

Parents Need X-Rated Eyes: Protect Kids from Indecent TV, Web

By Nancy A. Melville (The article is presented courtesy of HealthScout, ©2000)

SUNDAY, April 16, 2000 (HealthSCOUT) -- The age-old question seems to become more pressing with each new generation: How do parents prevent their children from being exposed to violent, sexual and otherwise inappropriate content on television, radio and now the Internet?

The answer, say parenting experts, is a combination of protection and preparation. As far as realistically possible, parents should monitor what children access and they should also prepare them for the images they will inevitably see.

"Parents have got to be aware of, monitor and control what, when and how much their children are exposed to," says Ed Dunkelblau of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning (IEIL) in Hoffman Estates, Ill. The institute conducts community programs to enhance social and emotional skills.

"Parents also have to be involved in talking with their children about how to make use of what information they do receive," he says.

Dunkelblau says the Internet, unlike radio and television, can become a parent's worst nightmare because it puts kids in contact with strangers in the outside world and compromises privacy.

"We recommend that before a parent ever allows a child to use the Internet, they sit down and discuss what the rules are -- not giving out their name or address, watching out for anyone who might want to meet them or exchange personal information. Until a parent does that, we strongly recommend that kids not be allowed to go on-line," he says.

More than ever, parents have to accept the fact that children these days are going to be exposed to all of society's dimensions, says Dunkelblau.

"Even if you banished them to a cave, they'd probably find objectionable cave drawings. So the point is, there's only so much you can control," he says.

A strong dose of parental influence, however, can give a child a healthy foundation with which to deal with that exposure, says Dunkelblau.

"Talk with your children about what you believe, practice role-playing and openly discuss issues. You can teach social and emotional skills that allow children to use problem-solving and to think about what their reactions are going to be and how they're going to handle them," he says.

Your talks should be tailored to your child's age, says Dr. Michael Rich, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Public Education and a specialist in adolescent medicine at the Harvard School of Public Health.

"At each developmental stage, kids have different abilities and different needs in understanding the media. Kids under age 7, for example, don't have the capability of discerning fantasy from reality, they can't separate someone dying in front of the screen from someone dying in front of them," he says.

In addition, he says, parents should play a big role in the television-watching process. "Children should watch TV in a co-viewing situation with parents. That doesn't mean the parent has to sit there and actually watch TV with them, but the parent can be in the room, aware of what's going on and when something comes up, be able to discuss and help children understand that experience."

When it comes to outside influences, Rich and Dunkelblau agree that school should help prepare children for the images they'll be exposed to.

"We're at the point where we have to demand formal media education from our schools," says Rich. "We already offer public education so that we are literate enough to be good citizens, and now we need to apply that level of literacy to all types of media."

"You can't avoid it. We live in a violent society," Dunkelblau adds. "Our best hope is to raise the next generation to be aware of that and to make choices that are different."

What To Do

There is only so much that you are able to protect your children from, you must prepare them for the rest. As a parent, you should monitor what your children access.

"Parents have got to be aware of, monitor and control what, when and how much their children are exposed to," says Dunkelblau. "Parents also have to be involved in talking with their children about how to make use of what information they do receive," he says. Discuss with your children your beliefs and the issues that they will have to deal with, and practice role-playing. In this way, you can teach them the social and emotional skills that will allow your children to build up their problem-solving skills. They will learn to handle their reactions properly.

Tailor the discussion to your child's age and developmental stage. "At each developmental stage, kids have different abilities and different needs in understanding the media," says Dr. Michael Rich, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Public Education and a specialist in adolescent medicine at the Harvard School of Public Health. He states that children under 7 are not capable of distinguishing fantasy from reality. They are not able to separate real-life death from a death in a movie or video game.

Dr. Rich adds, "Children should watch TV in a co-viewing situation with parents. That doesn't mean the parent has to sit there and actually watch TV with them, but the parent can be in the room, aware of what's going on and when something comes up, be able to discuss and help children understand that experience."

Watching television with your children will also prepare them for any outside influences they are exposed to. "You can't avoid it. We live in a violent society," Dunkelblau adds. "Our best hope is to raise the next generation to be aware of that and to make choices that are different." You can read this HealthSCOUT story about a recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics to keep kids under age 2 away from TV.