

100 Family Media Literacy Activities

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What is “media literacy?” The word *literacy* connotes a high degree of competency and usually means that a person knows how to read and write. A *literate* person, on the other hand, is well read, using and applying high level thinking skills across a broad range of topics. Computer literacy means the capacity to use computers well. Media literacy, then, is the ability to use all forms of media well. A media-literate person uses television, movies, DVDs, computer and video games for specific purposes, just as a print-literate person reads a book or a magazine, a college text or a newspaper for specific, various reasons.

Using all visual screen technology intentionally is the first, and most important element in becoming media literate. Ultimately as parents we want children and teens to be in control of small screens and not be controlled by them. Research has verified and experts know that a child who mindlessly watches a lot of TV or plays video games endlessly is less equipped to develop the capacities for wise media use. A media literate child, on the other hand, would learn to self-monitor screen time—being able to take it in doses—rather than make a habit of it four-five hours a day ad nauseum. He or she would want to do other activities because thinking, creative children are curious beings and there’s a whole world out there to explore—screen technologies just being one small part of it.

In addition to being able to control media use, media-literate children and teens know the differences between various presentation forms of media. Just as a print-literate person can tell a fairy tale from a biography, a media-literate person knows how different techniques are used to convey messages. Sitcoms are not documentaries, for instance, and while music videos may look like some commercials with their quick cuts, commercials and music videos have specific audiences, every image carefully constructed to “hook” an intended audience.

While a print-literate person reads words; a media literate person reads images. Using analysis, evaluation, and higher level thinking skills, a media-literate person interprets the subtle messages and overt claims visual messages convey. This is where we want our children headed—in a direction of making it second nature to think well about all forms of media images.

If we boiled down media literacy for our children and teens, I think we would find five basic skills that we would like them to acquire:

- Conscious, intentional, limited use of all forms of screen technology

- Ability to critique visual messages and understand their intent and intellectual and emotional impact
- Ability to communicate facts, ideas, and thoughtful opinions about media images
- A thorough understanding of media production techniques to fully appreciate how such techniques as camera angles, lighting, cuts, etc. impact the messages being delivered
- Ability to use all forms of screen technology purposefully, and eventually wisely

Children and teens can enjoy becoming media literate. Discussing TV shows; examining the intent around a certain movie trailer; observing how camera techniques in action movies are different from those on most PBS programs—such activities support kids to grow equipped to think critically about visual images.

The 100 family media literacy activities are grouped as follows:

30 General activities that you can adapt and use with children or teens.

The age specific activities below are grouped in categories of screen violence, advertising, news, and stereotypes.

15 Activities for children, ages 3-6

20 Activities for children, ages 6-10

20 Activities for teens, ages 11-14

15 Activities for teens, ages 15-17

(Please Note: You can adapt any of the activities for your child or teen, so don't feel constrained to the age brackets—if an activity looks like it will work for your family—go for it!)

30 General Family Media Literacy Activities

1. TV and books.

Keep track of the dates when a TV version of a book is scheduled to air and encourage your kids to read the book first, or follow up the program by suggesting they read the book afterwards. Great discussions can result from comparing the original book and the TV version.

2. Use TV to expand children's interests.

Link TV programs with your children's interests, activities, and hobbies. A child interested in crafts can watch craft programs for encouragement and ideas; after viewing a wildlife show, take the kids to a zoo and have them recall what they learned about animals from the TV program. How does the real life experience differ from the show they watched? Are there any similarities?

3. Time capsule.

Ask your child to imagine that he or she has been given the job of choosing five television programs that will be included in a time capsule, not to be opened for one hundred years. Discuss what type of society these shows might reflect to a child opening the time capsule one hundred years from now.

4. Different viewpoints.

All family members watch one program together. The TV is then turned off and each person writes a few sentences about their opinions about the show. Discuss and compare everyone's opinions, pointing out to your child how different people will like or dislike the same program. Why are all opinions valid? Who had the most persuasive opinion about the show? Why?

5. Watch a TV show being taped.

Take kids to a television program taping either locally or as part of a family trip to New York or Los Angeles. To make the trip more meaningful, have your children draw the set, take notes on the format of the show, note the special effects, and talk about what it was like being in the audience. Is the audience important to the show? How? (It may be easier to visit a local TV or radio station. You could visit both and talk about the differences between them.)

6. Make up an alternate title.

When you're watching a TV program or movie with your child, ask him or her to exercise imagination and think of another title. To get things rolling, suggest an alternate title yourself. All family members can come up with as many alternates as possible. Vote on the best. What makes it better than all the rest to convey the essence of the show or film?

