

### Parenting in a Media-Saturated World

Should toddlers watch TV? Is educational programming beneficial for preschoolers? What happens when school-age children play violent video games? How are teenagers using the Internet? In today's world, these are the questions that challenge parents on a daily (and sometimes hourly!) basis.

In the United States, 99 percent of all households with children have televisions, and half the children have a television in their bedrooms. Among households with eight to eighteen year olds, 85 percent have personal computers and 83 percent have video game consoles. Children ages two to seven watch on average 2.56 hours of television per day and children eight to eighteen watch on average 5.40 hours per day. Technological convergence, a hallmark of media use today, enables youth to access the same source from different, often portable, media platforms. As a result, America's young people spend more time using media than they do engaging in any single activity other than sleeping.

Clearly, the lives of American children are saturated with media. And electronic media is NOT going away. So how does this overwhelming presence of media impact children's well being? More importantly, what can parents do to exert some control over this media presence in their children's lives?

In a recent issue of [\*The Future of Children\*](#) series, [Children and Electronic Media](#), media experts discuss the most current information available concerning children's media use and its potential impact on children's development. These analyses highlight several important issues parents may want to consider concerning the current state of media saturation, how this may affect children, and what parents can do about it.

In the first place, the current emphasis on creating "educational" television for infants and toddlers is questionable. Research suggests that, at this young age, children learn much more effectively from real-life examples than they do from video demonstrations. While evidence indicates that educational programming can have a positive impact associated with both short- and long-term benefits for children ages three and older, this does not necessarily hold true for very young children.

Once children reach school age and start using various forms of media for longer periods of time and making some independent decisions concerning content, parental awareness and involvement remains imperative. Children's exposure to violent content on television or in computer and video games, for instance, has been associated with both fearful and aggressive behavior. In addition, children of early school age appear to be especially susceptible to the marketing and advertising that occurs on many of the popular television shows and websites; this is especially true as commercials become more subtle, embedded in the content of the show or game.

By adolescence, technological convergence and the increasing portability of media platforms enable teens to have almost constant access to media—often at times and in places where adult supervision is absent. The ease with which children are able to communicate via the Internet and handheld devices appears to be a mixed blessing. Though research indicates that the majority of adolescents use the Internet to interact with people they know as opposed to strangers, even peer interaction can involve risk. The same negative behaviors that some youth engage in off line - bullying and social exclusion, for example – can now take place on a much larger stage with many more observers. Moreover, these interactions often take place where no adults are monitoring the situation – on social networking sites and by viral e-mail. All youth media use is NOT negative, however. Clever non-profits and government are using media to positively influence adolescent health and well-being with exciting, interactive, “Web 2.0” media campaigns – many of which are highlighted in a *Future of Children* [policy brief](#) – that invite youth to create the content and own the message.

What, then, are the take away-messages for parents? It might be as simple as the advice given for every other aspect of positive parenting: Be aware and be involved. Awareness requires understanding the various forms of media and types of content available to children at different ages, and whether or not children’s exposure to such media and content is beneficial or harmful to particular children at particular points in their development. Involvement requires monitoring the type of media being used by children, the amount of time being devoted to media use by children, and the specific ways in which children are using these various forms of media in the course of their daily lives. Especially as children become more adept at using the newer forms of technology available, parents will need to remain vigilant in order to supervise children’s immersion in this media-saturated world.

The amount of parental involvement and monitoring depends on the ages of their children. The best approach is to start early so that by adolescence teens can make good choices independently. For internet use, practical guidelines are set out in “[Social Networking Safety: A Guide for Parents](#),” a publication drafted for *The Future of Children* by parent and media expert Nancy Willard.

Parents can also work with governmental and nongovernmental organizations to put pressure on the media industry to develop better content, create meaningful ratings systems, cut back on inappropriate advertising, and invent better products to help screen content. Because government will probably not intervene in the realm of media content, the most effective pressure on industry to produce positive media content will come from the court of public opinion made up of child advocates and parents.

Electronic media is here to stay. And it is not limited to children and youth. Adults “google” on a daily basis, use email and cell phones for work and connecting with friends, participate in social networking sites, get news and information from the web – just to name a few uses. As with everything else – from table manners to study skills to making friends – parents need to teach their children how to use electronic media in a way that increases their social wellbeing and promotes positive behavior.

Article drawn from *Future of Children* publications:

[“Parenting in a Media Saturated World,”](#) by Ann Cami, a part of *The Future of Children* “Highlights” Series.

[The Future of Children: Children and Electronic Media,](#) edited by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Donahue, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008.

[“Using the Media to Promote Adolescent Wellbeing,”](#) by Elisabeth Donahue, Ron Haskins, and Marisa Nightingale, a *Future of Children* policy brief.

[“Social Networking Safety,”](#) by Nancy Willard.

For more information, go to [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org) or contact the editors of this volume: Jeanne Brooks-Gunn [jb224@columbia.edu](mailto:jb224@columbia.edu) or Elisabeth Donahue [edonahue@princeton.edu](mailto:edonahue@princeton.edu) .