

Taming the Media Monster

By Thomas Poplawski

There is a warm and cheery feeling in the room for this, the first meeting of the year for the new kindergarten parents. Sharing stories about the little angels brings laughter, and when the teacher reflects what a great step it is to send the little ones off to school for the first time, there is a bittersweet tear here and there. After a stern mini-lecture about hair lice and another laugh over what parents tend to forget to pack in the mornings, Ms. Jeffers takes a deep breath and continues: "And now I'd like to talk about another policy here at the Waldorf School that all of you heard about during your entrance interview but which is controversial for some-the school policy about television and media."

Suddenly the room is quiet and tense. It is as if an arctic wind has suddenly cut through the balmy ambiance that had moments ago filled the space. A number of parents cross their legs or arms, and others begin to squirm in their seats. Ms. Jeffers also becomes uncomfortable. The sudden change in the room is apparent to her as well-though not unexpected. Nevertheless, she forges ahead with conviction, relating her own experience of the difference between children exposed to the media and those who are not. She also cites research findings critical of television viewing and computer use by children and hands out reprints of articles and studies by respected authorities. She concludes by strongly recommending that parents protect their children from exposure to the media-in other words, no television, videos, video games, and computer activities of any kind.

But the mood of the evening is ruined, just as it is every year when this topic is brought up. Some parents leave feeling that the school's policy is extreme. One parent chooses not to enroll his child, saying, "No television and no white sugar-that's not for us."

Others feel that somehow their expertise and their commitment as parents are being called into question because they do not agree with the Waldorf "party line." Why, the teacher even hinted that if a child talks about "Sesame Street" or sings tunes from a Disney movie the parents would be called in for a conference. Goodness, is this some kind of Inquisition?

Other parents who nodded their heads in approval at the teacher's presentation also feel perturbed. They are indignant that some parents are threatening what is perhaps their own main aim in coming to a Waldorf school-to shelter their children from the culture (if that is indeed the right word!) of television. They seek for their children an environment characterized by spontaneous free play, wholesome games, stories, and singing, one free of unsavory media content, of "trash talk," violent and distasteful imagery, and the adolescent "jive" and coolness of most so-called children's entertainment. They hope that the school community agrees on standards protecting the magical years from three to twelve.

The teacher goes home frustrated by the unsupportive response she has had from a number of families on this issue. She has seen how damaging media can be for the delicate unfolding of the young children. Yet these otherwise caring parents close a door when the topic of media comes up. She wishes there were a way to help them understand.

The Media Society

For parents who have never had their family's media use called into question, the idea of a media ban at home can seem extreme. This is especially true if one, or both, parents enjoy watching television or videos, or being on-line. A parent who makes a living from computers or media entertainment is likely to react even more. "What do you mean it's not good for my child?"

Almost all parents today have grown up with television. Of course, the content of television programming has changed, the amount children watch has increased, and the advent of video tapes, tape players, and computers has thickened the brew. Studies show that parents born after 1965 tend to allow their children more exposure to media than parents born earlier, presumably because they associate watching television with a warm, cozy family life. The television and increasingly the computer are felt to be, like the family dog, necessary parts of a household. Of course, everyone believes in moderation, so limiting media to a couple of hours a night seems a reasonable request. But, eliminate it entirely? Whoa!

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, never experienced television, but he did know about the silent movies popular in the early part of the twentieth century. Steiner recognized the medium's potential as a new art form and realized that technologically based entertainment would develop and spread. But he was aware of the negative effects and had serious reservations about such entertainment. In a conversation with a stage designer of the time, Steiner cautioned that film corrupts people's relation to time and space and spoils their ability to have a real imagination. For these reasons, he was concerned about adults who watch too many films.

For decades Waldorf educators have opposed all media use by children, especially young children, but communicating this to parents is more daunting than ever. The situation is analogous perhaps to that surrounding tobacco use in the 1960s. The society as a whole accepted cigarette smoking as benign, and the few people who warned about possible negative effects were dismissed as alarmists and health nuts.

Fortunately, medical and psychological researchers have come to share the concerns of Waldorf teachers. A steady stream of research has indicated the ill effects of media exposure on the child and the adult. The negative consequences include obesity, impairment of neurological development, increase in aggression, desensitization to violence, male/female stereotyping, a warping of the child's sense of reality, and susceptibility to commercialism and materialism—all from a few hours a day of watching "the tube."

As evidence has mounted, even the conservative American Academy of Pediatrics has asked its members to inquire how much media the children they treat are watching. Also, the Academy issued a policy statement urging that children under two years old not be allowed to watch any television at all and recommending that no child of any age have a television in his or her own bedroom or watch more than two hours a day. Some pediatricians feel that the position should be even stronger and expect that with more research, the age at which it is thought safe for a child to watch television, videos, and so on will rise. One can see a battle brewing that may eclipse the current struggle involving the tobacco industry. While tobacco use caused many people to die prematurely, the effects of media exposure are more subtle. They include the failure of children to realize their full potential as productive and happy human beings.

