger feels, is less harmful as teens are socializing at the same time and there is less viewing time involved. However, he says sexual references and acts, as well as sexual violence, are seven times higher in

movies than on TV, and movies are also more likely to show the use of drugs like cocaine and heroin. Strasburger feels music is also less negative an influence than television. Studies show that kids often either don't know the lyrics or don't understand them, and tend to interpret them more romantically. He goes so far as to recommend that lyrics not be published. It is Riera's opinion that kids' music helps adolescents articulate what they're feeling. Censoring the music itself will just make it more attractive, the authors say.

Strasburger finds MTV exploitative and its concept videos chauvinistic and pornographic ("In one study, more than one-half of the videos...involved violence and three-quarters involved sex and often the two were combined.")

In the book *Danger Zones, What Parents Should Know About the INTERNET*, authors Bill Biggar and Joe Myers note that kids are way ahead of most parents in their knowledge and use of the Internet. The authors urge parents

to be involved so they can learn about the Internet and discuss it with their kids as they go along.

Biggar and Myers offer guidelines for Internet use for younger and older teens as well as a sample contract parents can make with their kids. The authors, as well as Mike Riera, feel that teens communicating with one another via the Internet can be potentially helpful in developing intimacy because looks, sex, and background do not get in the way. The emphasis is on articulating one's ideas, and it can be a good method to practice and build self-confidence.

In summary, it seems important for parents to keep up with the ever-changing information and entertainment coming through the media. Just becoming conscious will make a big difference in your teens' lives.

Marsha Torkelson, a family therapist, is the mother of two sons in college.

Parents' Coalition Mission
To support and inspire parents of adolescents through education and communication in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.

Coalition Representatives

Jill Goldman	Carol Nathan
Carol Henwood	Barbara Wilson
Branson	Lick-Wilmering
Ginny Gertler	Sandra Edward
Bridget Hiler	Ellen Kreitzman
Convent of the Sacred Heart	Debbie Lawn
Joni Burton	Audrey Votano
Crystal Springs	Marin Academy
Carol Savio	Len and Holly Auerbach
Abby Schnair	University
Debbie Vogel	Terry Aramendia
Drew Preparatory	Carol Winetsky
Mindy Kershner	Urban
International	

Newsletter Staff

Editors:	Ann Bogazianos
Sue Adams	Girija Brilliant
Marsha Torkelson	Cynthia Ostroff
Designer:	Ellen Rashbaum
Aleks Kardas	Holly Shepard
	Camilla Smith

Representatives are selected by the parent associations of their schools. If your school is not listed and you have comments or questions, please call Roger Torkelson at (415) 664-6641. Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves. Call (415) 731-7217 for more information.

Very Important Dates

Upcoming Parents' Coalition meetings
All meetings are 7:15 - 8:15 p.m. at San Francisco Day School, 350 Masonic Ave. (at Golden Gate Avenue)

Nov. 18 Forum: Keeping Kids Safe in Cities • SFPD Inspector Ken Moses

Jan. 13 Forum: How to Prevent the Plunge in Girls' Self Esteem at Adolescence • Emily Hancock, LCSW, author of *The Girl Within*

Feb. 10 Teen consultants. Topic to be announced

March 10 Panel of school counselors

