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Subject Area - Childcare Media Children

Media has been a significant part of our daily life, a vehicle for communicating to the public as well as a source of entertainment. Magazines, TV programs, radio, billboards, news, internet, cell phones are the forms of mass media which are considered to be part of our everyday routine. Traditionally, parents serve as primary social models for children; whereas other models may include siblings, teachers, relatives and other persons who are significant in children's lives. Over time, however, parents' influence as models to their children is on the decline as a direct or indirect result of technological advancement and alterations in household economics. Aside from their busy schedules (which is common in dual-career and single-parent households), families of today seem to gather around rarely because each member has easy access to his or her own television, telephone, computer, music player, etc.. This set-up would imply that children are more inclined to interact less with their parents and spend more time on their own. Thus, children could turn their attention from their parents to more accessible diversions, such as television watching. Without their parents' direct guidance or control, such exposure can become excessive and unguarded. It would not be much of a surprise, if what these children watch did influence their thinking and behavior. Studies conducted by Weiten & Lloyd reported that children in the U.S. spend 2-4 hours on TV watching alone and this habit appears to increase as they get older (Kirsh). Children and the youth are media's darling. Media as perceived by children is full of excitement and wonder, because it brings them to a world of reality as well as make believe. A child development expert T. Berry Brazelton, MD., warns parents that, media is really "the biggest competitor for our children's heart and mind" (Steyer). Furthermore, James P. Steyer an advocate for media organization for children, in his book regards media as "the other parent" since at present time children spend much of their time with these different forms of media. In view of the fact that our society is media saturated, parents should be aware of the positive and negative effects of media to children.

Media's positive effects are: First, its academic learning opportunities. "Over the past 30 years, shows such as Sesame Street, Teletubbies, Barney, and Blue's Clues have provided academic learning to toddlers and pre-aged children. For older children, programs such as Zoom, Cyberchase, and Zoboomafoo are replete with informative, scientific facts. For pre-teens and teenagers, cable channels such as The Animal Planet, The Discovery Channel, and The Learning Channel offer a wide range of educational fare"(Kirsh). Children that are exposed to educational programs are more likely to adopt to what they are watching , to cite an example children(toddlers) from a non-english speaking country that are expose to shows like Barney are able to learn to speak English although with improper grammar. They learn to communicate with the English language and by the time they attend school learning grammar will be easier for them. The same is true with older children, programs shown in the National Geographic Channel, The Animal Planet and Discovery Channel and articles written in their published magazine as well as their websites help them to learn and see what a certain animal looks like, see and explore places that are impossible for human to go to and visit places that are overseas. These educational programs help them to visualize places and animals as well as further explain theories that are learned in the classroom.

The second positive effect of media is pro-social behavior learning. "Pro-social behavior refers to any action that benefits another person. Comforting, sharing, and helping are all examples of pro-social actions" (Kirsh). Many developmentalists, especially those leaning towards the tradition of Social-Cognitive perspective; argue that much of the changes in children's behavior may be accounted for by their observation of others. Learning through imitation or more commonly known as Observational Learning, occurs when a child observes and eventually imitates a model's behavior.

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Programs designed for pro social behavior learning teaches children to practice social behavior such as sharing, helping when they themselves interact socially. They are thought how to properly respond to problems encountered in the outside world like in school or in the community. For example a child who watches how kids share art materials in completing a project in Sesame Street will the same way share his crayons to a classmate when he attend school. To further explain this impression, a study conducted by Mares in 1986 “suggest that the viewing of pro social television content can increase positive interactions among youth during play and increase altruism” (Kirsh). On the other hand, although pro social programs are intended to teach pro social behavior the age of the viewer should be considered because children of younger age are more adaptable to such teaching than older children.

Despite the positive effects presented media has negative effects as well. Children's familiarity with these media models could lead them to pick up new behaviors that are not modeled by their own parents such as: First, body image and eating disorder problems. According to the Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorder organization (ANRED), more than half of teenage girls are on diets or think they should be (Tomeo). TV programs and magazines that show teenage girls that are thin even though unintentional young girls tend to copy their favorite character. In their target to get thin they put themselves to diet, at times they force themselves not to eat to get thin. “On average, girls begin dieting at the age of eight, and eighty-one percent of ten-year-olds fear becoming fat. A national eating disorder treatment center in 2006 reported that sixty-three percent of elementary school teachers are concerned about eating disorders in their classroom. From where do these girls get such a poor self image” (Tomeo). Unfortunately, mass media most frequently foster negative affective body images among youth (Kirsh). Apparently, models are not limited to real people; super heroes, cartoon or video game characters, even television or movie idols, can also serve as symbolic or media models in this case.

The second negative effect of media is the introduction to drug use. Commercials give enthusiasm to young viewers because they are entertaining, but the harm it brings to the young minds of children is often overlooked. The youth being exposed in a world surrounded with media, are therefore exposed to adult aimed advertisements like commercials of cigarettes and liquor. According to a group that studies health issues, in 1999 the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation concluded that the average child between age eight to 18 spends more than 40 hours using television, radio, billboards and the internet wherein advertising occupies much of the time (“Youth-Oriented Advertising”). Furthermore, it is a fact according to Gerbner that many of this adult oriented advertisements are purposely designed to be attractive to the youth (Kirsh, p. 337). Take smoking for instance; commercials of cigarette infuse curiosity to the youth in the same way that movies and music videos that contain characters that smoke predispose them to do the same. Moreover, ads contribute to problems such as obesity, alcohol abuse and teen smoking (“Youth-Oriented Advertising”).

To sum up, the discussion revealed that aside from parents and significant people who come in contact with the child, symbolic characters can also be potent models. Taking into consideration the presence of factors that have a pervasive influence on the child's imitative behavior, the television can be a powerful agent of socialization. Despite its negative effects, however, TV viewing can also have constructive effects on children. Under proper supervision and if viewing is done in moderation, families, particularly parents can harness, and even maximize this medium's potential as a good source of information and helpful avenue for learning.

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