

The City School

Media Guidelines

Introduction

Why did The City School create "media guidelines"?

In response to requests from parents and teachers who are trying as best they can to provide a healthy environment for the children. Many people know that the deleterious effects of television and media are far-ranging, from the obvious (the encouragement of gross consumerism) to the more subtle (the impact on neurological development). We can only touch upon a few issues here.

We have stated our recommendations as goals, recognizing that parents are starting this journey with differing attitudes and rules about media use in their homes. It is our fervent hope and wish that, after you have read the compelling reasons behind our media guidelines, you will decide to adopt them in your own family.

Who created this document?

These guidelines were originally produced by a committee from Pasadena Waldorf School, which has graciously allowed us to adapt their document for our school?

What are other schools doing?

As a Waldorf school, we are part of a worldwide movement dedicated to supporting the healthy development of children. Many other Waldorf schools have such guidelines or policies; in fact, our committee researched those produced by some twenty other Waldorf schools from across the United States and Canada. While some have worded their documents more stringently as policies, all have found that guidelines such as these go a long way to helping support parents in keeping their children as healthy as possible.

Media Statement

Media includes use of all electronic devices, such as television, movies, videos, computers, cell phones and electronic games.

In order to cultivate your child's imagination and reinforce the work that is done in the Waldorf School, we strongly recommend that children watch no television, videos, movies or computer games. The damage done to children by repeated and extended periods of watching television is recognized by many child development specialists and pediatricians. The younger the child, the greater the damage and the greater its irreversibility. It is not only the content that is harmful, but also the actual physical and physiological processes involved in watching. Waldorf education achieves its best results with children who watch no television at all. We strongly urge that any television or other electronic media is permitted, that no watching be done on school nights, especially by children below the age of 9. If you have questions about this statement, please bring them to your class teacher or request that it be addressed at a parent evening. *

Pedagogical Background

Intentional community

Families come to Waldorf education actively seeking developmentally appropriate experiences so their children will grow into interested, engaging people who one day will engage positively with the world. In that sense, Waldorf schools are intentional communities, populated by people who have discovered that schools based on Rudolf

Steiner's philosophy and pedagogy not only provide the support parents have been looking for, but also answer the educational needs of children.

Thus, when enrolling our children in The City School, we commit not only to the school's mission and educational philosophy, but also to a home life which complements and supports these values. We join like-minded parents in tacit agreement to uphold them. The success of our community depends partly on the degree to which each individual's actions resonate with and confirm these goals. The consequences of differing levels of parental commitment fall largely to the children, who must live with the results of their parents' choices.

Children tend to self-select friendships and/or play groups at school partly based on what they are exposed to outside of school. If several children see a particular movie or TV program, or listen to a particular kind of music, then their conversations and/or play at school reflect those experiences. Any child who has not shared those experiences cannot participate. So, here we have social exclusion based on media exposure, an unfortunate criterion, indeed, for choosing friends or playmates. Parents who have made a choice for less media exposure want to know that they can count on the other parents to have similar values, so that when the children go to school they will be safe from media influence there, too.

In every Waldorf school class, the parents grow in partnership over the eight or more years they spend together. They experience developmental challenges together, compare notes, and offer one another helpful suggestions. Parents do this best when they are operating from common understanding and agreements. It is possible for significant differences in family media choices to create an environment of mistrust, and somewhat erode the efficacy of the community of adults who should be coming together in support of the children. When the parents agree to work from the same assumptions and ground rules, their collective wisdom can create an even more supportive environment for their children. Our media guidelines are meant to outline some principles for nurturing physically, emotionally, spiritually healthy children while navigating the terrain of modern life. The ideals in our mission statement inform everything we do, including our media guidelines. Read on to see how.

The wonder and challenge of the world

Challenges are the vehicles through which human beings grow emotionally and socially, develop self-worth, and discover who they really are. Any time a child is not actively engaged in the world itself, she is not busy encountering its wonder and challenge. Even the root of the word "media" connotes something coming between. Passive, "mediated" experiences cannot help us grow in the same way as direct, first-person experiences. Children need to be *in* the world, not watching it on a screen; they must chafe against real human beings, and laugh with them, not observer actors or pre-recorded representations of people. Even "educational" programming removes the child from the real world, preventing her from experiencing firsthand its miracles, puzzles, jubilation, and heartache.

