

The Influence of the Mass Media



Mass Media

The[♂]ology
of the BO[♀]dy for families
& single people
plus Family Chastity Formation in Virtue & Purity of Heart

Universal Truths about Human Sexuality for People of All Ages

With extensive references to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church

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The Elephant in the Room: The Influence of Mass Media

Children deserve to grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships. They should be spared the degrading manifestations and the crude manipulation of sexuality so prevalent today. They have a right to be educated in authentic moral values rooted in the dignity of the human person. This brings us back to our consideration of the centrality of the family and the need to promote the Gospel of life. What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today? We need to reassess urgently the values underpinning society, so that a sound moral formation can be offered to young people and adults alike. All have a part to play in this task—not only parents, religious leaders, teachers and catechists, but the media and entertainment industries as well.¹

The Attack on Chastity in the Media

1 Overwhelming evidence suggests that the mass media is promoting a worldwide breakdown of chastity and moral values by exerting “pressure to reduce sex to something commonplace” through hundreds of millions of hours of “depersonalized, recreational and often pessimistic information...lacking the basic values of life, human love and the family.”² Family homes are receiving a steady stream of this material which is deforming the consciences of children and adults alike. A global effort to promote a sexual morality opposed to chastity is gradually debasing human sexuality and undermining the integrity and moral values of the family. Children of all ages are exposed to ideas, images, and information that is harming them physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. The damage that can now be done to your children in less than the twinkling

of an eye will remain with them for life, even though the harmful effects may not surface until years later.

2 A recent professional study of the *Catholic Medical Association Task Force on the Sexual Abuse of Children and Its Prevention* states:

For the child’s moral character to be consistent and stabilized, parents must have strict rules regarding exposure to media—TV, movies, video games, and internet. Children exposed to common media machines will have a hard time developing a respect for human life, for their own dignity, and for the dignity of others. The popular media teach greed, gambling, the advantage of power-over-others, and a perverse sexuality based on self-gratification. They teach that violence has no negative consequence, and action motivated by self-enhancement is superior to action based upon moral character. The

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC (April 16, 2008).

² TMHS, 1.

more exposure the child has to illustrations of primitive discharge of aggression, the less likely the child will learn to modify his aggression in healthy ways and the more likely the child will be to use relationships for self-gratification. The failure of parents to limit access to the media and to facilitate the child's development of self-reflection with modulation of emotion and aggression will result in a greater incidence of depression, suicidal ideation, unrestrained sexual activity, and in the escalating incidence of childhood violence at increasingly younger ages.³

3 Thousands of studies have been conducted over the years to determine how television programming affects children's health, attitudes, and behaviors. The conclusions of these studies can also apply to other media. In other words, inappropriate information obtained through movies, music, magazines, and the internet would have the same devastating results, as if it were obtained from television. Below are some representative findings from those studies:

- ⁴Television does influence behavior in children. Exposure to violent programming begets an inclination to

violent behavior.⁵ Too much time in front of the TV compounds the likelihood of childhood obesity.⁶ The presence of TVs in children's bedrooms has been linked to poorer academic performance.⁷ Exposure to sexual themes increases the likelihood that children will experiment with and become sexually active at an earlier age.⁸

- Studies have shown exposure to TV violence to be positively associated with aggressive behavior in some children, and exposure to sexual content increases the likelihood that children will become sexually active earlier in life. The extended argument implies that exposure to coarse language and disrespectful attitudes will also negatively affect children. Parents often take it for granted that children's programs are, by definition, child-friendly. This clearly is not always the case. Unfortunately this faulty assumption has led many parents to let their guard down and allow their children to spend hours watching television unsupervised. Young children are especially impressionable, and they learn social norms and behaviors as readily from television as from their peers or parents. The "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing" report documents that "children's television" is no safe

³ Catholic Medical Association Task Force Report, *To Protect and To Prevent*, 2006, 40. Used with Permission.

⁴ [1] Elif Özmert et al., "Behavioral Correlates of Television Viewing in Primary School Children Evaluated by the Child Behavior Checklist," *Arch Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 156; American Medical Association, 2002.

⁵ [2] Fact Sheet, "Television-How It Affects Children," American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002, available from <http://www.aap.org>; Internet; June 25, 2005.

