

TV Decency? It's Up To Parents

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Is prime time television too indecent for children? Profanity is increasingly uncensored. Obscene gestures as attempts at humor are more common. Sexual content is increasingly less subtle. Violence is a central part of more programs. And characters seemingly make more positive references to drug use and cigarette smoking. Should children even be allowed to watch prime time television?

Hollywood's mores have become looser over the past decade. In response, the new chairman of the Federal Communication Commission promises to more vigorously penalize indecency. But where is the line of decency drawn? Should it or can it be drawn at all? Should Americans demand that Hollywood clean up its act, for the sake of our children?

Some argue that television programming is not the problem - rather, it's parents. While turning off the television during prime time would be the ideal method of blocking indecent programming from a child's view, the sad fact is that many American parents, increasingly overworked and overstressed, are not so much letting their children watch television as asking television to watch their children.

In America today, most children have televisions, often with cable, in their bedrooms. Early bedtimes are not routinely enforced. Our definitions of what is and is not appropriate have changed, as reflected by Hollywood. What is indecent to some is obviously not to most, as evidenced by the success of profane, sexual and violent programming. Hence, many children are staying up late watching programs that 10 or 20 years ago many adults would not have been comfortable watching.

Others argue that even if parents limited children's television time to the recommended amount of less than two hours daily and eliminated prime time viewing, they could not keep indecent material from making its way to kids. Since parents cannot prevent their children's exposure to other children who are not similarly restricted, and because other children share what they've seen, many are calling on government to force Hollywood to clean up its act.

Although pining for a return to a cleaner and more decent Hollywood, I believe we must never restrict what can and cannot be said. As Voltaire supposedly once said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Restricting the First Amendment rights for some can only lead to restrictions for everyone.

Yet I struggle over how to protect free speech - and the right of Hollywood to produce indecent material, as well as the right of adult Americans to watch it - while protecting our children from a pop culture that is increasingly polluted.

Ultimately, I side with the argument that protecting children is the parents' responsibility. This is done by first restricting television time: Get televisions out of the bedrooms; reduce a child's screen time to less than two hours daily; and turn off the family television after 8 p.m. for children under the age of 8 to 10, and after 9 p.m. for children age 10 to 14.

Next, parents should be consistent: Most Americans polled agree there is too much violence, profanity and sex on television, yet most American parents let their children watch prime time television and even R-rated movies at home. Most parents say they want their children protected from smut, yet most are letting their children watch television unsupervised.

Finally, parents can protect their children by keeping open the channels of communication, so children can ask about what they hear from other children. Discuss your opinions of what is considered decent and what is not. While there is no one "right" or "wrong" standard of decency, children need to learn their parents' thresholds, so they can see that their world is not just one where "anything goes".