

Cries of Conscience

The Need for Media Mindfulness

Nancy Forer

A child wrestles with sleep
Another fidgets, whines and won't eat.
There sits one, expression stares in a glaze,
While in class he's unable to sit still or listen –
Oh, "it's just a phase" . . .
Some may say, so we think. Then we wonder, is there a
link?

Here's a six year old mimicking sixteen.
Across town they're mourning at burying
Kids killed by kids, playacting something they'd seen.

But what do we see?
What can this be?
Media in their lives . . . who would've known
This could be
The result of playing videos and watching TV.

—poem by Nancy Forer

What makes a fourth grade teacher literally beg on his knees to parents at a recent meeting not to expose their children to the influences of commercial media? William Wordsworth lamented over two hundred years ago that "our world is too much with us." We are confronted with television screens not only in our homes, but also in supermarkets, malls and clothing stores, post offices, airports, buses, planes, cars, waiting rooms, and dentist chairs! The mounting influx of information and entertainment that bombards us daily overwhelms, overstimulates, and inundates us. The world grows smaller as technology accelerates communication and transportation. As the world continues to become "too much with us" it becomes harder for us to disengage from it to find the quiet and feel the calm in our lives. Our experiences with nature are becoming less as we plug in more to our television sets and computers. How often do we see teens choose a walk over a Walkman? Fewer families

sit down together each day to share a meal. More children are spending more time away from home than ever before as the need for extended day care increases. "Looking back now," Jill Miller, a mother of two, honestly confesses, "I can so easily see how all of this media penetration arrived at precisely the same time as the stress in my life had mounted. I defaulted to TV and Videoland when I felt the most guilt about being a working mom."

We are becoming slaves to those media-links in our professional and our personal lives. Never before have children — blessed with the best in the world — needed treatment for stress, depression, hyperactivity, violence, attention-deficit, anxiety, and despair. Parents are dismayed. Headlines publish disbelief. And politicians practice denial. Can we remain dormant?

Schools are reluctant to tell people what they can and cannot do in the privacy of their homes. As parent and Waldorf school board member, Kit Rivenburg, notes, "If the results of media exposure were confined to the home, this stance would be understandable. Obviously this is not the case." Emergency rooms, for example, report significant increases of violence-related injuries of women and girls during televised Super Bowl games. Have you listened to some of the Rap lyrics and their utter disregard for the reverence and dignity of women? Increased numbers of cars stolen by young men and boys for "joy rides" are being raced through the streets, crashed, and abandoned in imitation of the "techniques" picked up from recent adventure movies. Children are being injured — even killed — when their "playacting" of wrestling and martial arts turns real. The list goes on. . . .

Teachers witness more violent play in kindergartens and more violent outbursts: the manifestations of overwhelming frustration or challenge. Neil Postman warned years ago of our *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in his book of that title. Children are bringing lethal weapons to school and are using them to kill, maim, and terrorize classmates. This is a new phenomenon of the extreme. To a lesser degree, but still noteworthy, are the changes in behavior in classrooms across the country: disrespect, cynicism, sarcasm, cruelty, offensive language. Some teachers routinely hear obnoxious sound effects from commercials and see actions being mimicked. Suggestive song lyrics and gestures are imitated. John Taylor Gatto—New York

State's teacher of the year, 1991—questions the aspirations of our current culture in his book *Dumbing Us Down*. Is this what we want for our children and for our future?

"I have found that even Waldorf friends have become lax in their commitment to seek alternatives to media enticement. It was so difficult for me to justify a family choice when other families were buying into these lifestyle choices of TV, computers and video games." Angeline Sturgis, mother of two sons, continues, "My biggest battle is other Waldorf families that have eliminated all the alternatives to media-dominated free-time and left me alone in my cause." Jill Miller admits, "We are a Waldorf family and weren't practicing the lifestyle and principles to reap the benefits—namely 'media mindfulness'."

The entertainment industry is mindful only of financial returns—not of their responsibility for child development or human behavior. A mindful approach to media must be solidly grounded in the home since the world at large exercises blatant disregard for media's potentially damaging, even lethal, affects. We are being called to make a conscious effort to create a space in our lives and homes for the sanity and sanctity of childhood. Where do we start?

As a founding parent at the Waldorf School of Princeton, mother of two Waldorf graduates now in college, and with fourteen years experience working in the school's nursery kindergarten, I felt an urgency to address these concerns. I began writing articles for our school newsletter in an effort to educate, enlighten, and inspire parents on the issues of media. As interest in this work grew a group was formed. We call ourselves Media Mindfulness. "The Media Mindfulness group is a wonderful, informal, non-threatening environment where we exchange ideas and experiences on living screen-free," says Camille Zimmerman, M.D. "I learned I wasn't alone in feeling TV wasn't the right thing for my children and that the no-screen decision was the best path for our children and the most supportive step we could take in assuring that the full benefits of the Waldorf education we love and desire for them would be reaped. As a mother of five," she adds, "If I don't need TV, no one does!"

"Meeting other parents with similar values, reading invaluable research and inspirational articles are highlights of my week," shares Hilary Cunniff, architect and mother of a four-year-old son.

We are being faced with a challenge and a choice. We need to be conscientious and sensitive to the needs of growing children—finding courage to commit to protecting childhood in a commercial culture that is so counter-conscious of this concern. “With a crash of consciousness,” Jill Miller adds, “we made a real commitment. . . no television or videos. . . Once there is a commitment, options start springing up to support it. What I started to see is that we don’t miss TV now and in fact are really having a good time with each other. We have developed deeper, more fun relationships. I, for the first time, feel like a real mom with a real family and not just some imposter.”

Media Mindfulness is opening dialogue, raising issues, questions, consciousness, responsibility, and effecting policy. While we don’t claim to have all the answers, we do proclaim a need for change. We are finding the courage to meet the challenge. What will your choice be? Who will decide for you, and how will you respond?

We encourage others to join in our work, and we welcome you with good will. It is our hope that good will come of this effort to protect children during their precious, short childhood years.

Nancy Forer grew up in New Jersey (the Garden State) and has tended gardens of children ever since. A graduate of Wheelock College in Boston, she worked as a psychomotor therapist for a Title I program in Cape Cod. She is a founding parent of the Waldorf School of Princeton and has assisted in the nursery-kindergarden for the last fourteen years.

