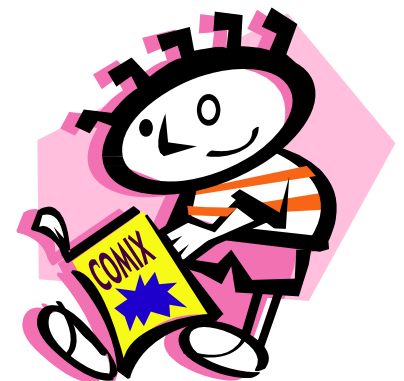
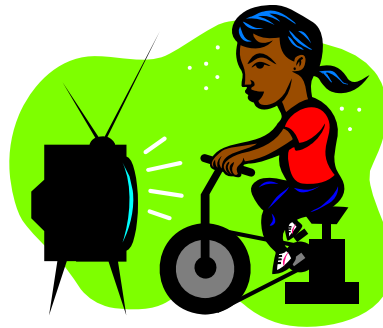


KidsRisk Guide on Media and Kids

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KidsRisk Guide on Media and Kids

Today's media influence all of our lives, but particularly the lives of children. With American children now spending more time on average consuming media than they spend in school, we must empower kids and the people who care about them with the information they need to be good and active media consumers. This guide offers 10 essentials (concepts and actions) that you need to make smarter media choices for and with the kids in your life.



10 Essentials

Concepts:

1. Learning happens
2. All media teach
3. Media ratings provide important information
4. Ratings may not tell you everything

Actions:

5. Make good media choices

6. Consume media actively
7. Talk with kids about media
8. Teach kids to deconstruct media
9. Watch the total media diet
10. Do your part to make media self-regulation work

1. Learning happens

Kids learn constantly - think of it as their job. Starting at birth, they use their senses to understand the world around them, which includes a wide array of media. Most parents appreciate the effectiveness and value of media products designed to teach young children basic educational and social skills. However, we must all appreciate that the process of learning from media continues throughout our lives, even from media products designed to sell, entertain, or inform. Parents need to recognize that children often lack the life experiences that provide context required to understand media, and consequently, children may experience media very differently than their parents. For example, character transformations (like a person changing into another person or creature) might terrify a child, while an adult sees this as obvious fantasy. Adults should also realize that animation does not necessarily mean appropriate content for children, and that even the nightly news can scare young children and give the impression of a mean and scary world.

2. All media teach

Some people make a distinction between entertainment and education when it comes to media – but all media have the power to teach. The current complicated media environment includes products that kids experience at home (television and radio programs and commercials,

recorded music and movies, video and computer games, and the Internet), away from home (movies, popular concerts, and sporting events), and all around them (printed magazines, advertisements, books, portable media players, etc.). The convergence of media also adds complexity, with the growing popularity of multiplayer online computer games, movies marketed simultaneously with electronic games on web sites featuring popular hit songs, and so on. All media deliver messages; some positive messages and others negative or mixed messages. We all need to recognize and think about the messages coming in. What do we take away from a program or song that suggests that using violence solves a problem? What about the more subtle messages like when a popular young “cool” actor smokes or uses illegal drugs on screen? Once you see every media product as a potential teacher, you will want to ask the following questions:

- What does this media product teach?
- What messages do my kids take away from the media they consume?
- How do these messages affect perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors?

3. Media ratings provide important information

Whether you like the current media ratings systems or not, they offer an important tool to help parents make good media choices for and with their children. Currently several different industry rating boards separately rate media using an "alphabet soup" of age-based rating categories, and some also provide content information. Even if you find the ratings confusing, you need to know the rating boards and their systems and instantly recognize the rating symbols used to label media products:

Rating Board (Acronym) - click to link	Age-based rating categories (listed by youngest to oldest age category)	Content information
Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)	G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17	Non-standardized rating reasons provided for movies rated higher than G
TV Parental Guidelines	TV-Y, TV-G, TV-Y7, TV-Y7-FV, TV-PG TV-14, TV-MA	Four content designations (V, S, L, D) assigned to the three highest age-based ratings, which mean different things depending on the rating
Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)	EC, E, E10, T, M, AO, RP	Specific list of content descriptors
Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)	Parental Advisory Label intended to alert parents	None
Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA)	Searchable tags for web filtering tools	See vocabulary list

The industry provides ratings to help inform kids and parents about individual media products prior to purchase. However, parents must use them. Parents also must manage any conflicts that arise as media convergence erases the lines between product types. For example, parents may need to deal with apparent conflicts in the ratings (an R-rated movie with a T-rated video game for the same co-marketed theme). Since parents will always maintain responsibility for the media in their homes, they must stay tuned in and speak up when they find something unexpected.

