

PARENTS, MEDIA, AND CONSUMERISM

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All too often, the blame is laid on parents for exposing children to overly violent or explicitly sexual media. As I have said in the previous articles, and as has been proven through extensive research by James P. Steyer in his book, “The Other Parent,” the whole purpose of media in all its forms – television, movies, videos, music, the internet, advertising – is the big fat dollar, and in our case peso, sign. And because sex and violence sell, media companies and corporations that utilize them, peddle this material to children. Politicians as well turn a blind eye, because these are the very sources of campaign funds. And, passing the buck, they say that parents should be the ones to monitor their children’s media use. Hello!

It’s not as if it is possible for parents to protect their children from the daily onslaught of media messages and images, so that they sometimes feel that no matter how vigilant they try to be, they feel alarmed about the kinds of distorted perception and values their children are getting. The truth is, no matter how media tries to exculpate themselves, and pretend otherwise, it is children who are in the crosshairs of their target. Isn’t it that the marketing schemes are basically to sell products, increase the bottom line of manufacturers, enrich the network, and indeed encourage consumer appetite, with children now the easiest to manipulate? Media has already cleverly identified the niches to target: the pre-schoolers, the 5-7 year-olds, the ‘tweens or the 8-12 year-olds and the teens. The last two in fact are already seen to have their own purchasing power. Sometimes parents feel “compelled” to buy all those products linked to TV shows (yes, even those innocent shows really meant for children have products that children “must have”) – what we now have is a “buy me” culture even among the very young.

Long ago as a young mother, I read to my children -- bedtime was a time for stories, and TV time was pretty limited, also for the reason that not too many shows were

really meant for children. These days, however, when I attempt to read stories to my grandchildren, they would rather watch TV as there really is such a proliferation of cartoons and other programs that are aimed at them. To be sure, none of those shows are sexual, but I have to say that some of them are actually violent in some ways. And of course, many products are advertised as “must-haves.” Hence even at a very young age, children are exposed to the commercialized and consumeristic culture of our times which now holds sway.

One chapter I particularly liked in Steyer’s book provides parents with what the author calls “Top Ten Steps for Parents,” to help them mitigate and control the impact of media on their children. Of course it is true that the first line of defense is really where dad and mom stand. Certainly parents cannot do much about the creative and marketing decisions of media and sponsoring companies, nor for the failure of government to set standards and limits or its inability to implement these if there are. Steyer says, “We can’t just shut our eyes to the problem and ignore the “other parent’s” constant and cumulative influence.” He says that parents have to be just as involved and aware of children’s media use as they are of their friends, their schoolwork, and their physical and emotional well-being. Thus he says that there are two key things that parents can do:

1. “We can limit our children’s access and exposure to the media, especially when they are young.
2. We can help our kids process and understand media messages and, as a family, make the most of many positive media experiences.”

Steyer then listed his Top Ten Steps for Parents, as follows:

1. Establish good media habits early.
2. Location, Location, Location: No TV or Computer in your child’s room.
3. Set a media diet and stick to it.
4. Teach your child to ask permission to use media.
5. Watch and listen with your kids – then tell them what you like, don’t like, and why.
6. Set clear rules regarding your child’s media use in other homes.
7. Have pediatricians review your kids’ media use as part of their annual check-up.

8. Teach media literacy in school and at home.
9. Read to your child and share positive media experiences.
10. Switch the dial to “OFF”.

Parents, and all of us, must realize that the use that people make of media can bring about great good or great evil. In the last few articles, I have tried to pick up on Steyer’s “expose” about the evil that media has wrought on our children especially these days. Media is the most powerful means of social communication, and should foster and support high moral standards, foster harmony and edify, and be a channel for spreading truth. The late John Paul II, in his message for the 2005 World Communications Day considered the theme: “The Communications Media: At the Service of Understanding Among Peoples” addressing the need to promote the unity of the human family through the use of these resources.

Whatever may be said, media has the unique privilege of having access to our children’s intellectual, moral, and social development. As one television hero himself says, “With great power comes great responsibility.” And so, media must realize that they have moral and social responsibilities and obligations. The “free market” that business loves to uphold as its rationale for their actions does not mean “free-for-all” and “no holds barred.”

Definitely, parents must exercise their role as the “first line of defense” in behalf of their children with respect to the current bombardment of the sensibilities of the young. But likewise, media has a responsibility to observe a Code of Ethics and to be a channel for what is good, uplifting and true. Profit as an objective of business, and of media, is not anathema -- indeed the world’s progress has been anchored on market forces. But this has to be balanced. Whatever the world philosophy which says “greed is good,” we know otherwise. And look where greed has led the world in recent times.