



*T*eachers  
*R*esisting  
*U*nhealthy  
*C*hildren's  
*E*ntertainment

# TRUCE

## Media and Young Children Action Guide • 2008

TV, DVDs, computers, video games and other electronic media are a powerful force in children's lives. Many children spend more time in front of a screen than in school. Shows, advertisements and the toys and other products linked to the media influence most aspects of children's development, learning and behavior.

*Many parents and teachers are concerned about this issue and struggle with what to do.*

**Our Action Guide will help you to:**

- *Promote informed and responsible use of media.*
- *Take action to reduce the harmful impact of media.*

### What Do We Know About Children and Electronic Media?

*Screen time reinforces the idea of violence as entertainment.* It can undermine lessons taught at home and school about how to treat people, solve problems and have fun.

*Screen time can undermine children's play.* It takes time away from play. When children do play, they often imitate what they see on the screen instead of making their own creative and imaginative play. Toys linked to TV shows and movies further limit creative play. Free-time activities and child-created play can seem boring. Creative play is vital for positive intellectual, social and physical development in the early years; it lays the foundation for academic learning.

*Screen time contributes to "problem solving deficit disorder" (PSDD).* The more screen time children have, the more involved they will be in a world created by someone else, the more they will come to expect fast-paced action and excitement and be bored when they don't have it, and the harder it will be for them to come up with their own interesting problems to explore, solve and learn from.

*Screen time leads to an emphasis on consuming.* Children learn to want the products linked to favorite shows—toys, clothes, lunch boxes and food.

In addition, children see 40,000 ads on the screen every year. Young children are victims of marketing because they believe what they see and hear.

*Screen time (educational and other kinds of programming) contributes to unhealthy eating habits and childhood obesity.* It reduces the amount of physical activity children have and contributes to snacking. The largest category of TV advertising directed at children is unhealthy food.



*Screen time teaches children lessons caring adults don't want them to learn.* It exposes them to large quantities of violence and anti-social behavior—both pretend and in the news. The violence can lead to increased levels of aggression, fearfulness and play with violence. Also, much of what children see on the screen promotes racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes as well as sexualized appearance and behavior.

*Screen time contributes to stress between children and adults.* Children watch programs adults find inappropriate. They nag for more and more screen time and nag for the products advertised on the screen. It makes it harder for parents to maintain what they want for their families.



# What You Can Do

## Parents and Children

◆ Help children develop thoughtful and responsible media viewing habits.

- Limit screen time. Decide together how much is okay each day or week. (With young children, start with the least amount that can work with your schedule and your child's).
- Set guidelines about what is appropriate viewing in your family. Apply guidelines to all media: TV, cartoons, videos, movies, video games, magazines and comic books. Help children select programs within your family's guidelines.
- Protect children from exposure to inappropriate media as much as possible. Be aware of what you are watching when your child is able to hear or see it.
- Teach your child to ask to watch television before being allowed to turn it on.
- Get TVs, video game systems and computers out of children's bedrooms.
- Make a chart (with simple picture illustrations for non-readers) of shows which your children want to watch and which you can agree are good choices. Check the chart regularly to help you discuss how things are going.
- Watch TV and movies with your children and talk together about what you see. [See box next page]. Aim for a give-and-take discussion rather than a lecture where you give the answers. Listen carefully, find out their ideas and fears, clear up misconceptions and share your ideas and concerns.
- Use media to spark your child's imagination and creativity. You can ask questions like: if you wrote the story, how would you change the ending? Would you add new characters? What would they look or act like?



*The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under the age of 2.*

◆ Encourage and support children's interests and skills beyond electronic media.

- Balance electronic media with playtime - encourage your kids to go outside and be active.
- Promote creative and imaginative play which children control, instead of play that looks like they are imitating what they see on the screen.
- Encourage children's play as a way to help them work out their own ideas and develop a sense of mastery. [Use the TRUCE Toy Action Guide available at [www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org)].
- Help children resist marketing; choose toys carefully.
- Provide play materials that can be used in many ways over a long period of time, such as blocks, play dough, dress-ups and props for dramatic play.