The imagination

One of the seminal directives in Waldorf education is to nurture the child's imagination. Why? During the school day, teachers articulate the curriculum in vibrant, lively, compelling images, leaving the child free to form his own internal pictures. But, a child who has already seen someone else's pictures, even if these images are beautiful, has been robbed of the opportunity. These pre-formed images not only impact a child's ability to use her imagination; they also have the effect of deadening the imaginative space where all of the

child's lessons and social interactions are processed, impeding her ability to draw conclusions and form concepts, to understand mathematics, to build reading skills, to work out social challenges. Thus, the wondrous work that the Waldorf curriculum continues to perform on children *after* they leave the classroom can be seriously compromised. Young children are vulnerable in that they do not separate themselves from what they experience, including what they see. They internalize what they are shown as their own pictures, and take all of what they view as real. Older children are vulnerable in that media exposure tends to encourage them to become cynical, closed, and diffident, and many then feel compelled to pursue an early path to adolescence. If we consider each of a child's experiences as literal "food for thought," we can begin to appreciate that a diet of content which has been pre-digested and feed to our children could not possibly be as healthy and enlivening as one in which our own stories present food for the imagination, providing opportunities to digest living content, shaping the stage upon which the young person creates the play of his or her own life.

Healthy body

Medical studies attribute the epidemic of obesity in this country partly to sedentary lifestyles. But, we hardly need this evidence to conclude that active play is more helpful to children's developing bodies than sitting in front of a screen. Further, the pace of media today increases distractibility in children and reinforces the need for instant gratification. Children *need* rhythmic, carefully –paced activity in order to develop and learn properly.

Healthy social life

TV and film require difficulties to be settled in pre-determined, unrealistic increments, and give children few possibilities to see true problem-solving skills modeled. Instead, media exposes children to a great many character traits we in no way want to see them mirror, including sarcasm and rampant disrespect of self, of others, of property. In addition, children need real, live interaction with other children to figure out how to work out social challenges. Children who lack social skills are much more prone to exhibit anti-social behavior, such as teasing or bullying.

Confident, capable people with a sense of social and environmental responsibility

With few exceptions, the representation of people in the media is designed to cultivate viewership. Conflict must occur and be fermented in order to keep viewers coming back for more. People of exceptional character, quality personal interactions, or positive human attributes rarely get airplay. The way people treat each other, the way they speak to one another, even the way they conduct themselves when no one is looking, all present a picture of human behavior. Children often become what they see. Certainly, we do not want our children to aspire to the negative role models they so often experience on the screen. Moreover, stereotyping is rampant in the entertainment industry. Pre-formed images of races, cultures, genders, whole categories of people overwhelm the inimitability of individuals and their unique roles in the world. Environmental responsibility requires that we understand how our actions impact the world beyond our own doorstep. The culture of materialism promulgated by media is directly at odds with this philosophy. Our youngest children have become the new darlings of marketing tactics, the goal of which is to grow brand awareness and loyalty even before the target, the preschool child, ever sets foot in school.

The spiritual: Whom are we educating?

The human being is, at its very essence, a spiritual entity. If we encounter the child before us as much more than just a physical being, we begin to conceive that all of the child's experience, and our every interaction with her, have far greater impact than we could have imagined in our wildest dreams. Our task, then, is to provide healthy spiritual food. Not only are artificial, vicarious, virtual experiences not healthy, they actually dull the organ critical to healthy spiritual growth. Steiner admonishes teachers to remember three paramount elements in the education of the school-age child: truth, beauty and goodness. It is difficult to imagine any form of media conforming to any one of those, much less all three.

The child's unfolding and awakening capacities

While teachers do not teach anthroposophy to the children, they do teach from the Anthroposophical view of the human being. Rudolf Steiner indicated that the child develops in stages, and with each new stage, new capacities are born. For healthy development, each stage must be addressed at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. A child can outwardly seem intellectually capable of processing all kinds of information, however, introducing particular content before the child is ready to receive it or presenting it in an inappropriate manner for that age, sets up an impediment to the proper processing of the information.

Arriving at concepts through imaginative, artistic and experiential activities

Another core element in a Waldorf curriculum is that we do not begin with concepts, but provide a series of multi-faceted activities which lead the children to arrive at concepts themselves. This active process ensures that children internalize what they are learning, and are far more likely to understand and retain the information. Clearly, passive exposure, even to the same information, will have a far different effect. Abstract, intellectual approaches to learning are not developmentally appropriate until after puberty. In the elementary school child, hearing stories of great men and women, and experiencing the secrets and beauty of nature, cultivate a deep, soulful connection to the stream of creation that gives a child the proper background to focus later on developing intellectual faculties.

Who is providing commercial content?

We really do not know, do we? We are careful about choosing play date companions, but we give our children up to TV programming, films, commercials, music content and video games created with the goal of selling something to them. The billions of dollars spent by advertisers to manipulate consumers, especially children, dwarf parents' efforts to counter marketing techniques after the fact.

