

GREENWOOD SCHOOL

Human Values and the Effects of Television on Our Children

by Karen Rivers

It is aliveness that must be the guiding principle...

*Joy and happiness in living, a love of all existence, a power
and energy for work....*

*The need for imagination, a sense of truth and a feeling of responsibility –
these are the three forces which are the very
nerve of education*

-Rudolph Steiner

A child requires careful guidance by parents and teachers if he/she is to blossom into the radiant flower whose seed lives within their soul. The cultivation and care of a child is a challenging task, for their needs are complex. The development of the will, the heart, the intellect, and spirit of a child must be tended with insight and care. Within these realms a child has many needs, among them are the following:

- ❖ To experience physical activity which challenges their body appropriately for the level of development;
- ❖ To experience themselves as an active participant in life, capable and effective in their efforts, creating a strong self image;
- ❖ To explore and develop human relationships and values
- ❖ To acquire fundamental skills in communication; to learn to read, write, express themselves clearly and develop a capacity for analytical thinking;
- ❖ To release innate imagery through creative fantasy play, developing a strong imagination;
- ❖ To experience quiet time to sort their experiences, find their inner resources, and allow them to provide imaginative responses to their life

Children are born unto the earth "trailing clouds of glory", and bearing seeds within their souls, which may blossom into fruits which reveal the glory from whence they came. The care and nurturing of our children requires astute

guidance if these seeds are to fructify. It is a responsibility that calls for the highest moral consciousness, for we are the role models our children imitate.

The challenges of raising children are becoming increasingly difficult as we proceed forward in the age of technology. Efforts to cultivate strong will forces, warm and loving hearts, keen intellects, and aspiring spirits within our children become fractured by mechanization, media imagery, and weakened faculties of critical thinking. Our awareness and steadfastness as adults must increase proportionately to meet these challenges.

"How does the experience of watching television influence a child's development?" This question haunts parents and educators because television is omnipresent in our culture, and its effects are powerful. Kate Moody, in her book, *Growing Up On Television*, states:

*"...we now have evidence that habitual viewing (of television) can affect a young person's basic outlook and sensibilities, predisposition to violence and hyperactivity, IQ, reading ability, imagination, play, language patterns, critical thinking, self-image, perception of others, and values in general. Further, habitual TV viewing can affect the physical self as it can alter brain waves, reduce critical eye movements, immobilize the hands and body, and undermine nutrition and eating habits."*¹

These findings are frightening. If we are to make intelligent parenting decisions in the best interest of our children, it is essential to closely examine the specific effects of television viewing on various aspects of human life.

Physical Effects

Behavior is an indicator of inner equilibrium. It reflects one's mental state and the condition of one's emotional and physical well-being. What happens to children just after watching television? Their behavior deteriorates and hyperactivity is often the outcome. This is a consequence of images projected onto the brain while the body is in a state of stillness. The images stimulate the impulse to move, but the impulse is repressed. The physical energy created by the images, but unused, is stored. Then, when the television is turned off, this energy comes bursting forth in aimless, random, speedy activity.

This type of behavior exhibits "sensory overload" - a condition that is damaging to all human beings, but especially to the young. Sensory overload causes variations in the electrical activity of the brain and in the heart rate, blood pressure, and secretion of hormones - all of which contribute directly to a variety of diseases. Research has proven that habitual television viewing produces major

physical effects: "It can alter brainwaves, paralyze eye movements, immobilize the hands, irritate the central nervous system, assault the senses, and impact us with microwave radiation."² The activity of watching television does not support the well-being of a child's physical body so that it can work harmoniously with the emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of his or her being.

Effects on Self-Image

As children watch television, they internalize what they see. The internalized pictures color their ideas about their own abilities and potentials. A child becomes willing to let the television image answer the question, "Who am I?" The answer to this question emerges from the unconscious frustration of sitting in front of a wall of indifference. A child cannot communicate with the television. The people on the screen do not even know that the child exists. As a result, the child learns that his or her existence is inconsequential; it has no effect.

In response to this feeling, some children resort to hostility, extreme aggressiveness, physical violence, or constant screaming. This is their attempt to convince themselves and the world that they can affect their environment, that their existence does have some consequence. Other children withdraw, experience apathy, and tune out to the world around them. Internalizing the sense of impotence in this way can gradually erode the will. Children need to experience themselves as active participants in life, capable and effective in their efforts. The strong primal impulse of the will must be protected and nurtured so that a child can grow into adulthood with the confidence and capability to meet the demands of our society.

