

# ***KIDS' TAKE ON MEDIA***

## **TEACHER/STUDENT ACTIVITY GUIDE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2003, the Canadian Teachers' Federation commissioned a groundbreaking survey, *Kids' Take on Media*, as part of its Media Research and Education Program. More than 5,700 kids from every province and territory took part, with participation from 122 schools in 37 different school boards. The response rate was an extraordinary 93%.

In a national chorus that stretched from Newfoundland to the Northwest Territories, kids told us what media they use, what satisfactions they get from their media consumption and how they think their media diet affects their behaviour and values. They did so by answering questionnaires, one for students in Grades 3-6, and one for students in Grades 7-10. The results of what they told us are contained in the complete report *Kids' Take on Media* available on the CTF Web site as a downloadable PDF file.

The questionnaires are available on-line too, so that other kids can answer them as well. Teachers (and parents) may want to have students fill out the entire questionnaire or else concentrate on specific sections. It's important to judge what works best for your particular group: in certain areas, kids may not have access to all the hardware listed.

### **ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

*To the fish, the water is invisible.*  
Ghanaian proverb

This activity guide has been designed to encourage students to think critically about the media in their lives. One of the report's most telling findings is that kids who discuss the films and TV programs they watch or the electronic games they play are more likely to be aware of the harmful effects of media violence. So are kids who talk about violence, racism and sexism in the media with their parents. Left to their own devices, kids are more likely to regard media violence as benign.

Though the questionnaires do deal with media violence, they touch on many other areas as well: kids' daily and weekly activities, which media they have in their homes, how those media are used at home, which TV shows and games they like and dislike and why. This guide is a combination of activity suggestions tied to specific questions, as well as commentary based on relevant findings from the report.

Kids' media fare is an inescapable part of their "kid culture". If you choose to have your class fill in the questionnaire, you may find it offers a quick snapshot of your students from a non-academic perspective. This informal way of gathering information about a group may suggest which materials, tools and connections will work best with them in a range of subject areas.

If young people are to navigate their media-saturated environments with discernment as well as pleasure, media literacy is an essential skill. This may certainly include experience with media

production but above all else, media education is about encouraging students to ask questions and find out for themselves what they think and how they feel.

We offer this guide as part of our contribution to that process.

## A. IT'S THE WEEKEND

This question asks kids to rate their two favoured ways of spending a few hours of free time on the weekend from a list of ten possible activities.

Have the class chart their own responses in pie graphs or bar graphs or line graphs. Here, kids are working with real data, including data from other young people like themselves.

To compare class results with national survey results, go to **Kids' Take on Media Report, pp. 5-7**. Note that the study results are broken down by gender. Do the students see any significant gender differences in their own group? If so, what are they and why might they be there?

Do the kids think there other activities that should be part of the list? If so, have them rewrite the question. Also, see **Section D** of this guide which deals with kids' daily activities.

## B. TELEVISION

This section explores which TV programs kids like to watch and why.

Boys' top choices emphasize animated programs, comedy and sports. Girls' top choices tend to feature people in supposedly realistic situations and often focus on social relationships.

Given the concerns about boys and literacy, information about their penchant for animation is useful. Why not show an animated version of a film such as *The Hobbit* if you're also reading the book in class or a video based on *Les Aventures de TinTin* (French version), or you might bring in comic book versions of historical events or reading material about characters that "do things one could never do in real life"?

If your class has a strong interest in comedy, students might examine the sources of humour in sitcoms. Do they come from stock characters, from sexist or racist jokes? Is physical humour involved? Older groups may want to explore the elements of satire and how it functions in various programs.

Survey results showed that virtually all kids, older and younger, Anglophone and Francophone, rank *The Simpsons* as their favourite show. *Friends* is also high on the list, particularly with Anglophone girls. (For lists of kids' favourite shows, see **Kids' Take on Media Report, pp. 17 -20**).

The following are some suggested questions about *The Simpsons* which could be adapted for other shows as well.

- If aliens learned about earth only through watching an episode of *The Simpsons*, what would they find out?
- Does this show make you laugh? Why? How does it do that?
- *The Simpsons* has been one of the top-rated shows for more than a decade. Why has it been so popular for so long? (Kids may want to refer to the list of reasons given in the questionnaire, p. 2.)
- The survey showed that *The Simpsons* was twice as popular with boys as girls. Is that true in your class? Why?
- Do you think younger kids should watch *The Simpsons*? (Though kids' name *The Simpsons* as their favourite show, they also say it's the program kids younger than they are should not be watching.) Recast the question as a debate and have the class decide on the most convincing arguments.