7. Compare what you see with what you expect.

With your child, come up with a description of a show before watching it, based on what you've read in a TV schedule. Predict how the characters will act and how the plot will unfold. When the program ends, take a few minutes to talk about what you saw: Did either of you notice any differences between what was written in the TV schedule and what was actually shown? Were either of you surprised by anything you saw? Is the show what you expected it would be? Why or why not?

8. Which category does it fit?

Using a television guide, your child will list all the shows she or he watches, then divide them into the following categories: comedy, news, cartoons, sitcoms, dramas, soap

operas, police shows, sporting events, educational programs, and documentaries. Which is her or his favorite category and show? Why?

9. **Predict what will happen.**

During commercial breaks, ask your child to predict what will happen next in the program. You can discuss such questions as: If you were the scriptwriter, how would you end this story? What do you think the main characters will do next? Is it easy or difficult to guess the main event in this program? Why or why not?

10. **The guessing game.**

Turn off the volume but leave the picture on. See if your child can guess what is happening. To extend this into a family game, have everyone pick a TV character and add his/her version of that character's words.

11. **Letter writing.**

Encourage your child to write letters to TV stations, describing why s/he likes and dislikes certain programs. Emphasize that giving factual and specific information will be helpful.

12. **Be a camera operator.**

Have your child experiment with a video camera to learn how it can manipulate a scene (omission—what it leaves out; selection—what it includes; close-up—what it emphasizes; long shot—what mood it establishes; length of shot—what's important and what's not).

13. **Theme songs.**

Help your child identify the instruments and sound effects used in the theme songs of his favorite shows. Have her sing or play the music in the show and explain what the music is doing. Does it set a mood? How? Does it tell a story? How does it make him/her feel?

14. **Sequence the plot: a game.**

To help your child understand logical sequencing, ask her to watch a TV show while you write down its main events, jotting each event on a separate card. At the completion of the program, shuffle the cards and ask your child to put them in the same order in which they appeared during the program. Discuss any lapses in logical sequence.

15. **A time chart.**

Your child will keep a time chart for one week of all of her activities, including TV watching, movie watching, and playing video games. Compare the time spent on these activities and on other activities, such as playing, homework, organized sports, chores, hobbies, visiting friends, and listening to music. Which activities get the most time? The least? Do you or your child think the balance should be altered? Why or why not?

16. **Winning and losing.**

Tell your child to watch a sports program and list all the words that are used to describe winning and losing. Encourage a long list. You can make this into a friendly competition.

if you like, with two or more children collecting words from several sports programs and then reading them aloud.

17. TV and radio.

While watching TV coverage of a sports game, turn off the TV sound and have your child simultaneously listen to radio coverage. What does your child think about the radio coverage? About the TV coverage? What are the strengths of each? The weaknesses?

18. Quiz show comparison.

Compare and contrast the wide variety of game and quiz shows with your child. You'll see shows that test knowledge, shows that are based on pure luck, and shows that are aimed specifically at children. Which are your child's favorites? Why?

19. TV lists.

Assist your child in making lists of all television programs that involve hospitals, police stations, schools, and farms, and all television programs that contain imaginative elements, such as science fiction shows or cartoons.

20. Television vocabulary.

Challenge your child to find out what the following TV terms mean, and report back to the family:

channel	serial
station	first of a two-partner
network	network affiliates
reality TV	spin-off
rerun	show host
repeat	anchorwoman or anchorman
special newscaster	cross-marketing
format sponsor	corporate sponsor
audience participation	sold separately at participating
assembly required	dealers only

21. Critical viewing survey.

Ask your child to watch one of his favorite programs with you. Afterwards, you will both fill out the following survey. Then compare your answers. Are they different? Why? Are there right or wrong answers, or is much of what was recorded open to individual interpretation?

Critical Viewing Survey

Program watched:

Characters (List three to five and describe briefly):

Setting (Time and place):

Problems/Conflicts:

Plot (List three to five events in order of occurrence):

Story theme:

Solution:

Logic (Did the story make sense? Would this have happened in real life?):

Rating of the show (from one to ten, with ten being the highest):

22. Body language.

Observe body language in commercials and/or TV shows and films. Notice head position, hand gestures, and eye movement. How does body language affect how you feel about the intended visual or verbal message? Children could cut out postures and expressions from print advertisements (magazines and newspapers) and see if they can find those postures and expressions on TV or in movies. How important is body language to convey persuasive visual messages?

23. Variations on a story.

Look at how a particular story is handled differently by different channels. Use videotaped shows to compare. What are the differences? What are the similarities?

24. Quick problem solving.

Point out to your child how quick problems are solved on many TV shows. Discuss the differences in dealing effectively with challenges in real life. You may want to include in your discussion what processes you go through to identify, confront, and resolve problems.

