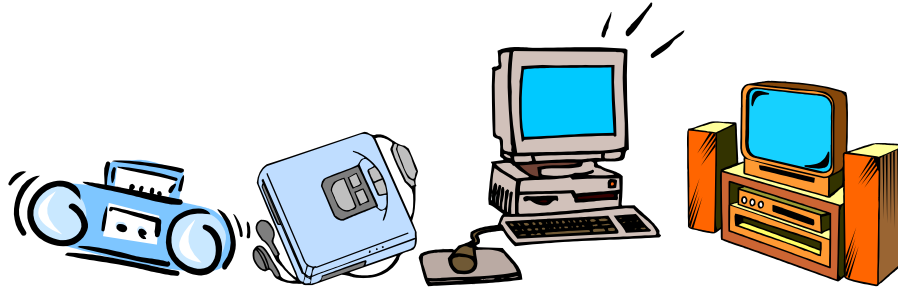


Me, My Kids and the Media: A Workshop for Parents



Introduction

The outline for this workshop has been created for maximum flexibility so that professional facilitators or parent leaders can change the material to meet the needs and interests of their own group.

Suggested Length

1-2 hours

Approximate times are given for various sections but these are only suggestions, not hard rules.

Goals

- To give parents a space to discuss concerns and strategies around how their kids relate with media, both in the home and with friends outside the home;
- To provide background information about how children and youth use media and what they think about their “media diet”. Much of the information comes from the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) study *Kids’ Take on Media* (2003) which surveyed more than 5,700 Canadian young people in every province and territory, and
- To provide parents with practical tips which will help their kids become engaged, active and careful media users. To give parents an opportunity to share with one another the positive media strategies that they have developed to provide their kids with the best that the world of media can offer.

Handouts

There are two separate handouts to give to participants, either during the workshop or at its conclusion. These include “Quotes by Parents” (very useful for jump starting a discussion) and “Tips for Parents”.

Diving In (approx. 5-10 min)

Not all workshop participants will know each other, so it is always worth taking the time to have people briefly introduce themselves to the group, say why it is that they have chosen to attend, and what they hope to get out of the workshop.

This exercise helps participants to feel connected. In addition, it gives the workshop leader a sense of where the group’s interests lie. Are they confused by what to do about video games or the Internet? Are their kids frightened by what they see on the news? Do they want suggestions about how to handle ‘R’ videos in the home? Given time restrictions and a large amount of material, the group might decide to focus mainly on one or two main areas for the workshop.

You can let them know that the workshop will provide them with some practical suggestions. You can also invite them to think about what has worked well in their homes, so they can think of strategies they might want to share with other participants later on in the workshop.

Who has What? (10-15 min.)

Communications technology – television, VCRs, DVDs, Play Stations, computers, the Internet, even cell phones and pagers – are part of our everyday cultural environment. Many kids can’t imagine a life without them or remember a time when they weren’t part of a “normal” household. In pairs or groups of four, have participants list the “media” they have in their homes. Ask them to rate which media they find most useful and pleasurable and which ones they find most problematic. Why? Is there a distinction between their ratings and what they imagine their kids would say?

Are there media experiences they share with their kids? Can they name their kids’ favourite TV shows? Can they name their kids’ favourite video games? Do they watch with their kids? Do they play games with their kids?

Background: What Kids Told Us (10-15 min.)

There are many articles written by adults about the effects of media, and particularly media violence, on young people. There are hundreds of research studies too. But what do kids have to say about these matters?

In 2003, the CTF commissioned a groundbreaking survey, ***Kids' Take on Media***. More than 5,700 Canadian kids, aged 8-15, in every province and territory, told us:

- Which media they use;
- What satisfactions they get from their media use; and
- How they think their media diet affects their behavior and values.

Some of the most striking findings are:

- Almost 50 percent of Canadian kids, aged 8-15, have their own TV. Twenty-six percent have their own computer hooked up to the Internet and by the time they reach grade 10, 22 percent have their own cell phones.
- A large number of kids say they've experienced no parental guidance on which videos or TV programs they can watch, which video or computer games they can play, or for how long.
- Parental involvement makes a big difference. Research indicates that parents, through supervision and discussion, play a critical role in making their children more aware of the negative impact of media violence. Left to their own devices, kids will tend to regard media violence as harmless.

TV

Kids rate their favourite TV programs as "exciting" and "funny". Violence is **not** what turns them on.