## Language and culture

There was a marked difference in the viewing patterns of Francophone students inside and outside Quebec. For Francophones living outside Quebec (in this survey, they included children and youth from New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba and the Yukon), ten percent of their top 20 TV programs were made in Quebec. Almost all the others originate in the U.S. For Grades 3 to 6 Francophone students in Quebec, 30% of their top 20 programs were produced in their province. For older students in Grades 7 to ten, that figure rises to 60%.

The charts of favourite programs and favourite video and computer games have been broken down by language. Have students in the upper grades compare the choices made by the different language groups. How are they different, how are they similar?

Older students might want to look at a show about teens and discuss whether they feel it is an accurate depiction of their lives. Are stories about teens universal? Does it make any difference what country they are located in or what culture they reflect? They might also want to speculate why teens in Quebec watch more homegrown programming and what the implications are of that fact? Does it make a difference who's telling the stories? What does it mean to "tell our own stories"?

Have older students sketch out an idea for a TV series about teens that would reflect some of the realities of where they live and what their own culture is about.

Students from Nunavut also took part in this survey. They, too, have access to programs, produced by the **Inuit Broadcasting Corporation** (IBC), which reflect their language and culture. Have older students research what kinds of productions are being produced by IBC and the **Aboriginal People's Television Network** (APTN). For background information, see an Overview of Aboriginal Broadcasting in Canada at:  
[http://www.mediaawareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal\\_people/aboriginal\\_broadcasting.cfm](http://www.mediaawareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal_people/aboriginal_broadcasting.cfm)

*Connecting Youth in Canada* is a four-part webcast series. Aboriginal communities host 30-minute themed discussions with Aboriginal teens that students and teachers across the country can watch live on their computers. Students can participate by sending in questions by email. The discussions with Aboriginal youth are intended to give high school students a chance to learn what it is like to be a youth living in an Aboriginal community.

The first two webcasts were broadcast from Iqaluit, Nunavut and Chehalis First Nation, B.C. and had more than 30,000 viewers. The archived webcasts are available at [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/connex](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/connex)

To find out more about an international project called *Teen Video Stories*, see <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/Newsletters/Currents/Vol3.4/Inuit.html>.

Check out <http://lxc.binghamton.edu/videolib.htm> for some relevant French-language videos which look at language and culture. Included are *Pub Francophone: révolutionnaire!* which contrasts the styles and techniques of Francophone advertising with the Anglophone advertising tradition and *Les Ados*, an engaging series of interviews with teenagers about the preoccupations of life as an adolescent in France. How does this contrast with shows made about Francophone teens in Quebec?

### Attributes of favourite shows

- Ask students to think of one of their favourite television shows. Give them 3 minutes to write down 5 things that they like about that show.
- Have them find a partner and share their choices and reasons for selection.
- Ask each twosome to find another group and share once more.
- After the sharing, ask the whole group if they noticed any of the same reasons for selection cropping up during their sharing, even if the television choices were different.
- Write on the board some of the common attributes which emerged during discussion.
- Ask students to meet once again with their last large group and discuss why they feel there were some similarities in the things they like about television.
- Share the comments.

**Look for** relationships that may be caused by age, gender, geographical location, language etc.

#### **A Step Further**

After the discussion, ask them if they think a younger (or older) brother or sister might:

- a) make the same selection
- b) have the same reasons for their choice.

Share the responses and encourage students to make the link between making media choices and other factors that influence their lives. (As well, they can go through the exercise focusing on programs they most dislike, and see if there are any commonalities that emerge.)

You may also want to have them compare their answers with the list of attributes given in the **Kids' Take on Media Questionnaire**, p. 2. It's interesting to note that survey results showed that kids rated their favourite shows as being "exciting" and "funny". Violence was **not** chosen as a quality of their preferred programs.

## What Canadian Kids Say about Television

See **Kids' Take on Media Report**, pp. 35-39 for a selection of comments from children about what they most like and dislike about television. Write a number of quotes on the board. Have students pick one and respond to it through personal reflection. Or choose four responses and tack up one on each wall. Ask students to walk over to the response they relate to most. Have them talk to others there and then share with the rest of the group.

