

# Making Good Decisions: Parenting Strategies to Guide Young Children's Media Use<sup>1</sup>

Stephanie C. Toelle and David C. Diehl<sup>2</sup>

Guiding your children's media use based on your values can be a challenge in a media-saturated world. The earlier you start teaching them, joining them in front of the television or computer, and even setting time limits and controls, the easier it will be as they get older. This publication will give parents viewing strategies, suggested media guidelines, and review media policies designed to protect children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under six years old watch no more than two hours of screen time a day and that children two years old and younger watch no screen time at all.<sup>3</sup> The restrictions are based on child development research. Young children have trouble distinguishing fact from fantasy or make believe, meaning they may have trouble differentiating when something on TV is real. This could make certain scenes even scarier than they are! They are also very gullible and don't understand jokes or sarcasm very well. Imitation of behavior on the screen is common, too.<sup>4</sup> More information on the impacts of media on children's development is available through other [Making Good Decisions](#) publications.

## Three Strategies to Guide Viewing

For children six years old and younger, parental media control is needed more for accidental viewing rather than intentional inappropriate viewing. Parents often use one or a combination of three strategies to avoid unwanted viewing: **instruction**, **co-viewing**, and **restrictions**.

With **instructive guidance**, the parent discusses the program content with the child and helps him or her evaluate it. Usually these children learn more from educational shows, are more critical towards media violence, and are less inclined to request products advertised in commercials than children not receiving parental instruction.

With **co-viewing**, the most common strategy, the parent watches television or plays a game with the child without discussing the content.



Figure 1. Take time to watch TV with your children. (Cupolo, 2009)

Though not actively engaged, the social experience provides modeling and a sense of closeness and acceptance.

Parents use **restrictive guidance** when they set limits on material watched, including what is watched, when it is watched, and how much they are allowed to watch. These children do spend less time with media.<sup>5</sup>

1. This publication is FCS2298, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published: May 2009. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
2. Stephanie C. Toelle, extension agent IV, Duval County Extension; David C. Diehl, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Florida Cooperative Extension Service; Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; University of Florida; Gainesville 32611.

**The use of trade names in this publication is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. UF/IFAS does not guarantee or warranty the products named, and references to them in this publication does not signify our approval/disapproval to the exclusion of other products of suitable composition.**

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Employment Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension service. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Millie Ferrer, Interim Dean.

A couple of organizations recommend the following restrictive three-step process to set family guidelines on TV, movies, video games, and music. *TV Watch* in particular recommends that parents:

1. Learn the rating system.
2. Decide what is right for you and your family.
3. Use technology for parental control that blocks inappropriate programming.

Digital TV, satellite TV, Xbox 360®, Sony PlayStation 3® and PSP®, Nintendo Wii®, Windows Vista®, and Apple Leopard® operating systems have built-in parental controls that you can use for blocking and/or monitoring your child's use. The *TV Watch Guide to the TV Ratings and Parental Controls* and the *2008 MediaWise Parents' Guide to Video Games* give excellent set-up instructions and parental guidelines. Check for the Web sites at the end of this publication.<sup>6,7</sup>

When determining your family's approach to viewing, you should consider your values and the viewing goals you have for your children. Consider the benefits of instructive guidance, co-viewing, and restrictive guidance and find a balance that works for you.

### Media Policies to Help Parents

Parents' efforts to limit unwanted viewing have been supported by policies such as the Children's Television Act (CTA) of 1990 and the Three-Hour Rule of 1997. The CTA limits commercial time during children's programming, increases educational programming for children, and bans host selling, a practice of using a character from the program to "sponsor" a product in the ensuing commercial. This act was expanded by the Three-Hour Rule which requires three hours of educational programming each week.<sup>8,9</sup>

Though now unnecessary with the advent of digital television and the dismissal of analog television, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 required V-Chips in all newly produced television sets that were 13 inches or larger. The V-Chip

blocked unwanted channels through programming set by parents. Research found that very few parents consistently used the V-Chip, even after special training.<sup>10</sup>

A sustaining part of this act, however, is the establishment of a rating system to guide parents in selecting appropriate viewing for their children. Learning the rating indicators has been challenging for many parents. Rating systems are listed below,<sup>11-12</sup> but are further explained by Web sites in the Internet Resources section of this publication. Sadly, research finds that many parents are not successfully using the rating systems. Some recommend the creation of a universal rating system.<sup>13</sup>

### Movies

- G: General Audience
- PG: Parental Guidance suggested
- PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned
- R: Restricted, under seventeen requires accompanying parent or adult guardian
- NC-17: No one seventeen and under admitted

### Television

- TV-G: General audience
- TV-Y: all children
- TV-Y7: directed to older children, age 7 and above
- TV-14: parental guidance suggested
- TV-MA: Mature Audience only

Television stations may also use the following content descriptors:

- FV: Fantasy Violence
- S: Sexual content
- V: Violent content
- L: Harsh Language
- D: Sexual Dialogue

### Computer and Video Games

- EC: Early Childhood, suitable for ages 3+
- E: Everyone
- E10+: Everyone 10 years and older
- T: Teen, suitable for 13 years and older
- M: Mature, suitable for 17 years and older
- AO: Adults Only, 18 years and older

## What Can Parents Do?

*How can parents guide their children's viewing and be confident of its content? Parents can be proactive by following these suggestions:*

- **Know the ratings.** They give parents a quick and easy screening.
- **Use the ratings** when purchasing software, movies, games etc. Teach your child to recognize and make decisions based on the ratings.
- **Set the parental controls.** Get into that manual and set limits on your computer, game system, or TV.
- **Apply the three guidance strategies.** Consider your goals and find the appropriate balance for your family.
- **Use websites that provide an extensive content analysis** for further consideration of movies and games. Read what other parents have to say!
- **Watch the movie, play the game.** Preview the media that your child is begging for!
- **Think of your child's developmental level.** Can he/she differentiate fact from make-believe? How will it affect your child later?