News

- Younger children (grades 3 to 6) are the ones most frightened by the news, feeling that their personal safety is at risk.
- Frequent news watchers feel more worried about the world but also more motivated to do something about it.

Video and Computer Games

- Younger kids are the most frequent video and computer game players. From Grades 3-6, 60 percent of boys play video or computer games every day. In Grade 10, more than 30 percent of boys still make this a daily activity.

- Parents supervise video and computer games far less than TV programs. Parents' knowledge of games' content is either very superficial or non-existent.
- One of the top choices of video games for both anglophone and francophone boys in grades 3-6 is "Grand Theft Auto", an ultra-violent action game aimed at mature audiences, which involves murder, severe violence and prostitution.
- Kids believe that there should be tighter age restrictions on mature-rated video and computer games than on R-rated films.

Films

- More than 75 percent of kids in grades 7-10 view restricted movies at home.
- Disturbing movies tend to be remembered longer than feel-good films. Frightening memories last longer for boys than girls.

***Note:** You may want to give participants a general overview of the above material or you may choose to concentrate on a specific area such as news or computer and video games.*

Handout: What Other Parents Say

These quotes from other parents are an effective bridge to move the participants from receiving background information to discussing tips for action. They can be used in several ways. You may choose to use one quote to spark a general discussion, e.g., that parenting in the 21st century involves making kids media-savvy.

The way I see it, we have to teach our kids about the world. We don't keep them inside just because there are cars on the road. But that doesn't mean we let them play in the traffic either. Instead we teach them the skills they need to get across the street safely. I figure it's the same with television. We have to make our kids smart about TV.
(Jim T.)

Or divide participants into groups of four and give each person a copy of the handout. Then ask each person to choose the quote they respond to most and then tell the others in the group why.

This exercise will naturally lead either into a discussion of a problem area or description of some successful strategy.

Media Tips for Parents (20-30 min.)

The Media Tips are set up as a separate handout, so that participants can take them home as handy reference.

It's important to stress the impact that parental involvement has on creating active and engaged media consumers. Parents are still kids' best TV guides – and that goes for videos and films and computer and video games too.

The most useful rule of thumb is:

- Choose **for** your children when they're young.
- Choose **with** your children when they're older.
- **Watch with your kids and talk with your kids whenever you can.**

ALSO: Suggest that participants try putting the TV or computer in the family room rather than in the child's bedroom. That makes for easier supervision and more chance for family discussion.

The tips deal with the following areas:

Television Tips

To help children and youth become active, engaged and critical viewers, encourage them to talk back to the TV set, predict what will happen next as they are watching a program unfold and create lives for the characters with whom they feel most connected.

The exercises "Five Handy Questions" and "What Happens When?" help to get discussion started and stimulate their imaginations.

Television News

For many children, the scariest program on TV is the news because they know the violence is "real". This is particularly so for younger children who often don't have the information and experience that would give them some perspective on the news items that they hear or see. Parents can help calm the fears of younger children and develop the critical abilities of their older kids.

A Parent's Quick Check List About Violence

Three handy categories are supplied that help parents evaluate whether a program, film or game is appropriate for their child.

Video and Computer Games

It's interesting that the young people surveyed in ***Kids' Take on Media*** called for tighter age-restrictions on mature-rated interactive games than on R-rated films. It's also clear that many parents are unaware of the content of the games which their children are playing.

To help parents make informed choices, we have included the rating system developed by the Entertainment Software Review Board.

Note: It is quite likely that many of the participants in these workshops will have developed some very successful strategies of their own when dealing with their kids' media experiences. It's especially important at this point to invite them to share those ideas with one another.

A Word in Closing

Media experiences are part of people's and families' everyday lives. Everyone has a lot to say about this subject and it is quite likely that a 1-2 hour workshop on this topic will barely scratch the surface. It's quite possible that parents will want to meet again to share problems and solutions, as well as trading information about wonderful programs, films, web sites and computer and video games.

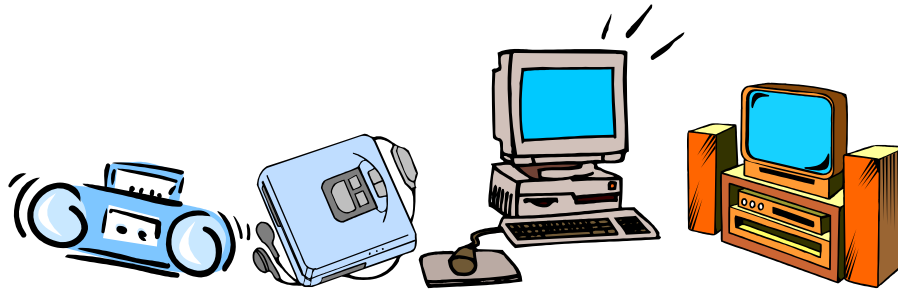
For those who have access to the Internet and want further information about ***Kids' Take on Media***, go to www.ctf-fce.ca.