25. Put words in their mouth.

As a family watch a favorite program with the sound off. Try to figure out what each of the characters in the show is saying. Discuss why you believe that based on past knowledge of the program and how the characters are behaving. Encourage your child to think about how he or she would write the script for each of the characters. What are the important things that they say? Why are these considered important?

26. Make your own family TV Guide.

Gather your child/ren and ask them to make a family TV Guide for the upcoming week. What programs would they include? What programs would they make sure not to include? Ask them to give reasons for their choices.

27. Thinking ahead to predict what might happen.

This is a great activity for school-age children who may need guidance in watching their favorite programs while you can't be there with them. Give your child a written list of 3-5 general questions that they can read before they watch a TV show. Consider such questions as: "What do you think this program will be about? What do you anticipate the main character's troubles will be? How will he/she resolve them? Why are you watching this show and not doing something else?" Instruct your child to think about the questions while viewing—no need to write anything down—just think. As your child watches, he/she won't be able to stop thinking about these questions—it's just how the brain works. Intermittently, ask your child to discuss the TV program with you, along with how this activity helps to think about the program!

28. Ask: “What will happen next?”

This is a simple, yet effective activity. Mute the commercials while your family watches TV together and ask each child and adult what he/she thinks will happen next. There are no right or wrong answers! This gives everyone a chance to engage in creative interplay and then to test his/her “hypothesis” when the show resumes. Children may learn just how predictable and mundane a lot of programs are and soon improve on the scriptwriters, adding their own creative ideas!

29. Record your child’s favorite show.

Then play it back during a long car trip or around a cozy fireplace on a dark winter evening. The purpose of this activity would be for your child to hear the program, without seeing the visuals. Talk about how the characters and their actions change as a result of only hearing the show. Does your child have to listen more intently? Why or why not? What are some crucial distinctions between watching and listening?

30. Encourage your child or teen to be a media creator.

Ultimately what we want is for our children to find ways to creatively express who they are. You can encourage a child to use a digital camera and make a photo collage of a family trip, for instance. Older children and teens can create websites, blogs, even podcasts. Screen technologies are powerful tools and when used intentionally, with specific purposes, our children become media-literate in the process of learning more about their own creativity and unique skills.

15 Media Activities for Children, ages 3-6

Screen Violence

1. Talk about real-life consequences.

If the screen violence were happening in real life, how would the victim feel? In real life what would happen to the perpetrator of the violence. Compare what's on the screen to the consequences of what happens when someone hurts another person in the real world.

2. Violence is not the way to solve problems.

Emphasize that hurting another person in any way or destroying property is wrong and won't solve a person's problems. Point out to your child that many of the violent cartoon characters never seem to solve their problems from episode to episode, and that to use violence is to act without thinking of the consequences. Tell your child it's powerful and smart to find peaceful, creative ways to solve problems with other human beings. Choose a problem your child encountered recently such as another child taking a toy away and talk about the reasonable way the problem was resolved or could have been resolved—without hurting.

3. Anger is natural.

Talk about the fact that we all get angry, that it's normal. It's what we do with our anger—how we cope with it and express it—that's important. When screen characters hurt people out of anger, it's because they have not learned how to deal with their anger. Your child could make a list of screen characters who know how to deal with their anger in positive ways.

4. Count the number of violent acts.

While watching a favorite cartoon with your child, count the number of actual violent actions. Point out that these are harmful to others and you would never allow him/her to do such things to others. Total the number of violent actions at the end of the program and ask your child if he/she thought there were that many. Decide not to watch cartoons or any shows with such violent actions.

5. Talk about real and pretend.

If your child is exposed to a violent movie or video game, it is especially important to talk with him/her about the fact that the images were pretend—like when your child plays pretend and that no one was actually hurt. Make it a common practice to talk about the differences between real and pretend with any TV programs, movies, your child watches. Understanding this concept basic to becoming media-literate!

Screen Advertising

6. Blind taste test.

Show your child how she can test the claims of commercials. Have her do a blind taste test. It can be done with a wide range of foods such as three or four kinds of soda pop, spaghetti sauce, cereal—your child's favorites. Are the products as great as the commercials claimed? Can she tell the difference between a generic brand and a famous one? Can she identify products by name? Do the commercials make products seem different than they really are? Why or why not? This is a fun activity to do with several children. Have a taste test party!

7. Draw pictures of a feeling.

Suggest that your child draw a picture depicting how he feels after watching two different types of TV commercials. What are the differences between the pictures? Discuss your child's feelings about the different commercial messages.

Picture the buyer. Younger children can watch a commercial and then draw a picture of the type of person they think will buy the product. After discussing the child's picture, explain how various audience appeals are used in commercials to attract specific audiences.