⁶ [3] Jonathan Pitts, "TV in Kid's Room Hurts Academics," *Baltimore Sun*, July 5, 2005, available from <http://www.BaltimoreSun.com>; Internet; August 8, 2005.

⁷ [4] Michael Rich, "Sex Screen: The Dilemma of Media Exposure and Sexual Behavior," *Pediatrics*, Vol.116, No.1, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2005.

⁸ Michael Rich, MD, MPH Director, Center on Media and Child Health On the Release of Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: A Content Analysis of Children's Television. Report by the Parents Television Council. Used with permission.

haven for children, and parents must be extremely vigilant as to what their children are watching.⁹

- Children learn from media. Research has shown that exposure to media violence can lead to fear and anxiety, desensitization to the suffering of others, and increases in aggressive attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. A more recent, smaller body of evidence indicates that similar increases in other health-risk behaviors, including unsafe sexual activity and the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, are found among young people exposed to media portrayals of these behaviors as normative and attractive.
- TV makes kids violent...In 1994, researchers reviewed hundreds of studies involving thousands of children and concluded that there was clear evidence that watching violence on TV makes children more aggressive. Similarly, preteens and teenagers exposed to sexual content on television are much more likely to engage in the kinds of activities they see on the screen.
- Educational videos don't make infants smarter...According to a 2005 report by the *Kaiser Family Foundation*, no program targeting children younger than two has demonstrated any educational benefit. Evidence from studies my colleagues and I have done found that children who watch TV before age three score worse on tests of letter and number recognition upon entering school than those who do not. And for each hour of television a child watches on average per day before age three, the chances that child will have attention problems at age seven increase by 10 percent. A 2005 University of Pennsylvania study found that even watching "Sesame Street" before age three delayed a child's ability to develop language skills.
- Sitting around watching television—instead of playing outside—makes kids overweight...television-watching itself—unlike other sedentary activities such as reading, block-building, or working on art projects —encourages overeating. Snacking in front of the tube is a widespread habit. About 70 percent of the ads children see on television are for food products, and virtually none of them are for healthy choices.
- TV does not help kids get to sleep. In fact, in a 2005 study of more than 2,000 children, my colleagues and I found that the more television children watch, the more likely they have irregular sleep and nap patterns.
- Kids watch too much television. Actually, the bigger problem is what they watch and how they watch it...When parents watch with their children, the value of the best television programs is enhanced — and the harm of negative programming can be curtailed.¹⁰
- A study of 1,792 adolescents, ages 12-17, showed that watching sex on TV

⁹ Source: Dimitri A. Christakis is a pediatrician and researcher at Children's Hospital in Seattle and coauthor of "The Elephant in the Living Room: Make Television Work for Your Kids." Used with permission.

¹⁰ Parents Television Council, Facts and TV Statistics. Used with permission.

influences teens to have sex. Youths who watched more sexual content were more likely to initiate intercourse and progress to more advanced noncoital sexual activities in the year following the beginning of the study...Basically, kids with higher exposure to sex on TV were almost twice as likely than kids with lower exposure to initiate sexual intercourse. – *Study Conducted by RAND and published in the September 2004 issue of Pediatrics.*

- Factors positively associated with initiation of intercourse among virgins are watching sex on TV, having older friends, getting low grades, engaging in deviant behavior. Positive factors for virgins to abstain are parental monitoring, parent education, living with both parents, having parents who would disapprove of adolescent sex, being religious, and having good mental health.
- Children often behave differently after they have been watching violent programs on television. Children who watched violent shows were more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority, and were less willing to wait for things than children who watched nonviolent programs. –*American Psychological Association, Family and Relationships—Get the Facts: Children and Television Violence*

Recommendations By Catholic Parents

3 The evidence *is* overwhelming: Television will harm your child. Parents should exercise great vigilance over the information their children are exposed to through all the various forms of mass media, including television, movies, video games, music, radio, magazines, internet, and so forth. Based upon our research in writing this book and as Catholic parents, we have formulated a number of recommendations to protect your children from the devastating effects of the mass media. Your family is under attack by an agenda in the media to destroy purity, honesty, integrity, truth, and honor by deliberately violating every principle of Church teaching on chastity, holiness, and authentic love. It is also an attack against God and His plan for love in marriage and family life.

4 Parents must be vigilant: “Make no mistake: God is not mocked; for a person will reap only what he sows, because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit. Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up.”¹¹

¹¹ Gal 6:7-10.