4. Ratings may not tell you everything

No matter how good you are about checking ratings, sometimes the content of a media product will surprise you. The current systems lack standards for applying rating reasons to movies and content descriptors for video games, and apply different requirements for content designations that depend on the rating for television programs. Music played on the radio may represent a "clean" version that differs from what you might find in stores. On top of these challenges, all ratings will always represent subjective judgments, both by the rating board and by you. Given the subjectivity you should expect some disagreement, particularly about media products that seem on the boundary between two different age-based ratings. The key for parents is to make sure that they stay calibrated with the current media ratings and the actual content of media products by experiencing the content directly with their kids to the extent possible. As media evolve, expect the ratings to change. It might help to apply your own standardized definitions for content, like the following:

- Violence - intentional acts in which the aggressor causes or attempts to cause physical injury or death to another character (not including actions that led to unintentional physical harm, the effects of natural disasters, the presence of dangerous obstacles not attributed to another character, or intentional acts of physical force that represent normal play in a sports game like tackling in football)
- Blood - a red fluid originating from an injured human or any colored fluid from an injured creature
- Sexual Themes - behaviors or dialogue related to sex
- Profanity - the use of abusive and vulgar language, anatomical references without the use of such words, and obscene gestures involving the middle finger or its full-arm equivalent that might occur in dialog, written text, song lyrics, or gestures
- Substances - scenes in which characters use or discuss use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, or when the player views images of at least one substance not including medicinal herbs, tonics, or ambiguous brews as substances
- Gambling - scenes where characters bet money for rewards

5. Make good media choices



"I UNDERSTAND THEY HAD A VERY DEPRIVED CHILDHOOD. EVERYTHING WAS IN BLACK AND WHITE."

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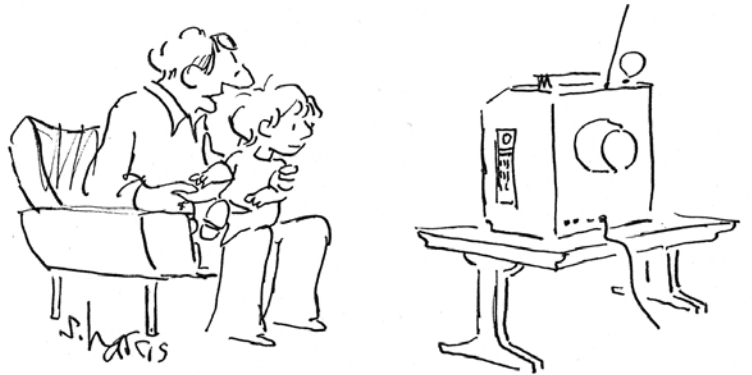
It's tough to keep up with today's rapidly changing media and the large number of product choices. Nonetheless, the power to control the media in children's lives rests with adults, at least until the children grow up enough to make their own good choices. This means that parents and caregivers should carefully consider the messages that they give their kids. Respecting the current age-based ratings provides an opportunity to validate the concept of the ratings and to respect the reality that some media contain inappropriate material for some children. Choosing media products with children empowers them to learn about how to make good choices. Given the major role of media in children's lives, learning to make good media choices is an important part of growing up. If you find that you make a poor choice of a media product, then take corrective action. Don't be shy about turning off the TV, leaving a theater, or returning a media product to the manufacturer with a complaint.