8. Cartoon ads.

While watching cartoons, your child can look for specific cartoon characters that appear in popular commercials. Explain the differences between the commercial and the cartoon: In the commercial, the character sells a product; in the cartoon, the character entertains

us. The next time she watches TV, have her report to you if she sees any cartoon characters selling products.

9. The toy connection.

When visiting a toy store, you and your child can look for toys that have been advertised on TV or promoted by TV personalities. Point out to him how the toys advertised on TV initially seem more attractive than those he hasn't seen advertised.

10. Invent a character.

Your child can pick a product, such as a favorite cereal, and create an imaginary character that can be used to sell the product. He/she could draw a picture or role-play the character. Or, using puppets, stage an imaginative commercial for a made-up product. Afterwards discuss with your child what she or he did to tell people about the product. Watch a few commercials and point out basic selling techniques such as making the product looking larger than life, repeating a jingle, and showing happy children using the product.

Screen News

TV news contains elements that may not be appropriate for young children. As much as possible, watch news when your child is in bed or not in the room. Protect your little one from graphic images and topics that she/he is not ready to handle cognitively or emotionally.

Screen Stereotypes

11. Not better, just different.

Children are never too young to start learning the message that differences do not make anyone better than anyone else. Point out how each family member has his or her own individual preferences, habits, ideas, and behaviors. Differences make us all unique and interesting. When your child sees a racist or sexist stereotype on the screen, explain that the writers of the script made an error in portraying the character in that light.

12. Change the picture.

Play a game with your child: When she encounters a screen stereotype, ask her whether other types of people could play that role. For instance, if the secretary is a young woman, explain that men are secretaries, too, and that many older women are very competent secretaries.

13. Girls, boys, and toys.

As you walk through a toy store, point out various toys to your child, asking each time whether the toy is made for a boy or a girl. Ask if any child could just as well play with the toy. Encourage your child to find toys that would be fun for girls and boys to play with. Then, when your child sees toy commercials on TV, point out whether only little boys or little girls are playing with the toys.

14. Play: Who is missing?

Often what children see on the screen does not represent all nationalities and the diversity he or she encounters in preschool, kindergarten, or on the playground. While watching favorite cartoons or movies with your child, discuss who is missing—such as an older person; a disabled person, or a person of a certain race or nationality. You can also discuss what types of people your child encounters more often on the screen—young, glamorous, happy white people usually take up the majority of the visual images with men outnumbering women 3 to 1!

15. Model discussion of screen stereotypes.

When your family watches a favorite TV program or a popular DVD, you can help your youngster identify stereotypical roles, behaviors, and attitudes by holding family conversations to involve your spouse and/or older children. While watching the program or movie, the adults and the older children take notes, tracking whenever they spot a stereotype of age, gender, or race. After watching, turn off the TV/VCR and discuss everyone's observations. Using each family member's notes, compile a master list of the stereotypical statements and portrayals that were noted. This discussion can be made more interesting if you taped the program (or replay the DVD in appropriate scene/s), so you can refer back to it as family members discuss the stereotypes they spotted. Your little one will listen to this family media literacy conversation and absorb important information while the others share their ideas.

20 Media Literacy Activities for Children, ages 6-10

Screen Violence

1. Get specific.

Ask your child: "What type of violence is most predominant in your favorite shows, movies, or video games?" Then encourage him/her to keep a record of how many of the following acts are viewed in a week: threat with weapon, unwanted sexual advances, rape, murder, slap or punch, fistfight, run over or hit by a car, knife wound, gun wound, property destroyed. Discuss with your child what he or she has learned about screen violence

2. Picture a world without media violence.

Have your child imagine that violence was suddenly eradicated from all television, movies, and video games. Discuss such questions as: "What would take its place? What would you miss? What would the general population think about the eradication of media violence? Would no media violence have any effect on real-life violence?"

3. Make a plot line of a favorite show.

When watching an action TV program or movie ask your child to write down the introduction; the problem; the search for the solution; the solution, and the ending. After the show ask your child to consider if the violence was really necessary to the plot. Other

questions to ask might be: “Is violence shown as a solution? Could there have been an equally effective ending without the violence? Why or Why not?”

4. Re-write violent scripts.

In this activity your child acts as a screenwriter or video game designer and uses his/her creative ideas to change the violent script of a program or video game to a non-violent one. The goal is to eliminate the violence and come up with alternative solutions to the problems. Depending on the child’s maturity and skills, this activity can involve drawing pictures rather than writing. Or, the writing could consist of an outline. Encourage your child to pay special attention to those elements that must be changed in order to eliminate the violence: Is it the people, the places, the time, the situation? Discuss your child’s story with him and point out changes from the original.