## Television News

For younger kids in particular, the scariest program on TV is the news. There are several reasons for this response:

- They realize that the images of violence and suffering they see there are drawn from real life. They feel especially vulnerable when they hear stories about disasters that have happened to other children.
- TV news tends to focus on tragedy, crime and catastrophe. "If it bleeds, it leads". These events are news just because they *are* unusual. Children don't know this and they may begin to see the world as a more threatening place than it actually is.
- There may be as many as 25 different stories in a 20-minute newscast. Since news items are very short, they don't usually offer context that helps to explain the story. Many adults can fill in the gaps. Children, though, have more limited experience and knowledge. Some children, for instance, who saw repeated replays of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre thought the event was happening over and over again, with different planes each time. Also, as the following anecdote from a parent suggests, just because children use the same words as adults doesn't mean that they understand them in the same way:

*"My six-year-old heard a bulletin on TV: serial killer on the 6 o'clock news. He ran to his father in tears. 'Daddy, Daddy, they're killing the cereal people.' My kid thought Tony the Tiger and Honeycomb Sam had been murdered."*

## And Now for the News (Grades 3-6)

- Ask students to raise their hands if they think the news is real.
- Explain that the news is like any other television show. It is created or constructed by a group of professionals, for a particular reason. The purpose of the news, is to inform and educate people about what is going on in their community, their country and the world.
- Tell them that every day, dozens of stories come to the newsroom via every possible means -- by fax, wire, telephone, other television networks, the Internet etc.
- Once all of the information has been gathered, explain that the team of specialists, or the producer and various directors take all of this information and do the following:
  - Decide **WHAT** they will show you.
  - Decide **HOW MUCH** of each story they will share.
  - Decide **HOW** they will link it to other stories so that there is a smooth transition from one story to another.
  - Decide **WHEN** it will be aired - morning news, noon, evening or late night.

- Then they loop it all together, sometimes adding old footage, music, sound effects, lighting etc. to produce a television show.
- Ask them to watch the news all week and see if they can tell what has been added to the current events to make the news more exciting for the viewers. Share the results.
- Close by reminding them that television news, like other media products, shapes content to fit a particular form, in this case, a 22-minute newscast.

**Look For** an understanding that the news is a vehicle to inform them of what is happening, but that it is not necessarily exactly as it appears because it, too, is a construction.

**A Step Further**

Contact your local television station and ask them if you can arrange a tour of the news room, or if anyone could visit the school to describe a typical day in the news room.

You may also want to:

- Have students take a 10-min. clip of news in their city and explore any patterns that emerge. How many items are treated? Which one leads? Why? Who speaks? Who’s missing? Who are the experts? From whose perspective is the story framed?
- Have students rewrite an item from the point of view of another person involved in the story or another group. How would the “framing” be different?
- Are the students comfortable with the way the story is being told? How would they do it differently?
- News items often spark discussions about political, economic and cultural issues. Students with an interest in social activism, especially when it is linked to a media critique, can take a look at the work of Adbusters at <http://www.adbusters.org/home/>.

**Additional Resources**

- *Scanning Television 2*: an award-winning resource package containing five videos and a Teachers’ Guide with detailed lesson plans for Grades 7-10. Material about news coverage of world events from different perspectives is also part of the package. [http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/JCP/scantv/home/scan\\_index.html](http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/JCP/scantv/home/scan_index.html)
- *Media Awareness Network*: an excellent site which includes a comprehensive *Lesson Library* for elementary and secondary school teachers. For this section, try “Teaching TV-Television as a Story Teller” as well as some of the lesson plans on news. [www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/index.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/index.cfm)

For Francophone material, see the francophone counterpart, Réseau Éducation-Médias [www.media-awareness.ca/francais/enseignants/index.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/francais/enseignants/index.cfm)

- *TV&ME*: a resource developed by Concerned Children’s Advertisers which includes pro-social commercials aimed at kids, Core Lessons, Skills Extensions and Peer Teaching opportunities. For K-9. <http://www.cca-kids.ca/tvandme/english/educators/index.html>

## C. VIDEO AND COMPUTER GAMES

Nowhere is the gender divide greater in this survey than in the boys’ and girls’ interest in and enthusiasm for video and computer games. However, even though boys’ favourite video and computer games contain more violence than their favourite TV programs, the most important attributes of their preferred games are “It’s exciting” and “I like beating other players or my best score.” It is also the younger children who spend the most time each day playing these games.

