

Language of the Heart

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Parents ratings soar much higher than television programming

What is the impact of television on children and teens?

[Children and adults soak up cultural television and movie messages](#)

Anybody watch the Oscars Sunday night? Even if you are one of the few who missed the show, by the end of the week you will no doubt know that Jon Stewart hosted and the Coen brothers were big winners. We'll talk about it on our work breaks and telephones for the next couple of days. Movies and television are part of our daily lives and to a significant extent portray history, sexuality, parenting and a host of other values and standards to our children. Oscar host Jon Stewart joked during the show that "the last time" we had a female or African American president, an asteroid was about to hit the earth. I believe he was referring to the movie "Deep Impact" where Morgan Freeman played the president, but the joke was delivered as if it had really happened.

Young children especially talk about movie characters as if they were real. Years ago when my friend Maureen's little girl was four or five she watched "The Lion King" several times then announced "mommy, I know the difference between good people and bad people." Amazed, her mother asked "how?" wondering what her little girl had learned from Simba, Scar, Mufasa, or Nala. Referring to the part in the movie where Scar refuses to accept Simba's help and falls to his death from a cliff, she said "bad people don't ask for help." Good rule of thumb

Teens and children are bombarded by TV aggression and sexuality

[Try some of the guidelines from American and Canadian pediatric surveys](#)

Sexuality and violence are television messages that abound, and are of more concern than the morally suggestive Lion King message. A Kaiser Family Foundation survey on teens sex and TV found that 72% of teenagers believe that sexual content on TV influences their decisions. For a minority of teens it's positive, and spurs them to talk to their parents about sex and sexuality. For others it creates distorted images of hypersexual teenagers who apparently have sex frequently and with limited emotional upheaval. Teens and preteens

are bombarded by sexual messages.

Other television messages are more subtle. I work with teenage girls in a group home, many of whom have had chaotic lives with a parent in jail, or using drugs. They've bounced from foster home to foster home, and have had limited guidance from adults. I asked a handful of girls what they were thinking of for career choices recently, and two of them wanted to train to be CSI's, based almost entirely on the television programming which seems saturated with crime scene science. I get periodic email offers to train in forensic science. For some teenagers, it is television that models that age old "what do you want to be (do) when you grow up," particularly for those children who don't know adults who are teachers, lawyers, business owners, electricians, shift workers or contractors, to name a few.

Here are some television guidelines for parents, based on research and information from a variety of sources including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Pediatric Society:

Children under two form social emotional memory based on interactions with parents and others. They need this interaction to fully develop social and language abilities as they grow. The American Academy for Pediatrics recommends **no** television for this age group.

Preschoolers, age 2-5, do not have much abstract thinking developed so aggressive and fearful programs makes them prone to nightmares, aggression and distractibility. Pick movies and cartoon with messages you truly want your children to learn, because they will watch them over and over and over again!

For children ages 6-11 the Canadian Pediatric Society reports that even one to two hours a day has a harmful effect on school achievement and reading, so limit the television and consider whether you really want children to have unsupervised televisions in their bedrooms.

With teenagers, get involved in conversations about television, and round out any distorted views about sexuality, dating, career choices and adulthood that they might be receiving. No matter how bombarded children are by television messages, parents continue to be the most powerful programming there is!

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