5. Make-up a different hero.

Choose a favorite TV program or movie—one that your child is familiar with and enjoys watching—that contains some violence. An action cartoon works well for this activity. Before the show begins hold a conversation with your child and say something like: As you are watching today, I want you to imagine another character being in the show (or cartoon)—someone you make up from your own imagination. This person can be male or female, tall or short, young or old. The only thing you have to make sure is that this person solves all his/her problems through talking, cooperation, and negotiation. *Never* through hurting anyone or destroying property.” Once the character has been chosen, ask your child to describe him or her in detail and how this imagined character (IC) might act in various situations. Then watch the program or cartoon while watching ask such questions as: “What is your IC doing now? What makes your IC strong? Smart? Creative? How would your IC solve the problem? What does your IC want to tell you about this show?” You can keep an on-going dialogue about your child’s non-violent IC and the creative ways he/she solves problems.

Screen Advertising

6. Commercial tally.

Ask your child, “How many commercials do you watch in a week? “ Then encourage him/her to, mark an X on a piece of paper every time a commercial is shown while watching television over one week’s time. You can have your child tally the results, multiplying by four to find out how many commercials you watch in a month, by twelve for how many commercials are watched in a year. Ask, “How many commercials will you see by the time you turn twenty-one?”

7. Cross-marketing.

Watch a current blockbuster film with your child and count the brand name products shown throughout the film. Then visit a fast-food restaurant and see what TV or movie tie-ins you can find. Discuss how companies find every way possible to get their products in front of children to make them want to buy it.

8. Attention grabbers.

Think of several products or services and have your child come up with a dramatic, funny, or unusual approaches to a TV commercial that will grab the viewer. Discuss why these approaches are effective in attracting viewers' attention.

9. Be an actor or actress.

While watching a commercial, have your child role-play an actor's movements. Ask such questions as: "How does it feel to imitate particular positions and gestures? Does it feel normal or does it feel put on? Is it the type of body language used in everyday life? Why or why not? Encourage your child to make up different body movements and gestures for an actor in a commercial, act them out, and then discuss how this new body language might change the commercial message.

10. Find the real thing.

Purchase a food item advertised on television. Children then list the main ingredients found on the package. Discuss why the commercial does not inform viewers about ingredients or give much specific information about the product. Explain that a person needs to buy it and read the packaging in order to find out what's in the product—the commercial doesn't provide this information.

Screen News

11. Put on a newscast.

Encourage your child with several friends to put on a newscast, using a newspaper or neighborhood event as content. Assign all roles—director, producer, writers, anchors, weather reporter, sportscaster, camera people, sound engineer. Use a video camera and actually tape the show. Be sure to show off your work to your families, or to your classes at school. Afterwards discuss such questions: "How did you determine what was important to share with other people? How do you define 'news?' How did people react to your newscast? What would you have changed about it if you were to do it again?"

12. Letter to news personality.

Help your child write a letter to a specific personality on a local news broadcast, encouraging him/her to ask questions or make comments. Your child might ask about how the person first became involved in TV news, and what it would take today to begin the same career. You might also ask if that personality thinks that TV news is appropriate viewing for children. Why or why not?

13. National vs. local news.

When watching a news program, identify it as a local or national show on the basis of its content. Is what's covered on local news different from what's covered on national news?

14. Watching vs. reading.

Choose an appropriate age news story and discuss it with your child. Watch an account of the story on a TV news program and then read an account of the same story in a newspaper. Discuss with your child the differences he/she noticed in the two accounts

along with the similarities. If you do this on a regular basis, you will help your child be both a discerning reader and viewer of news stories.

15. Compare on-line news with newspapers and TV news programs.

Encourage your child to read on-line news sources for kids—such as Linda Ellerbe’s Nick News, www.nick.com and compare what he/she learned about top stories with newspaper and television accounts of the same story. News programs directed to children can engage your child in thinking about current events in new ways.

Screen Stereotypes

16. Working people on TV.

As your child watches TV during one week, encourage him/her to keep a list of men's and women's TV occupations. When it comes to work, how are male and the female jobs depicted—do patterns emerge? Are characters' occupations stereotyped? How do you know? For instance, do you ever see a male nurse or a secretary that is an older woman?

17. Inventory of roles.

During the same week as the activity above, your child could write down the minority group characters he/she sees on television, including occupations and a few character traits. In a discussion with your child, compare and contrast these descriptions to the Caucasian characters on the same or similar programs.

18. I know that person!

Have your child compare a TV character to someone you know who's about the same age in real life. How are they the same? What differences do you find? How "real" is the TV character really?

