

# Parenting Without Television

Contributed by Joshua T Boswell

I grew up in a home of avid... no, ferocious... television and movie watchers. In fact, until I got married, I thought "family time" was mostly composed of sitting down to a movie, MASH, Star Trek, or anything else that the could be watched on TV.

It is likely that this trend would have continued into my adult life had I not married Margie...

In this respect, Margie was my polar opposite... she grew up without a TV. In the early days of our marriage I wondered why it was such a shock to her system when I constantly suggested that we spent "quality" time together watching something on TV or going to the movie.

It took her over 7 years to totally disconnect me. Regular TV programming went first and it went fairly early on. But plopping down in front of a movie on a regular basis, that was a bit harder to drag me away from.

Now, let's bring children into the discussion. You should know that we are the parents of eight children. As my children started growing up, I noticed that they too were beginning to believe "quality" family time was sedately sitting in front of the TV.

I noticed something else as well: I noticed the impact of long-term, current programming on the minds, attitudes, behaviors and work ethic of other children who were several years ahead of ours. (Currently our oldest is 10yrs). In that observation, I saw a direct and powerful correlation between the parents who were constantly bemoaning behavior challenges with their children and the sheer volume of TV that their children digested.

Parents would say, "My child simply does not listen to me!" And then I would see the child absorbing "The Simpsons". Hummm... Interesting. I could go on, relating challenges with smoking, drug use, violent behavior, disrespect for authority, etc... and connect them to hundred of different TV and Hollywood programs that portray, perpetuate and popularize these themes.

It seemed to make sense - just like eating a steady stream of junk food will eventually take its toll on your physical body, consuming large quantities of corrupt information will inevitably reflect itself in your behavior.

Somewhere around the year 1000 BC, Solomon penned these words: "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). In 1902, James Allen took that phrase and wrote a book called, "As a Man Thinketh", which detailed the vivid connection between the thoughts playing in our mind and the realities in the world around us.

Consider this quote from Mr. Allen in the opening chapter of his book, "A noble and Godlike character is not a thing of favor or chance, but is the natural result of continued effort in right thinking, the effect of long-cherished association with Godlike thoughts. An ignoble and bestial character, by the same process, is the result of the continued harboring of groveling thoughts."

Consider that in connection with the powerful principle of influence and persuasion that Dr. Robert Cialdini brings up in his book, "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion". In that book, he identifies the persuasion tactic of "Social Proof", that causes our minds to accept and then follow the behavior patterns of the sociality around us. He cites several examples. First, the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 that occurred in broad daylight with dozens of witnesses looking on. How could she have been killed with so many people watching? It was a mystery to the nation.

Cialdini concluded that the murder occurred precisely because there were so many people. More than the murder, they each were observing that no one was taking action, and so, following the social cues from their fellow humans, they each resolved to not take action. Social proof gave their atrocious behavior license and validity.

His second example is a rehearsal of his attempts to teach his son how to swim. His efforts were met with stern resistance from a young boy who was apparently terrified of water. The resolution to the impasse came when his son went to summer camp and saw his best friends jumping in the water and having a great time. The power of the social proof that swimming was acceptable radically changed his behavior and gave him permission to accept swimming as a safe and enjoyable sport.

But Social Proof is not the only principle of influence at work in the debate of allowing our children to consume large doses of TV. The other factor is one of Authority.

Here again, Cialdiini draws on a significant study done in the mid 60's. Two volunteers were invited into a medical facility. One was actually not a "volunteer" at all, but a plant as part of the experiment. A "doctor" conducts the experiment that runs like this: One volunteer is strapped into a chair with electrodes connected to them. The other volunteer (the real one) is placed outside the room and given control of a machine that can deliver metered electric shocks to the other volunteer. The volunteer strapped into the chair is asked a series of questions. Each wrong question is rewarded with a shock that increase in voltage each time. Thus the experiment becomes increasingly painful as time goes on. In reality no one was getting shocked - the fake volunteer was simply acting out the part. The point of the experiment? It was to determine how much pain and suffering one person would inflict on another under the direction of a recognized "authority" - in this case the doctor who sat at the arm of the real volunteer demanding that he continue giving jolts to the other volunteer, even if they were screaming out in pain.

The results were stunning - over 90% of the real volunteers continue to inflict pain on the others simply because the "authority" demanded it.

How does this relate to the debate? In our homes, many of us would never permit our children to use foul and abusive language, perform acts of violence on friends and siblings, consume drugs and alcohol, or indulge themselves in immoral behavior. We tell our children that these things are wrong and will lead to painful results. Yet, in the same breath we turn the TV on or rent a DVD that portrays this exact type of behavior and often times from people that are their peers. In effect, we are communicating to them that while we verbally disapprove of this behavior, in deed and action we exercise our authority as parents and actually encourage our children to participate. This is especially true of young children who still look to their parents as the primary authoritative figure in their lives. If such actions are truly wrong, they should be wrong all the time, in all circumstances.

Let me conclude with this personal example.

Almost 5 years ago, my wife and I made a made a bold move and turned off the TV - we unplugged everything for the entire summer. At first there were some grumbling. But in the end, it turned out to be the very best summer we ever had. It forced us to come closer together as a family, become more creative in our activity efforts, more cordial in our interactions, and more loving in our words and actions... because no one wanted to be miserable all summer.

For the most part, the TV has been off ever since. When a VERY good movie comes along, one that emphasizes the values and principles we love and strive to live in our home, we will sit down and view it together. Otherwise we enjoy time in the yard, board games, ping pong, horseshoes, family outings, etc...

Everyday we see more and more the beautiful fruits of the decision to turn the TV off. More than that, as they have grown, we see the stark contrast between them and their peers. Their minds are not filled with inappropriate images and confusing thoughts. They are able to reason better, think clearer, and learn more quickly. Their friendships run deeper and their love of family, authority, and educators is incredible. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they have reverence for sacred things with a vein of spirituality running through them that is undimmed by the ghastly images and behaviors portrayed in on TV.

In the end analysis, at least for our family, the effort to sift and sort through the good that is in the media did not deliver a positive return on investment. Our answer was to unplug from the TV and plug into the lives of our children. Borrowing from the poet Robert Frost, we have taken the road less traveled, and it has made all the difference.