Wired But Disconnected

By Todd Huffman, M.D.

A close friend of my 8-year-old daughter recently revealed to me that her favorite television show was NBC's "Fear Factor", one of America's most popular programs. For those enlightened few who long ago discarded their television sets, this program is one of many "reality shows" that now dominate the medium.

Such programs do not reproduce everyday reality. Rather, "real" people are placed in unscripted, unrehearsed, and, in fact, unrealistic situations. "Fear Factor" episodes titled "Eat Roaches, " "Uterus Skeeball," "Eat Rectum," and "Eat Buffalo Testicles" are but a few highlights, or lowlights, of the situations in which consenting adult contestants are placed.

My aim is not to bash "Fear Factor." Adults, provided every consideration is given not to infringe upon the rights of others, may entertain themselves however they please. My aim is much larger, to protect children from the potential consequences of watching such programming. My daughter's friend is not unique; many of my pediatric patients describe "reality shows" to me in vivid detail. But there is simply no reason for children to watch such programs such as "Fear Factor," nor the many others in which enjoyment is derived from the humiliation of other human beings.

As American parents are increasingly overworked and overstressed, it has come to be less that we are letting our children watch television, and more that we are asking television to watch our kids. It is not a matter of being a "good" parent or a "bad" parent; it is simply one result of our societal failure to value and protect the rights of parents to enjoy quality time with their children.

Consuming media now far surpasses creative, active and social pursuits as the average American child's favorite pastime. Between television, video games, and computers, the average child logs 40 hours of screen time every week, more than any activity besides sleep. Screen media have replaced parents as the mainstream culture in our children's lives.

Thus we are raising a generation of digital children, wired but disconnected. Screen time is time usually spent alone. As the aloneness of screen time replaces the togetherness of family time, detachment replaces attachment. Even if spent in the company of other children or family, screen time is no more than shared aloneness.

Trust in others comes from a childhood of shared life experiences. Endless hours of mindless screen time amounts only to a childhood filled with empty experiences. Given that the primary purpose of childhood is to develop competencies for life, children who are raised detached from humanity are less likely as adults to be capable of empathy and consideration, and less willing or able to contribute in meaningful ways to their communities.

Studies are showing that even before the advent of "reality TV," the meteoric rise in video game use was already furthering the detachment of our children. Many video games exalt selfish loner "heroes" who use violence as the preferred method of solving problems, almost always without negative consequences. Despite the presence of a video game rating system designed to educate parents and protect children, I am amazed how often younger children describe to me playing the most popular violent video games.

And now, as if these concerns weren't already enough, along come the "reality shows," asking viewers to partake in and enjoy the suffering and exploitation of others.

Taught by our parents that it's rude to point and stare and make fun, such programs offer to us the rebellious opportunity to do so from the privacy and comfort of our own homes. After all, "reality show" contestants have willingly consented to their own public humiliation - why not sit back and enjoy it?

While "reality TV" is too recent a phenomenon to fully predict its potential consequences, my fear is that repeated exposure will condition digital children to care even less about other people. Respect for the rights and dignity of all people is first and best learned in childhood. Witnessing the enjoyed humiliation of others, or watching people being mean, vindictive and even cruel to each other, both under the pretense of "reality," places our children at further risk of departure from their humanity.

I urge parents to become media wise by becoming aware of the profound effects of excess exposure to television and video games. "Fear Factor" is seeking children ages 11 to 15 as contestants for episodes airing next season, as if these effects weren't terrible enough.