19. TV jobs.

Suggest that your child watch a television program, and have paper and pencil on hand for the conclusion of the show in order to record all the job titles in the credits. Videotaping helps. With the completed list, ask your child to write next to each job title what he thinks that person does. Help your child determine whether any of these jobs sound like something he or she would like to do. Why or why not? Emphasize that any and all jobs are available from scriptwriter to sound engineer no matter if you are a boy or a girl.

20. Expand the roles.

Choose programs your child likes to watch. Tell him to pay close attention to characters that display stereotypical behaviors or attitudes. For example, in a sit-com, examine the role of the father. Does he resemble real-life fathers? Why or why not? How can this person be made more “whole” and a unique person if he seems one-dimensional and stereotyped? Have your child do this for a few characters, discussing what changes he or she made and why. Then point out how the roles change when stereotypical attitudes and behaviors are removed. Discuss with your

child how the program differs with the characters' new identities. You might also have your child draw pictures of his new characters engaged in real-life activities.

20 Media Literacy Activities for Teens, ages 11-14

Screen Violence

1. Sensational or sensitive portrayal?

In a discussion with your young teen about media violence ask such questions as: "When a violent act occurs on the screen, how can you tell if it's there simply to draw viewers' attention or if it's there because it's a necessary part of the action? Does the violence move you in any way to feel compassion? Is the violence more about human suffering and less about blood and gore? How was the violent act presented? Where was the camera? Are you right in there with the action or are you an observer? Are you the perpetrator or the victim? Do hyped up technical effects distance you from the suffering inflicted? How?"

2. Emotional violence.

Encourage your child to keep a tally of the types of emotional violence in favorite shows, such as putdowns disguised as humor, verbal threats, or name-calling. Then discuss how emotional violence harms a person and why it can lead to physical violence. Emphasize ways scriptwriters could re-write verbal abuse and emotional violence to treat human beings with more dignity.

3. Read about real people who suffered at the hands of violence.

Often kids separate violence in movies and video games from real life—yet, when playing violent video games, they rehearse violence and when watching violent films they are thrilled by murder and mayhem. If you bring to your child's attention article, books, or newspaper accounts of people who suffered from real violence

4. Predict violent content.

Using any TV schedule have your child predict which shows will have violence in them just by reading the titles. Go through a week's worth of programs and have him/her chose the five considered most violent, explaining the reasons for the choices. Depending on the age and maturity level of your child, you can watch a few of the programs with him/her to assess the predictions. This is a good activity when a new TV show, movie, or video game comes out that your child knows little about. Thinking ahead and considering what factors would make entertainment violent teaches important discerning skills.

5. How do you know what's cool?

Discuss with your child why violent entertainment is often considered "cool." Some questions to consider are: "What factors must be included to determine a rating of "cool?" Who gets to decide what's "cool"—you, your peers, or the businesses promoting the violent entertainment? Do you think it's important to be "cool?" Why or why not?"

Screen Advertising

6. Understand types of commercials.

While watching TV with your child, find and discuss examples of these types of commercials: Celebrity endorsements; unique viewpoint (for example, up high on a ladder, or underwater); testimonials or interviews; and use of special effects (animation, high-tech). Many commercials combine two or more of these. Encourage your child to start thinking about how the advertising executives made decisions about what to put in the commercial in order to hook attention and entice people to buy the product.

7. Are you the target?

In conjunction with the above activity or at a different time, you can ask your child to observe who the commercial is targeting and what techniques are used for that specific advertising audience—such as happy women cleaning their homes for cleaning products; and tough Western men driving their jeeps through rugged terrain. You can ask such questions as: “What commercials are specifically targeted to your age group? What does this age group respond to? What are its vulnerabilities? What are your and your friends’ strengths that enable you to reject the advertiser’s manipulations?”

8. Slogan game.

Encourage your child, with a group of friends, to make a game by collecting and recording all the advertising slogans you can think of. Do it individually or in teams. Give each team a week of TV viewing to prepare. Have a small prize for the team that collects the most slogans. Vote on which slogan is thought to be best and discuss why. What emotions do you feel when you see particular slogans? What do you think about when you see them? Why did the ad agency choose those cartoon characters, that actor, those colors? Can you think of another slogan for this product? After they go through this process, have a pizza party with them to discuss what they learned about advertising slogans and their effect on them and others.

9. Grade a commercial.

Children can give a grade to the commercials they see during one program or over the course of a week. Grading is based on how well the commercial succeeds at making your child want the product. Give an A for the best, F for the least effective. Have your child tell you the reason for each particular grade. Explain the manipulative techniques that commercials use. Discuss which of those techniques are the most effective and why.