The research that has most influenced pediatricians shows that babies and toddlers need almost constant direct interactions with parents and other primary caregivers. These are necessary to healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive skills. As the child gets older, direct, hands-on interactions with other human beings, the environment, and with nature are critical. And it is just these interactions, necessary throughout infancy and early childhood, that do not occur when children are involved in the unnatural activity of sitting still and watching electronic signals.

For Waldorf teachers, however, concern about media use is based less on the scientific studies and more on their own experience of seeing the difference between children exposed to media and those not exposed. Celia Riahi, a Waldorf preschool teacher with many years' experience, says she can recognize the "media children" in her class through the chaotic and mechanical movements and sounds that they make, in imitation of what they have seen on television. The play of these children is impaired. They tend to get stuck in a story line or get obsessed with one particular character-usually a television character. To the preschool specialist such behavior does not portend well for later development.

Some Waldorf teachers feel that allowing a child to be exposed to the media undermines what they are trying to accomplish in the classroom. Waldorf Education relies largely on the ability of the children to listen to, observe, and absorb what the teacher is saying and doing and also to respond sensitively to artistic stimuli. Media viewing shortens attention span and dulls sensory sensitivity. Here not only the activity of viewing but also of listening to electronically reproduced voice and music is problematic. Thus parents' inability to eliminate media exposure is a major problem.

Saying Farewell to an Old Friend

The Swiss physician Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is well-known for her research with terminally ill patients. She found that patients and their families go through a series of steps in dealing with the crisis of impending death. Each stage must be worked through and transcended if patient and family are to come to some

peace before the end. If they become stuck somewhere in the process there will be no resolution even though death will occur. These stages pertain not only to the loss that occurs in death but to every traumatic life change.

Families seeking to swallow the seemingly bitter pill of unplugging from media stimulation can expect a similar journey through the stages of denial, bargaining, anger, and depression. At each stage certain comments are typical.

Denial

"Television isn't a problem in our home. Our children never watch . . . well, maybe once in a while. Just a little bit during the week and then maybe on weekends a bit more."

"All the public schools are getting computers, so it must be the best thing for keeping our children ahead of the game. I love the Waldorf School, but sometimes these teachers are just too old-fashioned."

Bargaining

"How about if I limit it to one video on the weekends and give them a little more freedom during vacation times?"

Anger

"Let those teachers come here some rainy day and figure out what to do with my two boys."

"Do they expect me to stop watching television-which is the only way I have to unwind-just so the children don't watch any?"

Depression

"I just feel so miserable. How do I let those Waldorf teachers make me feel stupid and inferior and that I have already ruined my children by what I have let them watch?"

"I can't take away the kids' TV and computer. They would just hate me and think I am a horrible mom. Besides, I could never cook dinner if they didn't have a video or something to keep them occupied."

An objective look at the growing evidence of the harmful effects of media on the growing child should cause a caring parent to think again about media use. In fact, probably almost all Waldorf parents do try to cut back on media in the home. But they get stuck in one of these stages or crumble in the face of pressure from children, relatives, and friends. Holding out against a societal obsession is difficult. Also, it involves time and energy to find interesting things for a child to do and for a parent to do with a child. The parent's own personal space and time will be compromised.

Parents may succeed in protecting a child from the media. There is then the question as to how long this should continue. Among Waldorf teachers, responses to this question reflect a continuum from a purist position—that to some is impractical and unenforceable—through levels of compromise in bowing to what is felt to be the unstoppable force of popular culture. Almost all teachers feel that there should be no media at all before age seven. Some put this at age nine. Many then are willing to countenance judicious use of television between ages nine and twelve, with parents selecting the programs and, ideally, watching along with their children. Many teachers feel that after the onset of adolescence, at around age thirteen, the young person should have freedom in this area but also the benefit of parental guidance. Individual differences should be taken into account. For a very sensitive child of nine or ten, or older, even relatively benign classic family films like "The Wizard of Oz" or "The Sound of Music" may not be appropriate.

Waldorf parents who do struggle with their school's policy about the media and do work out a reasonable compromise should not be overcome by guilt or by fear of some impending disaster. There are many wholesome influences working in the life of the Waldorf child.

Still, something quite subtle may be compromised in the development of the child. Roberto Trostli is a Waldorf teacher and Waldorf teacher trainer who has taken several classes through the upper elementary grades. He comments that among graduating eighth graders, he can tell which ones still have little or no exposure to media. They are the students with the most capacity for imagination. They are the self-starters and the children in the class with the most initiative. Such an observation may be the most compelling reason for parents to take a hard look at the media question. a

Thomas Poplawski is a regular and popular contributor to *Renewal* and has had more articles in this magazine than any other writer. A psychotherapist who now lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, Thomas is also a eurythmist who trained in England. Thomas and his wife, Valerie, have two young sons who attend the Hartsbrook School in Hadley, Massachusetts. Valerie teaches eurythmy at the school and runs the nursery program there. Thomas writes and lectures frequently on Anthroposophy, Waldorf Education, and related topics. The Poplawskis live happily without the benefit of owning a television or computer.

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