

How Families Can Become Reconnected

It is difficult to shield our children from the relentless advertising targeting them. Kids are daily bombarded by virtually irresistible messages that say, in effect, "eat this now!" Billions of dollars are spent by sophisticated food marketers in hopes that caretakers will be too busy to deny children's requests for their junk foods.

But, as Elizabeth Thoman, founder and president of the Center for Media Literacy, so eloquently states:

"Parents should treat the media no differently than they would a stranger who knocks on their door and asks to play with their children."

Parents have the ultimate power of choice over what happens to their children. Here's some suggestions:

- Turn off the TV, or at least limit your child's viewing to commercial-free public broadcasting or an occasional video movie
- Limit your child's total screen time (TV, video games, computer) to a weekly average of **less than 2 hours per day**
- Limit *everyone's* total TV time to less than 2 hours a day. There's nothing worse than the dreaded "do as I say, not as I do" style of parenting
- Teach critical media skills by explaining to kids that commercials are simply actors trying to persuade people to buy things they may not really need
- Get televisions and video games out of the child's bedroom
- Turn off the TV during snack and meal times
- Our behavior is influenced by what's available. Have the TV on, and children will watch it. Have junk food out, and children will want it. Have fruits and vegetables out, and they'll eat it.
- Be very aware of the mixed messages of society and the media, and how this effects children. Our media says "Lose Weight! Look Fit!", while also shouting "Eat! Drink! Buy!"
- Get a library card. Reward children weekly for averaging at least one hour of reading each day while at home.
- Subscribe to kid magazines. They're cheaper than cable, encourage reading, and every child loves getting mail!
- Encourage creative play, dressing up make-believe, and competitive and non-competitive exercise.
- Television is little more than mental fast food. Give your child's brain something better to grow on by exposing them to alternative forms of entertainment uninfluenced by advertising: art exhibits, dance & music performances, stage productions, poetry readings.
- Resist the emphasis on brands and icons by limiting the purchase of clothing and other items emblazoned with company logos. Unless children are paid to do so, they should not be advertising for corporations.
- Create a craft or hobby area in the house. Foster children as creators and doers, rather than shoppers and buyers.
- Lobby Congress to support limits on advertising to children. We have speed limits, why not ad limits? Parents should not have to contend with cartoon characters, celebrities and toy give-aways all competing with parents and their ability to feed their children a healthful diet.

Did You Know?

There are lots of great references out there for those interested in learning more about the obesity epidemic:

Websites:

- www.publichealthadvocacy.org
- www.actionforhealthykids.org
- www.cdc.gov

Reports:

- Institute of Medicine Report on Obesity
- USDA Report To Congress 2001
- FDA Obesity Working Group: Calories Count Report 2004
- US Surgeon General's Report: A Call to Action To Prevent & Decrease Overweight and Obesity, 2001
- Third National Health & Nutrition Examination Survey
- Framingham's Children's Study, 2003
- Kaiser Family Foundation: The Role Of Media In Childhood Obesity, 2004
- World Health Organization Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity & Health
- School Health Policies & Programs Study, 2000