10. Emotions vs. facts.

Young teens are especially vulnerable to emotional appeals. While you watch TV with your child, point out how the commercials try to hook various feelings such as desire to belong to a crowd, happiness at having what you want; feelings of undesirability if you don’t look a certain way, etc. Point out any facts that are given about the product. Encourage your child to view commercials with an eye to consider the emotional appeals as well as any facts given.

Screen News

11. Comparing various news sources.

Encourage your child to read a local morning newspaper and write down the title of each main story. Then have him/her look up the same stories on news internet sites such as CNN and the *New York Times* and then in the evening watch a local/national TV news program, making a list of the stories covered in the broadcast. Before bedtime, have him read an article about one of the news stories in *Time* or *Newsweek*. Then the next day, hold a family discussion and such questions as: “What stories in the newspaper (and on the internet) were reported on the TV news? How many stories on the TV news were ‘new’? How do Internet sites choose which news to let people know about? How do TV news programs decide what to report? How do newspapers decide what to report. Which source would you go to for the latest breaking news? Which source would you go to in order to understand the issues more deeply? Why? What did you learn about the different news sources?”

12. News story tally.

Either for TV news programs or Internet sites, or both, have your child keep track, for a week, of every major story. He/she decides whether each story is negative, neutral, or positive. What's the final count? What does this say about the kind of news that is being broadcast? Encourage your child to think about how he or she would bring more balance into news stories, giving people more information about the positive things that are going on around them.

13. Study news anchors.

In this activity your child will study a variety of news anchors to observe what they look like; how they deliver the news; if they deliver the news with or without bias or comment, etc. Encourage your child to frame in his/her mind the “ideal news anchor.” For instance, would being beautiful or handsome be an important factor to being an effective news anchor? Observing popular news anchors, which one/s fit more to the ideal? Why? You may want to check out from the library old footage of Walter Cronkite—there is a popular one of him reporting the assassination of JFK. Your thinking child can observe the differences of how news was reported then with how the news is reported currently. The slower pace of yesteryear, along with more detailed reporting are a striking contrast to today’s hurried pace, fast speech, and surface comments.

14. Spotting reporter bias.

In conjunction with the above activity or as a separate activity have your child observe both TV news anchors and reporters in the field delivering news. See if he/she can spot any bias through subjective comments, opinions, or even through their mannerisms. Also, “news” programs such as the *Colbert Report* provide a way to think about the bias presented through exaggeration and satire. What are the real issues that need to be kept in mind when listening to any news anchor or reporter?

15. Local, national, or international?

As your child watches TV news, point out which stories are local, national, or international ones. Consider comparing channels such as Fox with the BBC—to find out which one provide more international coverage, for instance. This can be an ongoing activity to help your child understand the three distinct areas of coverage and where we can best learn about what is happening in these distinct parts of our world.

Screen Stereotypes

16. Secret wishes.

Find out if your young teen has secret wishes to be like or look like or act like a certain celebrity or screen hero. Discuss the realistic parts of wishing we could be like someone else and the unrealistic part, emphasizing the importance of embracing fully our unique selves. Discuss how screen portrayals can amplify stereotypical images of people and can even get in the way of accepting ourselves as we truly are.

17. Spotting realistic “whole” people on TV and in the movies.

In conjunction with the above activity, you might have your child discuss celebrities or screen heroes who seem well rounded and like ordinary people. What makes them seem well rounded? More ordinary? Have your child observe the celebrities over time and decide on the qualities that either enhance a stereotypical image or a full human being.

18. What do others think about screen stereotypes?

Have your child interview people who are different ages, genders, and from various cultures to find out what they think if stereotypes they encounter on TV, in movies and video games. A few questions for the interview could include: “What are some stereotypical images you have seen recently? Are you offended by them? Why or why not? Do you feel your (age, sex, race) is well represented in the media? Why or why not? What advice would you give to creators of TV shows, movies, and video games when they begin to develop a certain character?”

19. TV, movie and video game heroes.

Encourage your child to list the qualities of what makes a hero/heroine. Add to the list over a week or two so you keep talking about it and fleshing it out. Then point out people in your child’s life who also have these same qualities. Discuss the contribution of “everyday heroes/heroines” to your child’s life and what these uncelebrated real-life celebrities bring to it.

20. Hollywood heroes.

In conjunction with the above activity or as a separate activity, have your child pay attention to movies that he/she loves, outlining the actions of the hero—such as fighting somebody or driving a car recklessly. Then ask your child if the real life heroes listed above would ever do such things. Why or why not?