For an excellent site full of useful tips for parents on children, youth and media, check out the Media Awareness Network at www.media-awareness.ca

This workshop was produced by Arlene Moscovitch for the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the national voice of 240,000 teachers across Canada.

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What Other Parents Say



The way I see it, we have to teach our kids about the world. We don't keep them inside just because there are cars on the road. But that doesn't mean we let them go play in the traffic either. Instead we teach them the skills they need to get across the street safely. I figure it's the same with television. We have to make our kids smart about TV. (Jim T.)

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*My son and I love to watch *The Wheel of Fortune* together. It's great for spelling. (Zainep R.)*

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*When my 11-year-old begged me to buy him *Grand Theft Auto*, I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't want to be a censor. But I didn't want to get him a game where he would be killing people and shooting prostitutes. We talked about the violence. Finally, I said if he wanted to play it at the corner store sometimes, I wouldn't say no. And I knew he'd probably play it when he went to some of his friends too. I told him "I don't want to give my money to the people who made that game because I don't agree with what they're doing." He put up a bit of a fuss but in the end he accepted it. And then we agreed on another game he could buy instead. (Heather L.)*

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As we watch a program, I talk to my kid about how the show was made. I say things like "Look, Robbie, bet you anything that's a rubber axe!" or "Why do you think they made the sound so loud in that part we just saw?" I do that because I think it will be interesting for him and because I want him to realize it isn't real life he's watching. (Julie R.)

Everyone worries about violence on TV. But I'm more concerned about the advertising. What's the message our kids are getting? That life is only worthwhile when you're a buying machine? (Mark T.)

I want my children to belong here but I also want them to know that there is a different way where we come from. I watch TV with my children. Sometimes I tell them "In Somalia, it's not the same. Our families, they are not like what we see here on TV. To me, it's important that my children understand these things." (Samyra W.)

Media Tips for Parents

Television Tips

Five handy questions to ask when watching TV with your kids. (They can be changed for video and computer games too)

- *Do you like it?
- *How does it make you feel?
- *Could that really happen?
- *How would you solve that problem?
- *How is this going to end?

What happens when?

The following questions will help stimulate your kids' imaginations, encourage them to try drawing or writing or making a comic strip of some of their answers.

What 's your favourite TV character's life like when the set is switched off? Does she live in a house or an apartment, with a family or alone, in the forest or maybe in another dimension?

What does he eat for breakfast and what do they do when they're not in front of the cameras? What about the "bad guys?" Do they have families? Does anybody care about them?

Television News

For younger children especially, the news can be very frightening. They may feel personally at risk, particularly if they see news items of disasters involving children. To check, ask your younger kids what the story was about. Ask them how the story makes them feel. Fill in gaps in their understanding and let them know they are safe.

For older kids, ask: Who's telling the story? Who isn't there? Would the people who have been left out perhaps have a different point of view?

A Parent's Quick Check List About Violence

What They See: What's the show or game about? Is there a lot of violence?

When They See It: Is my child the right age to be looking at this movie or playing this game?

How They See It: Is my child watching this alone? Is there someone there to explain what's happening on screen or to offer comfort if it's needed?

Video and Computer Games

Read the game description and instructions on the box before buying a video or computer game. Examine the pictures for clues to the game's content. Check for the ESRB (Entertainment Software Review Board) rating on the front of the box and the content description on the back. It will tell you the correct age-level for the game and notice anything special you should know about the content.

ESRB RATING SYMBOLS

EARLY CHILDHOOD: Titles rated "EC -- Early Childhood" have content that may be suitable for those age 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.

EVERYONE: Titles rated "E -- Everyone" have content that may be suitable for people age 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief and/or mild language.

TEEN: Titles rated "T -- Teen" have content that may be suitable for people age 13 and older. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.

MATURE: Titles rated "M -- Mature" have content that may be suitable for people age 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.

ADULTS ONLY: Titles rated "AO -- Adults" Only have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for people under the age of 18.

Look for games or films or programs that most members of the family can share together. And remember board games, puzzles and card games too. They are often inexpensive and can involve everyone in the family.