**Note:** Before trying any of the following activities, it is important to create a “safe space” for discussion so that those children (mostly but not only girls) who are repelled or frightened by some of the images in video games) feel that their reactions and concerns are honoured. The U.S.-based organization **Children Now** stated that ... “According to a previous academic study at UCLA, when children themselves designed video games, girls preferred non-violent games with positive feedback for players. In addition, girls did not program "evil" characters nor did they incorporate conquering an "evil enemy" as the goal of their games. In comparison, most boys in the study designed games that terminated with violence, usually resulting in the death of a player's character.

"Video game producers need to stop thinking pink," said Patti Miller, director of Children Now's Children & the Media program. "Research shows that girls want games that engage and challenge, as well as entertain them, not 'girlie versions' of games originally designed for boys."

### Just the Facts, Please... (Grades 3-6)

Remind students about the section of the survey that asked what their favourite computer games were. Explain that one of the top choices for boys in grades 3-6 was *Grand Theft Auto*, an ultra-violent action game aimed at mature audiences.

- Divide the students into pairs and explain that you would like them to pretend that they are newspaper reporters, covering a story about why this computer game appears to be so popular with this group. Explain that the editor of the paper has asked them to cover the following information in their report:
  - What are the key elements of the game?
  - Why do young boys seem to like it?
  - Do their parents know what the game is all about?
  - Do they think the game is appropriate for boys of this age?
  - What are some of the reasons that adults do not like this game?
  - Do they agree?

Encourage them to interview their classmates in order to get the information.

**Note:** It is possible that no one in the class will have played this game. In this case, still have the students complete the exercise, simply by answering the questions with what they ‘think’ would be the right answers.

Once the articles are complete, share them and discuss the findings.

**Look for** the connection between the game, violence, parental supervision and other related discussions.

**A Step Further**

Select one or more of the articles and put them in the school newsletter or send to the local paper.

Students might also want to try out some of the following ideas:

- Discuss:
  - \* What are the good things about video games.
  - \* Who wouldn't be interested in purchasing a video game? Why not?
  - \* What hints or tips would you give to parents who are considering buying video or computer games for their eight-year-olds?
- Write a letter to a videogame company, explaining that the results show kids want action and graphics in their video and computer games but not violence. Which company would you sent it to?
- What would you like to see in a video game for a ten-year-old girl? How would you design it? Write to the company letting them know about your ideas.
- Choose a video game that you do **not** like. How would you improve it?

**See Section E: Media Use** in this guide for further ideas related to mature and/or violent video games.

**Additional Resources:**

For lesson plans on violence in video games aimed at students in Grades 7-10, check out the Media Awareness Network at:

[http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/lesson\\_search\\_results.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/lesson_search_results.cfm)

## **D. ACTIVITIES**

This question asks kids to chart their participation in 15 activities, ranging from daily involvement to “never or almost never”. Survey results showed that kids who spend more time doing homework, reading books and taking part in lessons, clubs and hobbies are more likely to be aware of the negative effects of media violence than those who do not.

As with question A, have kids graph their responses on an individual and class level and compare them with the results from **Kids' Take on Media Survey, pp. 10-14** .

With the older kids especially, you may ask them to discuss the finding that participation in a cluster of related activities is linked with sensitivity towards the issue of media violence. What might be the reasons for such a result? Or students may wish to reframe the finding as a question for debate. (For discussion about that result, see **Kids' Take on Media Survey, pp. 77-78** ).

## **E. MEDIA USE AT HOME**

These sections focus on the different kinds of media-related items available in the home as well as some of the rules about how they can be used. Students might want to consider the following:

- How is this list different from what it would have been 15 years ago? If you lived 150 years ago in Canada, how would you have spent your day before TV? What other activities would have occupied your time?
- If you were going to create a time capsule and bury it in your backyard, what would you include so that kids 50 years from now would know something about you and how kids like you lived? OR: Create a class time capsule.

### **Unsuitable Programming**

Kids were asked to name a TV program they felt younger kids should not be watching. As an extension, try the following:

- Have kids in Grades 6-8 write a letter of advice to younger kids or to the parents of younger kids suggesting programs that they recommend and those that they consider inappropriate. Ask them to explain the reasons for their choices.
- Have kids in Grades 7-10 draft a list of media-related babysitting guidelines, which would include programs or games that they would watch with their younger charges and again, explain why.
- Have kids in Grades 3-6 create a role play with two parents plus a child trying to convince the parents that there's a particular program he or she should be able to watch.