15 Media Literacy Activities for teens, ages 14-17

Screen Violence

1. **Debate your teen.**

Teens love an argument. So why not structure a conversation to make it an intentional debate? One topic could be: "Gender stereotypes on TV and in the movies do (or do not) influence teen behavior toward the opposite sex." Have your child develop at least ten pro or con arguments for this proposal. You do the same then present the debate at a family gathering. Encourage your teen to discuss this issue with friends or ask your social studies teacher if a debate can be set up in the classroom.

2. **Discuss the value and the problems with rating systems.**

Provide opportunities for your teen to confess to and then discuss movies or TV programs they saw or video games they played which were "off-limits". Provide non-judgmental guidance about what is appropriate viewing for people their age, explaining the reasons why you had made this content off-limits to him/her. Include in your discussion the impact of peer pressure for your teen to go against your wishes. What can be done so your teen will honor your wishes and avoid the inappropriate content?

3. **Write a recommended non-violent TV/video game list for young children.**

Have your teen research on the web and through interviews with teachers, what TV programs, video games, even movies are appropriate for younger children. Have him/her share the lists with pre-schools and schools in the area; parents your teen may baby-sit for, or to post on his/her own blog or website as a community service.

4. **Share and discuss the research.**

There are over 3,000 reliable research studies linking media violence with real-life violence. The correlation between media violence and aggression is higher than the correlation between smoking causing lung cancer! Have your teen read one or more of these studies and discuss them with you. A good place to begin is my book, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Call: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie, and Video Game Violence*.

Screen Advertising

5. **Use satire or spoofs to show misguided causality.**

With friends your teen may enjoy creating a layout for an original TV commercial that spoofs a real commercial. It can be fun making an exaggerated version of a familiar commercial. You may want to pick up a copy of *AdBusters Magazine*. Your teen will enjoy the satire and you will enjoy having a lot of great information for interesting family discussions.

6. Which product, which show?

Have your teen think about how advertisers appeal to certain audiences for specific shows—such as advertising beer and video games for major sports events on television. Ask him/her to list two products that might be advertised on each of these shows:

Basketball game

Daytime soap opera

Evening news

Cartoon show

Golf tournament

MTV Reality Shows

It may be interesting to have your child track advertisers' patterns over time and explore what insights were gained from the activity.

7. Commercials in other parts of the world.

What kind of advertising is on TV in other areas of the United States and in other countries? Your teen can find out in any library or through web-based research. Ask your teen to consider such questions as: "How and why are foreign commercials different from what you see at home? Are the differences merely in the kinds of products and services being sold, or are different appeals made to foreign audiences?" This is a great activity to do when your family is planning a trip abroad.

Screen News

8. Distinctions and similarities between News and Talk Shows.

Ask your teen to watch for one week and list all the topics covered by one talk show and one news program. Then discuss such questions with him/her: "How many of the topics covered had to do with strange or abnormal human behavior? sex? crime? abuse? Which had more of these, the news program or the talk show? Which would you recommend watching on a regular basis? Why?"

9. Examine Public Broadcast News.

After your teen watches a Public Broadcasting Service news program and another network's news program, have him/her think about the differences between the two. Discuss what might account for the differences and what a viewer gains from each type of news program.

Stereotypes

10. Is advertising turning you into a stereotype?

If teens follow their friends who follow the latest fads promoted by popular culture, does that mean that your teen is being stereotyped without him or her knowing it? Explore this issue with your son or daughter and how she or he may feel about being an industry-generated stereotype.

11. Consider screen and school stereotypes.

Discuss with your teen the different groups of students at the school he/she attends. Some questions to consider could be: "Are there jocks, nerds? goths? etc? How does media contribute to the creation of these groupings? Do most teens feel compelled to belong to a certain group? Why or why not?"

12. Stereotypes and bullying.

In the discussion of screen-generated school stereotypes, you may want to ask: "What happened to kids who don't fit into any of the identified categories? Do kids who are different get bullied more often? Why or why not? Would eliminating the categories of types of students stop the bullying? Why or why not?"

13. Gender representation.

Ask your teen to consider how males and females are represented in his/her favorite programming, movies, and video games. Consider such questions as: "Are these representations accurate? Fair? What do you learn about males and females from these representations? How would you change these images if you could? Why?"

14. Does branding create a collective universal stereotype?

Explore this question with your teen. One example is the Pepsi brand that always is associated with young, happy "with-it" people drinking Pepsi. When these types of images are repeated so often to masses of people, do the people viewing them come to believe that is who they are? As your teen answers this question and others you discuss, be sure to ask your teen, "How do you know?" This will encourage him/her to think specifically about the reasons for any answer given.

15. Compare the old with the new.

Rent older comedies such as I Love Lucy or older westerns or any older film. Compare gender, racial, and ethnic representations with current ones. Amplify to your teen how media reflects current trends in our society and provides political and social messages as well as entertains its viewers.

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