

Statement on Children and Media

Hawthorne Valley School

Throughout the years at Hawthorne Valley School, teachers and parents together have considered the effects of television in our children's lives. Every family that applies to HVS is informed of the HVS policy about TV: "Parents are asked to cooperate with the recommendation that children not watch TV on a regular basis. Regular TV saps the child's strength and creative energy, interferes with healthy social development, and weakens academic performance." (from the HVS Parent Handbook.)

However, over the last 10 years, the influence of media in our children's lives has grown so pervasive and so powerful (through not only TV, but also movies, videos, video games, and computer programs and games) that it is time to look at this issue once again. During this same period, scientists have identified with ever greater clarity and precision the effects of mediated experiences on the growing child. Moreover, an increasing body of research reveals the holistic, integrated, sequential nature of brain development,

“from the most primitive core (action) brain, to the limbic (feeling) brain, and finally to the most advanced neocortex, or thought brain.” (Johnson, p.3) It has been shown conclusively that children’s three-dimensional, real-time, multi-sensory experiences of the world through body, hand, and heart form the basis for their later cognitive abilities.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has published guidelines for parents and physicians: No media for young children under two years with very limited use after that and a “media-free bedroom.” The AAP also recommends that physicians now take a “media history” as part of every child’s routine medical exam in order to screen for media-related problems. (Healy, p.110)

In 1998 Keith Buzzell published a very thorough review of research into the neuro-biological effects of TV viewing in *The Children of Cyclops*. The physiological effects seem to be of greatest concern to these scientists, even more than the content of the shows. For example, EEG readings reveal that “children watching television often drop to a rather low level of arousal, with plenty of alpha [the brainwave indicating a resting state]. The posture is often a relaxed one, especially the facial musculature. This high level of alpha led me to speculate that children may be spending a huge amount of time learning how to be inattentive.” (Mulholland in Buzzell, p. 82)

Also in 1998, *Failure to Connect* by Jane Healy offered a lengthy review of current studies of children’s brain development and the effects of the increasing use of computer games and programs. Metacognition is the psychologist’s term for self-reflection and self-evaluation and is dependent on language development; we talk to ourselves as we problem-solve and this capacity, so important for academic success, develops rapidly between the ages of six and eight and once again at adolescence. Most media viewing precludes dialogue and discussion. “More extended reading and conversation, on the other hand, will encourage youngsters to articulate and mediate problems with words. If this important groundwork is neglected or subordinated to electronic babble, it will never be regained.” (Healy, p. 191)

The Alliance for Childhood has just published a review of research about computer use in education, titled *Fool’s Gold*. Not only was there a review of all the concerns and questions surrounding this new medium as an educational tool; but there is also clear

documentation of all the proven techniques for raising and educating healthy children, from close, intimate relationships with loving adults, to play, to hands-on physically engaging activities. The question we, as teachers and parents, continuously ask ourselves is: How can we prepare our children/students to meet the advancing technology of the twenty-first century with their full humanity?

In view of the wealth of research now coming to light, we would like to reaffirm our strong recommendation that children’s exposure to media be eliminated before the age of ten and kept to a minimum thereafter. The bodily, cognitive, and emotional development of the young child blossoms in interaction with caring adults and is undermined by media exposure. Waldorf education addresses the development of imagination and creativity, while the media feeds this normal, healthy longing for images with “entertainment” produced primarily in order to market an ever-changing flow of products. While Waldorf education most positively benefits the child who is free from media exposure, it cannot counteract the limiting, cynical, and confusing messages about sexuality, power, and violence embedded in a variety of “entertainment” media, including CD’s, TV programs, videos, and movies. Waldorf education actively engages the limbs, touches the feelings, and awakens the developing intelligence. These real-life, long-range benefits cannot be assured to children who have become desensitized or over-stimulated by media exposure. We hope that the supportive educational community surrounding HVS can be in the vanguard of affirming and restoring the healthy development and education of our young people and the integrity of home life.

In her lovely book, *Mitten Strings for God*, Katrina Kenison describes turning off the TV: “In our house, eliminating television cleared a space for the things we really care about. In fact, I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that turning off the TV was the greatest single thing my husband and I have done to foster creativity, imaginative play, and independent thinking in our children. What’s more, we realized that we suddenly felt more connected to each other and more in touch with ourselves. Somehow we got far more than we gave up.” (Kenison, p. 49)