Effects of Human Values and Relationships

The hours that children spend in a one-way relationship with television people - an involvement that allows for no communication or interaction - influences their relationships with real people. In many families, the television has replaced the parents' role in the socialization of the child, the development of human values, and the creation of family rituals and special events. Urie Bronfenbrenner writes:

Like the sorcerer of old, the television set casts its magic spell, freezing speech and action, turning the living into silent statues so long as the enchantment lasts. The primary

*danger of the television screen lies not so much in the behavior it produces - although there is danger there - as in the behavior it prevents: The talks, the games, the family festivals, and the arguments through which much of the child's learning takes place and through which his character is formed. Turning on the television set can turn off the process that transforms children into people."*³

Television images teach values and behavior patterns, and children accept television characters as models for their own attitudes and actions. At some level, children begin to judge their own meaning, dignity, and worth in comparison with these portrayals.

But what are they teaching children about family relationships, sexuality, violence, and racial groups, for example? And what are they teaching children about conflict and difficulty? Children who become conditioned to seeing problems resolved in 30 or 60 minutes develop a low tolerance for the frustrations involved in solving problems of any real stature. As the traditional opportunities for expressing love within the family are being usurped by the television, children are losing the opportunity to explore and develop human relationships and values. Children need to learn through love expressed in everyday participation in family life so that they can grow to understand what the gift of human life truly is.

Effects on Reading

Children growing up in a literate society must acquire fundamental skills in written and verbal communication. The capacity to read, write, speak, and reason are functions of the left side of the brain - the hemisphere that orders data. When the brain perceives printed letters, scans them, and joins them in a meaningful way, it is making use of the analytical thinking processes of the left hemisphere. The right side of the brain works differently; it perceives the world holistically rather than analytically. It operates through pattern recognition rather than through coding and decoding. Television viewing, a process of perceiving pictures through pattern recognition, engages the right hemisphere of the brain.

Habitual television viewing has proven to be counterproductive to analytical thinking and to the mental processes needed for reading. Reading requires perceptual continuity and the ability to persevere line after line. However, television viewing habituates the mind to short sequences and an accelerated pace, causing children to be easily distractible. Inundated with so many messages, a child cannot stop to make sense of them. Eventually, the speed and

sequencing of television programming impairs the child's ability to focus and concentrate on the printed word.

Eye muscles develop and are strengthened by their daily use, and reading requires the use of intricate eye movements. However, television viewing conditions these muscles to hold the eye at a fixed point. Children who habitually watch television find that reading causes an undesirable strain on their eyes. To develop the skills necessary to read, write, and think analytically requires exercising the muscles to focus and the mind to order and concentrate.

Effects on Imagination

Daydreaming and imaginative play promote a child's perceptual maturity, emotional growth, and creative development. Imagination is the capacity of the mind to project itself beyond its own perceptions and sensations. Imaginative play allows children to become active users rather than passive recipients of experience, to work out difficulties and adjust the realities of life to their inner requirements. In make-believe play, children can take on the roles of their parents and redress grievances that have caused suffering; they can reenact painful scenes from everyday life and transform them into more satisfactory experiences. In the course of their play, children structure a world in which they have the power to act and to affect people and events. By this symbolic reversal of the power balance, a child is able to accept his or her position in the real world.

When children's minds are occupied with television, their opportunities and abilities to exercise their own imaginations become limited. Children begin to imitate adult-created images that are projected from the television into their brains. Eventually children become dependent on outside sources to create ideas and visual pictures for them. If a child's ability to create images from his or her own innate resources is stifled, so is the child's maturation toward healthy adulthood. It is the ability to imagine that underlies the capacity to love. The imagination is the threshold to the human spirit.

Effect on a Child's Spiritual Development

Through their imagination, children find expression for their innermost reality. They discover their true feelings and thoughts, which awakens their sense of self. To nurture this inner discovery, children must have some quiet time each day for reflection, processing the events of the day, and resolving conflicts that may be burdening them.

Parents usually recognize that children need some quiet time each day, but many parents use the television to facilitate this. Rather than providing a chance to work through the day's experiences, this fills the child with more stimuli, overloading the faculties rather than relieving them. Television fills the mind with other people's ideas and images, denying children the freedom to discover their own. Without this opportunity for reflection, children will feel frustration, overload, and most crucially, a lack of self-knowledge. Children must have the opportunity to know themselves, a process that evolves from within. Given this opportunity, a child will develop the capacity to explore his or her inner world and begin to grapple with the question, "Who am I?"

In Waldorf Education, human values are paramount. Every aspect of the pedagogy is based upon developing individual human potential and helping each child grow toward freedom in adulthood. This requires foresight and morally awakened acts of consciousness. The responsibility lies with us, as parents and teachers, to protect our children from harmful influences, and cultivate within them seeds of imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility. It takes courage and conviction to lovingly tend the precious seeds which our children bring with them from "that imperial palace whence they came." To provide the conditions that might allow our children to develop to their fullest potential is the greatest gift we can offer them and the future destiny of humankind.

1 Kate Moody, *Growing Up on Television* (New York: Times Books, 1980).

2 Ibid.

3. Kate Moody, *Growing Up on Television* (New York: Times Books, 1980)

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