<< Return to article

Media Literacy Begins at Home
Parents have more control than ever before over how popular culture influences their kids. The trick is to treat media as an ally rather an enemy.

By Henry Jenkins
Digital Renaissance
December 5, 2003

In October, the Kaiser Family Foundation released a startling new study of media consumption in early childhood. Based on telephone interviews with more than a thousand parents, Kaiser found, for instance, that children under six spend about the same amount of time each day consuming media (118 minutes) as they do playing outside (121 minutes). This finding raised great public outcry among those who see media consumption as a social problem.

Staff Illustration

I was reminded of W. Russell Neuman's 1991 prediction in *The Future of the Mass Audience* that the transformative potential of new media would be blunted by the continuation of mental habits developed through decades of relating to mass media. We are taught to see media in passive terms rather than to develop the selectivity, creativity, awareness, and agency needed for the new media age. Most current parenting advice adopts a protectionist or even prohibitionist perspective, urging parents to unplug their sets. It takes for granted that there can be no constructive relationship between child-rearing and popular culture and that we must therefore seek only to minimize the damage; most adopts a double standard, stressing the importance of parents shaping their children's encounters with literary stories but seeing popular culture purely as a negative influence; most depicts parents and children as passive victims rather than empowered media users.

Such advice clearly has had an impact. The Kaiser study found, for example, that

90 percent of parents have rules about *what* their kids watch and 69 percent have rules about *how much* they watch. Such restrictions are not bad as a first step, but most parents end there. With a media literate child, such restrictions may be unnecessary. Fortunately, many of today's parents—especially those in their 20s or 30s—came of age as avid game players and full participants in online communities. They have an instinctive grasp of what is required to prepare their children for the new media environment.

Media literacy refers to the full range of capabilities children need if they are going to be full participants in a more participatory media culture. It includes skills in using new media technologies, cultural competencies in understanding how stories are constructed and what they mean, aesthetic vocabularies that heighten their appreciation of diverse forms of expression, and critical frameworks for thinking about the power big media companies exert even in an age of expanding options. Though we often trivialize the intellectual demands of popular culture, these skills are acquired over time and depend upon informal instruction. Parents provide such mentoring, both by modeling patterns of media consumption and by developing and enforcing guidelines for how they want their children to relate to media content.

We would not regard our children to be literate if they could read and not write. We should similarly not feel that our children have developed basic media literacy if they can consume but not produce media. Creating media content can range from the traditional, such as writing stories, to the high-tech, such as programming original computer games. Just as reading and writing skills feed on each other, production and consumption skills for other media are also mutually reinforcing.

Parents often complain that popular culture threatens their ability to shape their children's values. In practice, though, parents have more control than ever before—if they treat media as an ally rather an enemy. Given the sheer range of media available in an era of 200-plus cable channels—not to mention countless games, DVDs, videos, and Web sites—it is much more likely that parents can find media that reflects their own values and cultural background if they learn how to look for it. The disturbing images in some contemporary video games bear more than a passing resemblance to the pictures we used to draw with our crayons when we were kids—images of Army guys getting their heads blown off. The difference is that we often hid those pictures from adult view, whereas they are now consumed, out in the open, in the living room. Such open consumption need not imply endorsement of the depicted actions. What parents can see, they can monitor and shape.

To intervene effectively, parents need to know what media their kids are consuming and why. Parents should spend time watching shows, playing games, listening to music, and scanning the Web with their children. As parents do so, they should model active engagement—asking the child to predict what is going to happen next, helping her to understand how one event is connected to previous and subsequent developments, and discussing what each event means for the characters. (Just don't do it sitting next to me in a movie theater, please!) Do not be too frustrated if the child's attentions wander. Kids younger than five or six tend to watch media in short spurts, rather than processing entire stories. VCRs, TiVos, and DVD players support such viewing practices, allowing kids to skip over the dull bits and zero in on the most meaningful segments. And parents shouldn't be afraid to hit the pause key themselves occasionally if it seems that the child has missed something important.

The relationship between new media and the family has been disproportionately shaped by the

debates about video game violence, which again focus on media "effects" rather than media uses. Within this framework, all forms of violent or disturbing content are inappropriate for children. Yet, many parents realize that working through emotional issues via fiction may be a way of lowering tensions, allowing parents to communicate with children about things they fear, and helping them to bring those scary thoughts under their symbolic control. It's no accident, after all, that much of children's literature deals with the death of a parent or other loved one—fear of abandonment is something that many children confront. The same principle should apply to other media kids consume—including at least the milder forms of media violence, which can be used as an opening to help kids thinking through alternative ways of dealing with their own aggressive feelings.