- Limit the number of highly realistic toys and other products (such as lunch boxes, tee shirts and breakfast cereals) that are linked to TV programs.
- Avoid media-linked toys, especially those connected to media rated for older children or adults.
- Find appealing non-TV activities for your family.
- Read to your child and go to the library. It's the best way you can build their literacy skills and help them establish a love of books.
- Have art supplies readily available and accessible for your children to use.
- Play age-appropriate board games.

### Adults and Children Can Talk Together about TV and Other Media

- **Discuss** each other's reactions (both positive and negative) to what you saw.
  - *What did you think about that show/game?*
  - *Did you like it when \_\_\_\_\_ happened? Why do you think it happened?*
  - *I didn't like it when \_\_\_\_\_. I wish they didn't have to hurt each other. What do you think?*
- **Help** them sort out fantasy from reality.
  - *What was pretend and what was real? How could you tell?*
  - *Help clarify confusion by saying things such as, "In real life things don't work that way. I wonder how they made \_\_\_\_\_ happen on that show."*
- **Help** them develop an understanding of advertising and marketing.
  - *How can we tell the difference between these ads and the show?*
  - *I wonder why they made the ad like that?*
  - *How do you think this product really looks in real life?*
  - *Do you think this toy or product is intended for boys or girls? What makes you think that?*
- **Compare** what they saw to children's own experience.
  - *Could anything like \_\_\_\_\_ happen to you? When? How could it be the same/different?*
  - *What would you do if you were in that situation?*
- **Talk** about the violence and other mean-spirited behavior that children see on the screen.
  - *What do you think about how \_\_\_\_\_ solved their problem?*
  - *If you had a problem like that, what could you do? What could you say?*
  - *Can you think of a way to solve that problem where no one gets hurt?*
- **Ask** questions that focus on stereotyped images and behaviors.
  - *I wonder why it's always men with big muscles that go to fight? Did you notice that?*
  - *The women always seem to need to get rescued by men. Have you noticed that? I wonder why?*
  - *I wonder why the "bad guys" have foreign accents? Wear dark colors? Have darker skin?*

\* Adapted from *Remote Control Childhood* (Levin, 1998)



## Parents and Other Parents

- ◆ Be aware of what children are watching outside your home. Communicate your standards to neighbors, grandparents, child care providers, babysitters, and anyone who may care for your child or children. Ask for their cooperation in limiting media exposure.
- ◆ Talk about media management with other parents; share tips and provide support for one another.
  - Help each other find solutions to problems media creates for you and your children (how to make good choices about what to watch and buy; how to turn off the TV while you're making dinner).
  - Agree on how you'll deal with TV and other media when your children are at each other's houses for play dates, birthday parties, etc.
  - Use each other to check on appropriateness of TV programs, movies, video and computer games.
  - Support each others' choices to resist media's negative influence.
- ◆ Challenge those who are still apathetic by sharing information on media's effect on children.
  - Talk about your concerns and approaches to media violence, stereotypical images and behavior, and media-linked toys.
  - Learn some facts to spark conversation and/or advocacy. For example, 61% of babies 1 year or younger watch TV. For more, see *TV and Your Child* on the TRUCE website.

## Parents and Community

- ◆ Raise community awareness about the effects of media on young children.
  - Ask your pediatrician and other health care professionals to become informed and advocate on this issue.
  - Bring TRUCE materials and other information to libraries, clinics, events, family and friends.
- ◆ Work together to reduce inappropriate content in the media and to create an environment more conducive to children's healthy development.
  - Contact TV stations, movie companies, toy manufacturers and local newspapers to voice your concerns. Urge other adults to do so, too. [See Action Guide Resources, p. 7-8]. Help children write letters. Check our website for letters that can serve as a guide.