5 Parents must take action and lead by example. If you want your children to be prudent in their use of the mass media, you must also be prudent. As Catholic parents, we must daily reaffirm our choice to live our Faith in word and action by, first and foremost, protecting the innocence of our children. The following eight recommendations are made with these thoughts in mind to help you create your own list of rules:

1. Firmly restrict the amount of television viewing time in your home to an absolute minimum.

2. Supervise your children while they are watching television. Talk about what they are watching, correct misinformation, note false advertising, etc.

3. Do not allow television for children under three years old.

4. Do not allow television sets in children's bedrooms.

5. Limit television, movies, and video games to the following:

- a. Christian programming from trustworthy sources like the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN).
- b. Educational programming that presents God's truth about creation and/or honors Church teachings.

- c. Entertainment and other programming that does not undermine the purity and innocence of your child, the family, nor the Faith.

6. Limit the time your children spend listening to the radio or CDs and in addition:

- a. Provide guidance in choosing music that is healthy.
- b. Listen to the lyrics and message and forbid any which undermine purity, holiness, and the Catholic Faith.
- c. Do not permit headsets or earplugs unless monitored.

7. Limit the amount of time your children spend on the internet, and to avoid problems:

- a. Always supervise your children while they are on-line.
- b. Make a list of trusted sites that are age-appropriate viewing for your child.
- c. Restrict searches and surfing to guard against unwanted exposure to dangerous images or information.
- d. Closely supervise all chat room activity in which your child has been permitted to participate and know the identities of those with whom they

speak.

8. Redirect any time that might be spent watching television to worthwhile and constructive activities such as:

- a. Daily family prayer in the home.
- b. Athletic activities that do not interfere with family meals, time together and daily family prayer.
- c. Encouraging children to develop their musical talents.
- d. Playing with friends or alone.
- e. Developing interesting hobbies.
- f. Reading good books.
- g. Doing school homework.
- h. Doing volunteer work.
- i. Visiting with family and friends.
- j. Doing charitable works of mercy.
- k. Engaging in family fun activities.
- l. Joining family discussions to develop healthy relationships within the family.
- m. Studying the Bible and other aspects of the Catholic Faith.
- n. Having children help with daily chores, other household duties, or a family business.
- o. Fathers can cultivate mutual interests with their sons like hunting, fishing, fixing things, rebuilding a car engine, and so forth.
- p. Mothers can cultivate mutual interests with their daughters like sewing, cooking, baking, gardening, and so forth.

6 So many of the ordinary daily routines that made families strong in the past have fallen by the wayside because of the influence of the mass media within the home. Because the media surround us everywhere we go, parents often do

not recognize its very harmful influence, even though it has become the proverbial elephant in the room, the one obvious, huge problem that no one wants to recognize or address. Like an unaddressed alcohol or drug addiction problem within the family home, the media can often dominate, control and gradually destroy the spirit of family unity and love. Sexual imagery and relationships once considered shocking and obscene are now being viewed by the whole family together in their living room. With all the obvious evidence, parents would be foolish to deny or procrastinate in addressing the scandalous flood of impurity violating their children's innocence within the home, since it can literally poison and destroy their souls. Since parents will be held to a strict accounting before the Lord as to how they either carried out, neglected, or produced scandal in their duty to educate and form their children in chastity, it is most urgent to take responsible and immediate action to control the use of media within the family home.

Summary Points

7 Parents routinely permit violence, pornography, and all the other sins against chastity to stream into the family home through the media which is actively deforming the consciences of their children.

8 The physical, spiritual and emotional health, and personality development of a child can be seriously harmed by exposure to television, movies, music, and the internet.

9 Watching sexual activity on television, at the movies, or on the internet encourages young people to commit sins against chastity and endangers their souls.

10 Parents must defend their children and the family home from the attacks against chastity directed at them by the mass media, since they will be accountable before God.

11 After eliminating or strictly reducing the media stream entering the home, parents can then be proactive in helping their children establish healthy relationships through family prayer, charitable works, and recreation.

12 Like an unaddressed drug or alcohol addiction within the family, the influence of the mass media has resulted in many parents being in denial or blindly ignoring its influence, so that they do not see this huge problem, even though it is obvious to others as the proverbial “elephant in the room.”