## Internet Resources

The following are reliable resources for parents and professionals interested in learning more about policies regulating media for children and tools that help direct viewing choices.

### American Library Association:

[www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)

Offers a link to Great Web Sites for Kids on a variety of educational topics.

### Beliefnet:

[www.blog.beliefnet.com/moviemom/](http://www.blog.beliefnet.com/moviemom/)

Movie reviews from the perspective of a family with children and issues that may concern parents.

### Common Sense Media:

[www.common Sense Media.org](http://www.common Sense Media.org)

Provides a 'Decider-Slider' and 'Content Grid' to help parents determine if media content is

appropriate for their children. Parents can also search TV, books, games, Web sites, and music titles for reviews. Many other media articles and parent tips are available.

### Control Your TV:

[www.controlyourtv.org](http://www.controlyourtv.org)

More for parents on parental controls, rating systems, violence, suitable family programming, educational programs, monthly previews, and media literacy links.

### Entertainment Software Rating Board:

[www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org)

This non-profit organization assigns ratings to entertainment software, enforces guidelines on advertising, and promotes online privacy practices. Site lets you search by software title or publisher, rating, platform, and type of content. Offers ParentTools™ and GamerTools®, features which e-mail you the latest in games based on criteria you submit; also offers a “search widget,” which downloads to your desktop and conveniently searches ratings on computer and video games.

### FCC Parents' Place:

[www.fcc.gov/parents/](http://www.fcc.gov/parents/)

Information for parents on TV rules, programming, ratings, children's access to the Internet, limiting commercials, and childhood obesity.

### Get NetWise:

[www.getnetwise.org](http://www.getnetwise.org)

Information for keeping children safe online, protecting your computer and privacy.

### Kids-in-Mind:

[www.kids-in-mind.com](http://www.kids-in-mind.com)

Movie content analysis, particularly addressing sex and nudity, violence and gore, profanity, and substance abuse.

### MediaWise/National Institute on Media and the Family:

[Mediafamily.org](http://Mediafamily.org)

Gives parents the latest information on various technologies to guide their media lifestyle and make informed decisions. Provides the acclaimed *2008 MediaWise Parents' Guide to Video Games*.

**Motion Picture Association of America:**

[www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org)

Web site offers great resources for parents to monitor and make choices about movies under their *Parental Resources* link.

**Open Congress:**

[www.opencongress.org](http://www.opencongress.org)

Check the status of new bills and summaries of others that have been enacted.

**The Pause, Parent, Play Project:**

[www.pause.parentplay.org](http://www.pause.parentplay.org)

Gives parents tools to think about how their children might react to the media, to make a decision as a parent regarding what is right for their child, then enjoy the chosen media as a family.

**The TV Boss:**

[www.TheTVBoss.org](http://www.TheTVBoss.org)

Gives parents advice to take charge of media in the home. Provides instructions for setting your parental control programs for cable, digital and satellite television.

**TV Guidelines:**

[www.tvguidelines.org](http://www.tvguidelines.org)

Gives full descriptions of the TV ratings, as well as Web links to help parents use the V-chip feature.

**TV Watch:**

[www.televisionwatch.org](http://www.televisionwatch.org)

Provides *Television Tools for Parents 101, 1-2-3 Safe TV* guidelines, and more on parental tips and controls.

**Endnotes**

<sup>3</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Public Education. 1999. Media Education. *Pediatrics* 104(2), 341-343. "Ugg"cnq<422300 gf kc"Xkqgpeg0Rgf kc vt keu"32: \*7+."3444/34480

<sup>4</sup> *Ages and grades: Highlights*. Common Sense Media. Retrieved January 16, 2009 from <http://www.common sense media.org/grade-pre-k>.

<sup>5</sup> Koolestra, C.M., and Lucassen, N. (2004). Viewing behavior of children and TV guidance by parents: A comparison of parent and child reports. *Communications*, 29, 179-198.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> National Institute on Media and the Family. 2008 *MediaWise Parents' Guide to Video Games*. Retrieved January 16, 2009, from <http://mediafamily.org>.

<sup>8</sup> Participatory Politics Foundation and the Sunlight Foundation. Open Congress. Retrieved January 6-7, 2009, from <http://www.opencongress.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Jordan, A. 2008. Children's media policy. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 235-253.

<sup>10</sup> Scantlin, R.M., Jordan, A. (2006). Families' experiences with the V-chip: An exploratory study. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 6(2), 139-159.

<sup>11</sup> Motion Picture Association of America. Retrieved January 6, 2009, from <http://www.mpa.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Entertainment Software Rating Board. Retrieved January 6, 2009, from <http://www.esrb.org>.

<sup>13</sup> The Harris Poll #125, December 14, 2007. One-third of parents use video game ratings to decide whether children play or get game and even fewer understand what the ratings mean. Retrieved February 19, 2009, from [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/printerfriend/index.asp?PID=845](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/printerfriend/index.asp?PID=845).

**Photo Credits**

Cupolo, D. (2009, January 6). *The Vacuum Glow*. Retrieved April 23, 2009, from FlickrCommons: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>