

A Media Strategy for Families

Barbara Nicolosi

In terms of media, it is a tough time to be a parent. This only means that being a good parent today will involve monitoring more influences than in your grandmother's family. I meet lots of Christian parents who boast to me, "We don't even own a television," or "We never go to the movies."

Between Fearful and Foolhardy — A Balance

Their emphasis is on protecting their children from bad influences. This is a fear-based program of life in which children are raised to feel like aliens in their own culture.

It's equally problematic to make light of the harmful potential of media. I meet plenty of parents who tell me with a scoff, "It's just music," or, "Just because movies can effect some kids, doesn't say anything about its effect on my kid."

As regards media, raising either fearful cave dwellers, or foolhardy gamblers is a bad strategy. A better approach is to prepare kids to weed through the myriad messages and methods in use in the media, so as to glean out what is good, and avoid what is harmful.

I grew up in a family that took media very seriously. My parents didn't hesitate to help us make the right choices in our movies, television and music, particularly, when we didn't think we needed their help. Twenty years later, I am very grateful for the thoughtful vigilance by which my parents prepared my sisters and I to live in this media age. I offer their adages as a tribute to them, and for the consideration of parents today concerned with raising the next generation of apostles for the Kingdom.

"A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever"

Plato was right: If you want people to give up sugar, offer them honey. The best way to make sure that your kids avoid entertainment that is vile and crass, is to give them a taste for entertainment that is beautiful. Mom and Dad exposed us to the classics of cinema history from our earliest ages. My mother went out of her way, when my sister and I were just ten and twelve, to bring us to see *Gone With the Wind* on the big screen. Those were the days before video and the classic films were only re-released in theaters once in a generation. My mother wanted to make sure that we got the chance to see the film in all its glory. I remember the debate between Mom and Dad when I was twelve or thirteen as to whether I should be allowed to stay up and watch *Dr. Zhivago*. In the end, they decided that the beauty in the film would outweigh the possible harm it would do to expose me to a story of adultery. Of course, they did hedge their bet by making sure I picked up from the movie that adultery and communism were both evil.

When the gross out comedies like *Animal House* were regurgitated on my generation in the early 80's, they held no appeal for me. My comic sensibilities

had already been formed by hours spent with Laurel and Hardy and Chaplin. We had laughed over *Bringing Up Baby*, *It Happened One Night*, *Top Hat* and *The Great Race*. Compared to these, the gross-out teenage comedies were just, well, gross.

The same was true of music. We were raised with Beethoven's *Pastoral* symphony, and Nat King Cole, the Tijuana Brass and the Buffalo Bills. We knew all the great musicals of the fifties and sixties by heart. When you've been bred on harmony, discord and musicians whining like animals in heat just can't take root.

Media Matters

Because media is so good, it has the potential to be addictive. A sound strategy for helping kids make healthy entertainment choices must include practice in walking away from it all. Next to, "Clean your room," my mother's default greeting was, "Turn it off." Mom was perpetually invading our summer vacation zombie states, by walking in and turning off the TV mid-show. "Read a book," she'd say intractably.

There was no TV on school nights. There were no movies during Lent or Advent and no R-rated movies at all. We learned early on not to complain of boredom, because Mom always had a household chore that needed to be done. We did sports, played games, put on plays, worked on puzzles, and read a lot. Another way of keeping our choices balanced came about because, from our early teens, we had to raise our own entertainment budget. We had to save to see movies, or to buy records and later videos. I learned quickly that certain movies were just not going to be worth the three hours of yard work that they would cost me.

My parents were not the least repressed or apologetic about standing in between us, and the media that they felt was harmful. There were some shows that all of our friends watched, that we were not allowed to watch. My parents believed with Mark Twain that "when you find yourself agreeing with the majority, it's time to reform." My father banned *Hogan's Heroes* early on with the edict, "The Nazis were not funny." We didn't watch *M*A*S*H**, because they felt it made the men and women in the military look like clowns. *Laugh In* and *SNL* were off-limits for being vulgar and overly suggestive. *All in the Family* and *Maude* were proscribed as cynical and propagandistic."

What I gleaned from all this was that media mattered. There are attitudes in television and movies that need to be filtered, and in some cases, avoided altogether. Children need help in deciding what is good. It requires a lot of energy to incorporate media into a healthy program of family life. But there really isn't any other alternative.

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*featured on Catholic Exchange 20/06/03
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