## Parents and Teachers

- ◆ Ask your child's school to develop policies and educate parents about the problems created by media violence and how to deal with them.
- ◆ Work with schools to develop curriculum that incorporates healthy play, media literacy, and conflict resolution and violence prevention programs.
- ◆ Promote school-wide activities which help create a community of aware parents and teachers.
  - Sponsor school events such as a TV Turn-Off Week or a violent toy trade-in.
  - Create a media resource library to help parents use media wisely.
  - Have the PTA organize workshops and guest speaker events for parents on this topic.
  - Sponsor school-wide activities to involve children in alternative activities such as after school clubs.



## Teachers and Children

*The effects of too much electronic media can reach into the early childhood classroom. Teachers and child care providers can create an environment that counteracts the effects. During indoor and outdoor playtime, small group activities and class meetings teachers can:*

- ◆ Take an active role in creating a peaceful, cooperative community whose values and activities displace those given by the media.
    - Set up routines so that children help each other with getting dressed and classroom jobs.
    - Introduce stories of people who deal with challenges in powerful and resourceful ways, both real and fictional, for example, Rosa Parks, Sally Ride, the boy in *Abiyoyo*, the characters in *A Chair for My Mother*.
    - Work with families to mutually support the values of a peaceful learning environment. For example, create kits with books and activities for families to borrow. At parent/teacher meetings, discuss the effects of media on learning.
    - Discuss with children what they need to feel safe. Create a classroom chart with their responses.
  - ◆ Promote creative play that allows children to explore their ideas and use their imaginations.
    - Develop curriculum and foster play that encourages creative thinking and problem-solving skills.
    - Select open-ended toys and materials (e.g., art and recycled materials, blocks, dolls) that children can use in their own creative ways.
    - Resist use of materials that are linked to TV, movies and other electronic media – for example, puzzles, books and games based on characters such as Spiderman and Dora the Explorer. While children are drawn to characters from the media, schools and childcare centers should expand children's experiences and interests.
    - In communities where children have access to computers at home, minimize computer use with young children at school.
    - Observe for play that imitates popular media and guide children to use more of their own ideas.
    - Help children redirect play that includes fighting, such as pretending to be “good guys and bad guys.” Often they are stuck. For example, a teacher might say, “The Power Rangers have been very busy.
- I wonder if they are hungry and want to go to the dramatic play area and have a picnic.”
- Serve as a bridge between children acting out aggressive themes drawn from the media, and other children who are playing peacefully nearby to change the tone of the play.
- ◆ Promote alternative ways for children to feel powerful other than fighting, excluding, bullying or relying on media images or marketed products.
  - Help children redefine power to be the skills and accomplishments they achieve, such as crossing the balance beam, buttoning, opening a friend's thermos, overcoming fears.
  - Children's play sometimes deals with monsters. Teachers can extend those ideas by providing props, such as ropes for traps, ingredients for potions, cloth for caves, etc. Children can feel powerful while working creatively and safely on a common goal.
- ◆ Guide a conversation about superhero play with open-ended questions and comments that invite children to share their thinking. Sometimes children need a prompt; sharing an idea to begin can be helpful.

*Some examples:*

  - \* I have noticed a problem and I need your help figuring out how to solve it. A lot of children have been playing Power Rangers and it doesn't feel safe. (Refer to classroom chart about what children need to feel safe, see above.)
  - \* Can you tell me more about what makes you scared?
  - \* What could Power Rangers do instead of fighting to feel safe and powerful?
  - \* What can you do to feel powerful?
  - \* What do you think about giving ourselves a name to show that we are powerful? Shall we write your ideas on a list and tally them?



[See TRUCE website for an example of a classroom dialogue.]



- ◆ Address racial, gender and other stereotypes promoted in media.

*Media designed for children often reflect and promote stereotypes that limit children's ideas of who they can be, how they understand others and how they see the world.*

- Respond when children use media stereotypes in their play. For example, a group of white preschool girls who are playing "Princess" tell an African American girl, "You can't be Ariel because you don't look like her." An adult could respond, "What do you think princesses look like?" to help children explore the ideas they are getting about race from the media. Validate for children that they can choose whom they want to be: "Playing pretend means you are using your imagination – you don't have to look like the character in the movie to pretend to be it." This issue is addressed in the children's book *Amazing Grace* – reading the story with the children could create more opportunities to explore it.
- Look for opportunities to expand children's thinking. When a girl brings a Thomas the Tank Engine toy and a boy tells her the toy is for boys, a teacher might say, "Some people think that, but I don't agree. What do you think?"
- Have photos of people in non-traditional roles displayed in the classroom.