6. Consume media actively

Consuming media is a choice, and with this choice comes responsibility. Remarkably, in many homes media come into the living room or bedroom "under the radar," or without parents paying attention to the media's power to teach. Make it a policy and practice to consume all media products actively. Watch, play, and/or listen to media products with your kids and pay close attention to your child's experience. Make sure that the sound level is not too high if you can control it, or give your kids earplugs they can use to cut the sound by 10-20 decibels when the volume control is out of your hands. Teach kids to close their eyes and tune out scary moments. Media present glimpses of the real world, including the full spectrum of the good and bad. They also offer imaginary worlds and virtual realities, which some children may find difficult to put into context. Psychological studies suggest that media experiences can simulate real experiences, and consequently they can inspire responses. For example, consuming media violence may desensitize kids when it comes to real violence, glamorized body images in the media may create expectations about attractiveness, and some depictions of sexual acts or substance use in the media may normalize risky behaviors or illegal activities. While adults can draw on life experiences when interpreting media, remember that a brief media experience may represent the sole basis for a child's perception of an experience.

7. Talk with kids about media

Adults can provide context, but to do this they must stay tuned in to the media that children in their lives consume and talk to kids about media. Use media experiences to open dialogues with children about some difficult-to-discuss topics. Whether it's telling a three year old that a media character pushing over another character would hurt or talking with teens about sex or drugs, parents should look for the many opportunities that media provide to get important conversations started. If you create an expectation in your home from the very beginning that people in your family consume media together and talk about media experiences, then you might find this helpful in maintaining connections with your kids as they get older. It's never too early or too late to start paying attention to your kids and what they experience, and to show them that you care by talking with them about the media in their lives.



"...NO, HE CAN'T REALLY FLY... NO, THE BAD GUYS REALLY DON'T HAVE A RAY GUN... NO, THIS CEREAL REALLY ISN'T THE BEST FOOD IN THE WHOLE WORLD... NO, IT WON'T REALLY MAKE YOU AS STRONG AS A GIANT..."

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8. Teach kids to deconstruct media

Go a step beyond just talking with kids about media and teach them to deconstruct media. Media deconstruction - analyzing media and taking it apart to look carefully at its components - helps to empower kids so that they control the media instead of the media controlling them. Taking media apart basically involves answering questions like the following for any media product:

- Who made this media product?
- What motivated the producer (selling a product or idea, education, entertainment)?

- What are the main messages?
- What values and preferences come with the messages?
- How might other people interpret this message differently?
- How does the producer attract and hold your attention (appealing to your emotions, shocking you)?
- What information does the media producer omit and why?

If you want to look more closely, then you can also analyze the content of media products in great detail and measure the amount of violence, types of weapons used, numbers of injuries and deaths, times you hear a specific word, and depictions of substances like tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. Simply asking questions about how media make your children think and feel can empower them to sort out healthy media messages from unhealthy ones. When media fail to depict the consequences of actions, then adults must help children understand what would really happen and how they might make a different or better choice.

9. Watch the media diet

Media offer so many choices and their constant availability makes them extremely attractive to children looking for things to do. However, although a little bit of well-chosen media exposure offers wonderful adventures and memorable experiences, too much media exposure or poorly-selected media may put children at risk. Public health researchers consistently find a strong correlation between overweight children and increased television consumption, and studies suggest that girls who frequently read popular fashion magazines experience more unhappiness about their body weight and shape than girls who don't frequently read them. Many parents don't realize that pediatricians and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend limiting media consumption for kids, so talk to your family doctor about exposure to the media and its potential impact on your child. If you're not sure how much media your family consumes, then keep a media diary for a week to track it. Get into the habit of turning off media products when no one is actively consuming them.

10. Do your part to make media self-regulation work

Our current system of media self-regulation depends on everyone making responsible choices.

- Kids need to actively consume media, learn to deconstruct media products, and take charge of the media in their lives.
- Adults responsible for children and for their media choices must pay attention to media content. This means taking an active role in children's media consumption. Compare products, read reviews, and choose wisely. Talk with kids about the messages in media and their experiences. When you experience media content that you like, reinforce it with your kids and provide positive feedback to the producer so you encourage more of it. Tune out bad media products and complain if and when you find content that surprises you. Make a difference by caring and taking action.
- The industry needs to lead when it comes to kids and media. The responsibility of providing useful and high-quality rating information represents the small price the industry pays for its privilege of self-regulation. As industry leaders develop the next generation of media rating systems, they must deal with the reality of converging media and cross-media marketing.

Protecting children, our freedom to create, and media self-regulation depend on active and responsible media consumers and producers. Do your part. Action!