### **V-Chip or Program-blocking Feature**

- Have kids debate the pros and cons of a blocking feature. Or create a role play for younger children in which a family at dinner time is deciding on whether they should have a blocking feature in their TV set, again stressing arguments for and against.

### **Mature Video Games**

- Ask students: Where do you get your information about new video games? What forms of advertising do video game manufacturers use? What techniques do they use in their advertising (images, words, design) to appeal to prospective buyers?
- Have them bring in examples of print ads or even game boxes to analyze the ways in which the games are presented.
- Have students in Grades 7-10 interview a number of owners of video stores and video game shops about their rental policies. What do they do when underage kids want to rent mature

games? How are video games displayed in their stores? What do the store owners have to be concerned about? What do the students think about the quality of the store owners' arguments?

## **Restricted Access to Mature Entertainment**

The survey data shows that by Grade 7, the majority of kids have seen restricted films at home on video and more than 50% of the boys have played mature-rated video games. Again, students in your class may want to graph class results and then compare them with those in the national study. (**Kids' Take on Media Report, pp. 59-65.**)

**Note:** Disturbing movies tend to be remembered longer than feel-good films. Frightening memories linger longer for boys than girls.

Interestingly enough, the kids surveyed said that there should be tighter age restrictions on mature-rated video and computer games than on R-rated films. Reframe this finding as a debate topic, for example: "Let it be resolved that kids should have less access to mature video games than restricted movies." OR: "Let it be resolved that mature video games are more dangerous than restricted movies." Provide students with the data from the above-mentioned pages so that they can refer to the results and use them in their arguments.

## **And Then There are the Movies**

Kids were also asked to name two films that made them feel good. The films' primary qualities seem to be heroism and overcoming odds. The girls' choices tend to be romantic while the boys' choices emphasize adventure.

It's worth noting that in television programs, video games and films, boys tend to be attracted by fantasy, by characters who do things they could not do in real life, and violence.

For background information about specific films as well as intelligently written study guides, see **Scanning the Movies**, <http://www.chumlimited.com/mediaed/studyguides.asp>

## **F. OPINIONS ABOUT MEDIA VIOLENCE**

Students in Grades 7-10 were asked a series of questions about the possible negative effects of media violence.

How much do you agree with these statements.

- My family often discusses what we watch on TV
- My parents would be upset if they knew the words in some of the songs kids listen to
- We should study the media and talk about them in school
- The way people treat each other in movies and TV contributes to bullying
- Killing someone in a video game is not an act of violence
- Violence in the media contributes to violence in schools and communities
- There is too much violence in movies and on TV
- There is too much violence in hockey games on TV

Their responses indicate that kids who simply immerse themselves in media without any critical or “feeling” input are more likely to disregard media violence. However, when parents or other adults talk with kids about what they watch and what games they play, when they explore together the impact of violence, racism and sexism in the media products they consume, young people are more likely to be aware of the negative effects of media violence.

- Several of the questions above can be re-framed as provocative topics for debate.

### ***Additional Resources***

There is a wealth of material available for teachers about media violence as well as racism and sexism in media portrayals. Some of the best are:

- **Media Awareness Network:** Lesson plans range from an examination of consequences and media violence for students in Grades 1-4 to an exploration of put-downs for Grade-six children to advertising and male violence in Grades 11-12. They can be found at [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/lesson\\_search\\_results.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/lesson_search_results.cfm). They also have separate sections for racism and sexism.
- **Media Watch** is an organization devoted to educating people about violence, racism and sexism in the media. <http://www.mediawatch.com>
- **The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario** has prepared a guide *Take a Closer Look* which explores issues of media violence in the intermediate classroom. Available from EFTO at: Suite 1000, 480 University Ave., Toronto ON M5G 1V2  
Toll-free 1-888-838-3836      www.ETFO.on.ca

## **IN CLOSING: A FEW WORDS ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY**

It’s clear from the Erin report that dialogue with kids about the media is essential. It is our hope and intention that the information gathered from **Kids’ Take on Media** will help parents, educators and others concerned about the welfare of children to act in supportive and creative ways give young Canadians the best that the world of media can offer.

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