

Chicago Tribune

FAST CHAT

Prep kids to be savvy TV watchers

By Kristy Kennedy
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

If you're a parent, chances are you've parked your child in front of a show to get dinner started, to call the insurance company or to have a few minutes of quiet.

Don't expect Nicole E. Dreiske, director of children's programs at Facets Multi-Media, to give you a guilt trip about it. Do, however, expect her to ask you if you've talked to your tot about what he's watching on that big box sitting in your family room.

Dreiske (also the founder/artistic director of Chicago International Children's Film Festival) leads media literacy seminars aimed at caregivers of young people including teachers, day care providers and parents. Later this year, she plans to self-publish a book to be read aloud with young children, making them more savvy TV watchers.



Facets' Nicole Dreiske wants caregivers to help children watch TV in smarter ways. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE

Q Aren't parents supposed to turn off the TV?

A For the last 50 years, parents have been advised to turn it all off or watch everything with their children. Think about all the different kinds of styles of families. It is impossible for parents to do that. Or as one parent told me, "Oh, great, I get to be the weird mom." We've turned parents into media wardens, which causes them to be alienated from their children. There's a whole lot more in our power that we can do than turn it off.

Q So, what should parents or caregivers be doing?

A Parents are smart and they love their children. They are very much inclined to prepare their children for experiences. Children are prepared for the first day of school, first trip to the zoo and first trip to the doctor, but parents don't take one minute to prepare them for what will influence them through their lives. Children spend 1,200 to 1,400 hours a year in front of the television and no one is talking to them about

how they are responding to it. We're creating a horrible, fertile environment for them to draw conclusions we don't want them to draw.

Q Like what?

A In the absence of dialogue with their parents, children form their own relationship with the TV and it's not consistent with the values of our culture. Think about the shows that are so popular that our kids are watching. Oprah asked some parents to sit with their kids and make a hatch mark every time they saw something with a sexual innuendo. The mothers were blushing; 5- and 6-year-olds laugh at condom jokes. There are Viagra ads on during football games. The first step is to turn the light of awareness around and get kids to focus on what they're thinking, instead of just focusing on what's on the screen.

Q So how can parents get their kids thinking?

A To get the ball rolling, we've developed lots of little scripts that parents can use with their kids. "What is the difference between what we're looking at in this book and on the television screen? That's right, pictures. Have you ever seen anything that was very different from what your mommy or daddy told you was good to do?" Everyone has seen hitting and guns. And so you go on and establish that television can be fun, but that it can also be bad or sad or scary. Then you say, "When you see something especially fun or bad or sad or scary, come talk to me about it." Just starting to talk with our children about how they are reacting to what they watch helps make media part of the normal family dialogue. It's healthy and empowering and it gives kids the chance to process the ideas they're picking up.

Q My boys sometimes come to me and say, "Mom, I watched this show and it was violent, but it wasn't that violent." Where do I go from there?

A You need to have an indulgent smile on your face most of the time so the kids have a safe environment to disclose what they are watching. One good strategy is to find out more information. Talk about the characters and what happened. "Between the first and last time you watched this, how did it start to look to you? Was it boring?" You wait for the golden answer that the violence looks normal or ordinary. Then say, "That is amazing to me that someone hitting someone looks normal. What does that mean to us? Do you think anyone might try that?" And they say, "My little brother," knowing they were once little too. You are getting them to think about it.

When you have your values going forward in their media choices, then you are there with them when they are watching television. If you go past that and help them digest and sort through what they are watching, then we'll be turning the problem into a solution.

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