

Speaking Out

Caution: Entertainment directed at children can be detrimental to their health

Connie Valk and Ruth Cowing

We know some of the causes for violence in the City of Rochester— poverty, joblessness, drug addition, ready availability of guns. There is another probable cause, though, that we tend to ignore. It is a cause that has permeated our culture and affected the way our children develop into adults: violence in the media and the pervasiveness of excessive screen time.

Our children are growing up with unrelenting entertainment and fantasy violence in the media that gives them constant exposure to pretend danger and fighting that is depicted as heroic, exciting, and fun. Studies tell us that by the age of 18, the average American child will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence on television.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, through the research it has compiled, tells us that there is an undisputable link between media violence and aggressive behavior in children. Studies demonstrate that violent media affects children by increasing anti-social behavior, making them less sensitive to violence and the victims of violence, and increasing their appetite for violence. Violent media often fails to show the consequences of violence. As a result, children learn that there are few, if any, repercussions for committing violent acts.

Exposure to media violence isn't the only problem children encounter with too much TV, computer games and video. Number of hours of screen time is a contributing factor in childhood obesity. According to a report by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation entitled *The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity*, preschoolers spend as much time with screen media as they do playing outside. Much of the media targeted to children is laden with elaborate advertising campaigns that promote unhealthy foods, such as candy, soda, and snacks – the typical child sees about 40,000 such ads per year on TV alone. One study in the report documented approximately 11 food commercials per hour during children's Saturday morning television programming.

What about TV as a “babysitter” to help out parents? Isn't watching TV a sensible, safe thing for children to be doing while busy parents do what they need to do? The American Academy of Pediatrics states that children two years of age and under should be watching no television at all. Babies and toddlers learn from human interaction and creative play, and the TV screen provides none of this. There is some research to indicate that TV interferes with a toddler's language development. Children three to five years of age should watch no more than one hour a day of high quality programming. In no case should a young child have a TV or other screened media in his or her bedroom.

Is there any effort locally to raise community awareness about the impact of the media on young children's health and well-being? Three notable efforts are underway:

- The Greater Rochester Health Foundation's ten-year strategic plan *The Prevention of Childhood Overweight and Obesity in Monroe County, NY* has outlined strategies to reduce screen time among children.

- Many schools and organizations are promoting the Center for Screen-time Awareness campaign to turn-off screened media between April 20 and 26 and again from September 20-26.
- The Children's Film Festival, taking place during Rochester Association for the Education of Young Children's *Month of the Young Child*, is facilitated by Children's Institute and curated by the Rochester High Falls International Film Festival in partnership with several early childhood organizations, the Mayor's Office, the Monroe County Library System, the George Eastman House, and other community groups. The event links physical activities with short (under nine minutes) artistic films with gentle messages, brochures for parents to guide children's TV viewing, and trainings on the impact of the media for caregivers, teachers and others who come in contact with young children and their families. In addition, facilitated discussions with children after each screening help promote literacy through discussing new words and concepts from each film, and talking about related books with similar themes.

All of these efforts send the message that a community dedicated to the well-being of its children pays attention to what children are watching, and to when and how children are using screened media, including television, electronic games, video, computers, iPods and cell phones. Such a community steers its children away from excessive or inappropriate screen time into more healthful activities, and when children do view entertainment, ensures that that it is quality programming like the selection of films from the Children's Film Festival. For more information on the Children's Film Festival, visit www.childrensinstitute.net or www.rochestersmoviefest.com

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