- ◆ Create opportunities for discussion about violence or scary events in the news.

*These things are often on children's minds, and they worry that they will happen to them. Children need to know that school is a safe place where they can get support processing unsettling information. Honor children's needs by responding honestly while not giving them too much information. Children need to be reassured that adults are working to keep them safe.*

**A sample dialogue between children and teachers occurring during free play time:**

**Sara:** *A hurricane came and flooded people's houses.*

**Eli:** *People are on the roofs!*

**Teacher:** *Where did you hear about it?*

**Sara:** *I saw it on the news. A baby was crying.*

**Teacher:** *I saw that, too. What did you think about it?*

**Eli:** *I was scared 'cause one time our basement had a little flood.*

**Teacher:** *A flood is scary, and lots of people are working together to rescue people and bring them to a safe place. Did people work together when the flood happened in your basement?*

**Eli:** *Yeah. My mom used a vacuum thing and my aunt kept us upstairs where it was dry.*

**Teacher:** *What do you think people are doing to work together to help with the flood you saw on the news?*

**Laura:** *They can use a helicopter to get them off the roof. Or a boat!*

**Teacher:** *What a great idea to use helicopters and boats, Laura.*

A teacher can follow up by bringing in pictures from the newspaper showing people being helped in the ways that the children mentioned and in other ways as well. Avoid pictures that show graphic or scary details. Doing this keeps conversation lines open with children, validates their ideas, and helps them feel more secure knowing that people are helping to make things better.

- When children are experiencing real life violence in their home or community, it becomes even more important to be a keen observer and listener. Children may be working out their own questions and ideas about violence as they play, and caregivers may need to seek support from a counselor, psychologist or from community organizations.



# Action Guide Resources

Keep by your phone or computer.

## Books

- Cantor, J. (1998). *"Mommy, I'm Scared" How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.
- Cantor, J. (2004). *Teddy's TV Troubles*. Madison, WI: Goblin Farm Press [Children's book about fears caused by TV.]
- Clinton, J. (2003). *The Other Parent: The Inside Story of the Media's Effect on Our Children*. New York: Atria.
- De Gaetano, G. (2004). *Parenting Well in the Media Age: Keeping Our Kids Human*. Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press.
- Greenman, J. (2001). *What Happened to the World? Helping Children Cope in Turbulent Times*. Bright Horizons [Download copies at: [www.brighthorizons.com/talktochildren](http://www.brighthorizons.com/talktochildren); order copies from: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)].
- Hoffman, E. (2002). *Changing Channels: Activities Promoting Media Smarts and Creative Problem Solving for Children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Hoffman, E. (2004). *Magic Capes, Amazing Powers: Transforming Superhero Play in the Classroom*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Levin, D. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Levin, D. & Carlsson-Paige. (2006). *The War Play Dilemma: What Every Parent and Child Needs to Know* (2nd Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Seiter, E. (2005). *The Internet Playground: Children's Access, Entertainment and Mis-education*. New York: Peter Lang.

## Videos

[Distributors listed in **Organizations** below]

- Game Over: Gender, Race, and Violence in Video Games*. Media Education Foundation. Addresses the fastest growing segment of the media and how it exploits gender, race and violence.
- Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood, and Corporate Power*. Media Education Foundation. Takes a critical look at Disney's role in shaping childhood and the ideas Disney movies teach about race, gender and ethnicity.
- Unplug Your Kids*. National Center on Media and the Family. Shows how children learn values, attitudes and behaviors from the mass media and offers suggestions for using media in a healthy way.