These first few years are when children learn to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. By age 4 or 5, they may distinguish between cartoon and realistic violence—between, say, *Jackie Chan Adventures* and *The Sopranos*. The newer DVDs, which include director commentary and "making of" features, are excellent resources for helping kids understand the unrealistic nature of most media violence. Research shows that the most traumatic violence is the kind that can't be dismissed as imaginary—predator/prey footage in nature documentaries, for instance, or crime and war footage on the news. Developing a sense of mastery and knowledge over how such images are produced can help kids cope with their more disturbing aspects.

The new media literacy takes us beyond helping children to become skilled readers; we need to empower our children to become storytellers and critics. When our son was three or four, we began to alternate between reading him a bedtime story and asking him to make up his own. We would type his stories into the computer and encourage him to draw illustrations. On major holidays, we would reproduce his story books as gifts for grandparents. This process encouraged him to see himself as an author, to expand his literacy skills, and to understand the ways stories are constructed. Most of his stories drew characters and situations from popular culture. For example, he and his friends used images from the then-popular TV show Pee-Wee's Playhouse to sort through their contradictory feelings toward disruptive behavior at the moment they were moving from the home into preschool. They often used the same phrase— "going bonkers"—to describe conduct they found amusing on the show and distressing when performed by their classmates. Talking through these mixed feelings toward misconduct gave us a way to help our son adjust to his

A Media Literacy Reading List

As media have proliferated, so have books analyzing the phenomenon and helping parents guide their children through it. A sampling:

***Mommy, I'm Scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Kids and What We Can Do to Protect Them*, by Joanne Cantor (Harcourt, 1998)**
Cantor draws heavily on media effects research and comes close to adopting an alarmist perspective on media, but she provides lots of valuable information about what the child development literature might tell us about children's evolving relationships with media fantasies. She also offers pragmatic and balanced advice about how to help children cope with the more unsettling images they may encounter in media.

***Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*, by Gerard Jones (Basic, 2002)**
Jones is critical of the protectionist tradition in child-rearing literature; he argues that media violence enables children to confront and work through their darker feelings, and stresses the value of the kinds of stories that kids make up about the characters of popular culture.

***Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy*, by Anne Haas Dyson (Teacher's College Press, 1997)**
Dyson speaks as an educator about the value of helping kids make up their own stories about superheroes and other pop culture characters, showing how such stories can reinforce traditional literacy skills.

***The Braid of Literature: Children's Worlds of Reading*, by Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath (Harvard University Press, 1992)**
This book contains vivid and personal descriptions of how two young girls learn how to live with, play with, and rewrite children's books. The girls are depicted as almost hermetically sealed off from popular culture, but almost everything Wolf and Heath say here can be applied more broadly to media content.

***Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*, Joseph Jay Tobin, ed. (Duke University Press, forthcoming).**
The authors tackle the Pokemon phenomenon from a

new social context.

Adults need to reinforce rather than dismiss children's growing mastery over media content. Kids need to feel like there are some things they know better than their parents and their teachers and to have the experience of explaining that information to others. Learning about the imaginary worlds of popular culture, some educators now believe, can help children develop basic learning skills that they will later apply to classroom content. For example, recent anime series, like Pokemon and Yu-Gi-O,

range of different national and disciplinary perspectives, showing how the same show is experienced differently in different cultures. The most important essays here concern the ways that kids' interactions with Pokemon promote certain learning skills that will help them later in school.

***What Video Games Can Teach Us About Literacy and Learning*, by James Gee (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003)**
Gee, a major expert on literacy, helps parents and teachers recognize and build upon the kinds of learning that occur through video game play.

encourage kids to classify pocket monsters, their skill sets, their various developmental forms, and their alliances—a contrived world that bewilders many parents but that kids find captivating. This classification and memorization process can help prepare kids to, for example, understand similar classifications at work within the animal kingdom.

At the same time, parents can build upon these pop culture interests to encourage other kinds of learning. The cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt tells the story about how baseball card collecting paved the way for her son to master a range of other skills and knowledge—math (calculating batting averages), geography (knowing where the hometowns of various teams are), and history (knowing what happened in particular years can provide a scaffolding upon which to hang other relevant historical dates and events). It is far better to integrate school and popular culture than to isolate school knowledge from the rest of the child's life.

Most dispensers of child-rearing advice act as if it were enough to "just say no to Nintendo." In practice, parents can play a crucial role in shaping their children's relationships with popular culture and preparing them to live in a society being profoundly influenced by a rapidly proliferating variety of media. We accomplish nothing if we shelter young kids from media and then throw them to the wolves when they get older. Parents may be the most powerful force shaping the way our culture thinks about media: they should use their influence to promote a more participatory model of popular culture.

Henry Jenkins is director of the Program in Comparative Media Studies at MIT.