

Keeping Your Kids Safe by Being Media-Wise

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

These days, our kids are being bombarded by messages from a variety of media sources: television, movies, radio, magazines, internet – and let's not forget the entire entertainment industry. It's no secret that the media's messages that our kids listen to, watch, and read have a powerful influence on their lives. Unfortunately, the messages are often lies the media portrays as healthy, normal behavior among kids today. Parents often avoid addressing the issue of media and kids because we don't know what to do. But, we need to roll up our sleeves, and get to work helping our kids make right and wise decisions about media. Don't give up. Don't bail out. There are things you can do to improve the media health of your family. You can keep your kids safe by becoming and staying media-wise. Here are some tips for handling some of the common forms of media your kids are interacting with.

Taming the Tube

The TV is not a baby-sitter. Hopefully, parents are extremely careful about choosing a baby-sitter and day care for their children. Why are we not as careful about choosing the programs our kids watch on TV?

- *Know what shows your kids are watching on TV.* It is vitally important to know the content of every program your child watches. As a rule, most programs will either work to reinforce your values or oppose your values. This is why it is so important to be aware of a program's content – so you can manage what values your kids are exposed to.
- *Don't put a TV in your child's bedroom.* A TV in your child's bedroom is a big no-no. You won't be able to monitor the content – and your kids may be drawn to their rooms at the expense of family interaction. A TV in the bedroom is a far too attractive temptation for your kids.
- *Set limits on TV time.* What are your guidelines, rules and expectations for TV viewing? Setting limits may seem challenging, but with consistency the results are well worth it.
- *Talk with your kids about TV shows.* All television is educational. The question is, what does it teach? Watch TV together with your kids and then debrief the themes and content afterward. You'll be surprised just how easy it is to turn a mediocre program or movie into a first-rate learning experience.

Internet

The Internet will have more influence on your family quite possibly than the television had on your parents' homes. Your children are growing up with one of the most incredible tools ever invented. Like it or not, your kids will use it as a way of life.

Whether you are Web savvy today doesn't matter, but by tomorrow you had better be on your way to becoming an expert. Just because my elderly dad doesn't trust an ATM machine doesn't mean that his children don't use them.

The Web is wonderful, but the Web is dangerous. So learn all you can about the Web and make it your friend. Just like friends at school, it will either be a positive influence on your children or a negative one. There has never been a time when the world had a greater access to positive

information and negative influences. For example, the U.S. Customs Service estimated in 2002, that there are more than 100,000 websites offering child pornography alone – which is illegal – worldwide. Further, an MSNBC survey in 2000, indicated that *25 Million* Americans visit internet sex websites between 1 and 10 hours, *per week!* I'm glad I'm not a twelve-year-old boy anymore tempted by the call of the darker side of the Web.

Following, are a few steps you can take to help ensure that the Web is your friend. If you are looking for more resources, we have more helpful information about handling the Internet in your home on our HomeWord website.

- *Consider a quality Web filter for children and young teens.*
- *Keep the computer with online access out of your child's room.*
- *Keep the computer with online access in a "public" part of your home.*
- *Remind your child not to give out any personal information over the Web without your permission.*
- *Teach your kids to report inappropriate online interactions to you right away.*

Music

Another one of the greatest influences in your child's life will be the music they listen to. Don't buy the story that your kids don't listen to the words. Music and musicians have a great deal of influence on our culture. Listen to what they listen to!

When our kids were teenagers living at home, Cathy and I believed that because of the powerful influence of music, we had a God-given responsibility to review and, yes, even approve what words our children listened to in our home. So, we had a policy that we would listen to all CDs brought into the house. Sure it took a great deal of time listening to some styles of music that weren't our favorite, but we knew it was necessary to learn what our kids were listening to.

Magazines

Many kids today regularly read magazines targeted at pre-teens and teens. Don't think, however, that just because these magazines are targeted at your child's age, that all of the content inside will be age-appropriate. Magazine publishers often push the limit content-wise in order to attract and keep their target audiences coming back for more. The wise parent will read what their kids are reading. You'll gain a much better understanding of the issues your kids are facing and who is influencing them. Help equip your kids to make wise choices about the magazines they read.

Most likely, every parent reading this article wants to help their kids develop healthy morals and values. Still, most parents are frightened by the amount of negative distractions and temptations our kids are being exposed to by various forms of media. You won't be able to protect your kids from every negative form of media. So, instead, prepare them to be able to discern and make wise decisions about the media messages they receive. With proactive parenting in addressing media issues – including proper education, good examples and a positive faith – your kids can make it through the maze of negative media influences and develop positive morals and values.

(Based on and updated from an excerpt of [The 10 Building Blocks of a Happy Family](#) by Jim Burns, Ph.D.)