## National TV Networks

### ABC Entertainment

818-460-7477; [www.ABC.com](http://www.ABC.com)  
Local Station # \_\_\_\_\_

### CBS Audience Services

212-975-4321; [www.CBS.com](http://www.CBS.com)  
Local Station # \_\_\_\_\_

### Cartoon Network

404-827-1500; [www.cartoonnetwork.com](http://www.cartoonnetwork.com)

### Disney Channel

818-569-7500; [www.disney.go.com](http://www.disney.go.com)

### Fox Broadcast Studios

310-277-2211; [www.fox.com](http://www.fox.com)  
Local Station # \_\_\_\_\_

### NBC Entertainment

212-664-4444; [www.NBC.com](http://www.NBC.com)  
Local Station # \_\_\_\_\_

### Nickelodeon

212-258-7579; [www.nick.com](http://www.nick.com)

### PBS

703-739-5000; [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)  
Local Station # \_\_\_\_\_

## Websites

- [www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive)  
Helpful one-pagers on dealing with various aspects of the media.
- [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)  
Fitness for kids: getting them off the couch.
- [www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news](http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news)  
"Talking with Kids about the News."
- [www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia/resources.html](http://www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia/resources.html)  
List more resources on media and children.
- [www.tvsmarter.com](http://www.tvsmarter.com)  
Resources to raise consciousness about dangers of rampant advertising and TV and promote action.



# Action Guide Resources

## Toy Manufacturers & Retailers

**Bandai America, Inc.**  
310-926-0947; www.bandai.com  
Makes Power Rangers.

**Hasbro Toy Group**  
401-431-8697; www.hasbro.com  
Makes Transformers, Spiderman & more.

**Mattel Toys**  
310-252-2000; www.mattel.com  
Makes Barbie & more.

**MGA Entertainment**  
800-222-4685; www.mgae.com  
Makes Bratz dolls.

**Saban Entertainment**  
310-235-5100  
Makes Power Rangers media.

## Government Officials

**Federal Communication Commission**  
(regulates TV)  
888-225-5322; www.fcc.gov

**Federal Trade Commission**  
(oversees marketing)  
877-382-4357; www.ftc.gov

**President of the United States**  
202-456-1414; president@whitehouse.gov

**US Senator** \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

**US Senator** \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

**US Rep.** \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

**Governor** \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Keep by your  
phone or computer.

**American Academy of Pediatrics**  
847-434-4000; www.aap.org

• Prepares position statements and informational pamphlets for pediatricians and the public on media issues.

**Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood**

617-278-4172;  
www.commercialexploitation.org  
• Coalition working to stop marketing practices that harm children.

## Organizations

**Center for a New American Dream**

www.newdream.org  
• 32-page booklet: "Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture." Download free copy: www.newdream.org/kids

**Kaiser Family Foundation**

650-854-9400; www.kff.org  
• Reports and research on children and families' media use and more.

**Media Education Foundation**

800-897-0089; www.mediaed.org  
• Producers of high quality media literacy videos for educational purposes.

**National Institute on Media & the Family**

888-672-KIDS; www.mediaandthefamily.org  
• Newsletter rating media products' impact on children; produces media literacy materials and advocates for sound policy.

**TV-Turnoff Network**

202-333-9220; www.tvturnoff.org  
• Organizes annual TV turn-off week and materials to support efforts in your community.

**TRUCE** is a national group of educators deeply concerned about how children's entertainment and toys are affecting the play and behavior of children in our classrooms.

**TRUCE's** goals are:

- To raise public awareness about the negative effects of violent and stereotyped toys and media on children, families, schools and society.
- To work to limit the harmful influence of unhealthy children's entertainment.
- To provide children with toys and activities that promote healthy play and non-violent behavior at home and school.
- To create a broad-based effort to eliminate marketing to children and to reduce the sale of toys of violence.
- To support parents' and teachers' efforts to deal with the issues regarding media.

**For more information about what you can do and to make a contribution to cover our printing and disseminating costs, contact us: TRUCE, PO Box 441261, Somerville, MA 02144**

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