Research

Imagination

The child is developing the faculty to form her own mental pictures, her internal mechanisms for imagery. In imposing others' images, television stunts the child's critical development of imagination. The child begins to rely on external sources rather than calling up her own internal pictures.¹

Visual System

The development of certain visual skills is critical to a child's capacity to focus and pay attention, and later, to read. "The ability to search out, scan, focus and identify" what enters the visual field is impaired by watching television and movies.² When children watch television, they do not dilate their pupils, and have little eyes movement at all. A lack of use

of the eye muscles can cause a weakening, which will negatively impact the ability and effort required for reading. Dilation of the pupils, tracking, and following are part of the reticular activating system, which is the gateway to the right and left hemispheres of the brain.³

Hearing system

The hair-like cells in the inner ear convert sound waves to electrical impulses, which get sent to the brain. These cells, which do not regenerate, can be destroyed by loud sounds. The type of hearing loss once common in aging adults is showing up in younger and younger people. Newer earbud-style headphones, which are placed directly in to the ear and can boost the sound signal by as much as nine decibels (dB), are even more likely to cause hearing loss than the older muff style. Not only do kids listen at a more intense sound level, but with the longer battery life and storage capacity of modern music players, kids are listening longer. Students at Wichita State University had the output of their MP3 players' signals measured and, on average, they were listening at 110-120 dB – the equivalent of a rock concert. This level is high enough to sustain hearing loss after only one hour and fifteen minutes of listening.⁴

James Battey, Director of the National Institute of Health's National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders said, "All of these devices [portable MP3 players] have maximum sound output levels that range from 115 to 130 dB, which is comparable to the sound level of a jet engine." Apple Computer Inc. has recently introduced a software update for iPods that lets parents set a maximum volume limit on the device.

Disrespect and vulgar behavior

Approximately eighty percent of respondents in a poll in April, 2002, believe not only that a lack of respect and courtesy is a serious national problem, but that it continues to worsen.¹¹ Behaviors such as increased aggressiveness, lack of consideration of others, and public vulgarity are normalized by increasingly vulgar and rude television shows. Experts believe that television has shaped and accelerated this trend. Children watch these shows, see the behavior as normal, and can no longer judge when they are socially inappropriate.

Health concerns (obesity, diabetes)

Obesity and type II diabetes are epidemics in the United States. One in ten children in the United States is obese. American children spend an average of four hours per day watching television, not only an inherently sedentary activity, but one which stimulates a desire for, and consumption of, unhealthy food. Studies showed that approximately seventy-five percent of advertising during children's programming was for junk food, such as sugary cereals, candy, and highly processed sugary snacks. Television promotes unhealthy eating and an unhealthy lifestyle.

Body image/anorexia nervosa/bulimia nervosa

In 1995, television was introduced to Fiji. Prior to the introduction of TV, only three percent of young girls in a survey by Anne Becker, anthropologist at Harvard Medical School, reported using vomiting to control weight. Three years later, fifteen percent of girls did it.⁵ Becker believes the sudden influence of Western cultural images and values is changing the way Fijian girls view themselves and their bodies. In a 1994 survey of female undergrads at a large Midwestern university, a researcher found fifteen percent of the women met the criteria for eating disorder. The study, published in the *Journal of Communication*, shows that watching TV, as well as reading magazines that depict and promote thinness,

significantly predict symptoms of women's eating disorders.⁶ "We... found an undeniable influence of mass media in the genesis and maintenance of the disorders."⁷ To prevent the observed increase in prevalence and incidence of eating disorders among adolescents, it is appropriate to control the messages, myths and falsehood propagated by media, TV in particular."⁸

Neurological development/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ("ADHD")

Television viewing, even educational shows and videos, is rewiring our children's brains. The Quickly changing images and sounds of the television prevent our higher-thought brain (neocortex) from becoming involved. According to Ron Kaufman, "[as] time is cut up, the brain is conditioned to change at the expense of continuity of thought."⁹ A 2004 study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* shows a correlation between hours of television viewing and subsequent attention problems. Watching television or videos can cause permanent changes in the developing neural pathways, putting the child at increased risk for ADHD. The study showed that for every hour per day of television viewing at ages one and three, the child has an almost ten percent higher chance of developing attention problems by age seven. ¹⁰ "Educational" programming is also problematic. Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center reports, "Sesame Street creates a psychological orientation in children that leads to shortened attention span, a lack of reflectiveness, and an expectation of rapid change in the broader environment." In addition, some psychologists point to the possibility that viewing is literally addictive, that it changes brain function in the same way chemical dependency does.

Violence/desensitization/culture of fear

According to the American Psychiatric Association, by age eighteen, an American child will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 simulated acts of violence. Countless studies show that children watching television or playing video games are at risk for learning to behave violently. In July, 2000, the American Medical Association and the American Pediatric Association made this joint statement to Congress: "Well over 1,000 studies point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children." The majority of these studies reach the same conclusion: television and film violence leads to real-world violence.¹² A study of population data for various countries showed homicide rates doubling within ten to fifteen years after the introduction of television, even though the introductions occurred at different times in each site examined.¹³ Some research also demonstrates that cumulative exposure to media violence can desensitize the view to real-life acts of violence. According to the American Psychological Association, children who regularly watch violence on TV are more fearful and distrustful of the world, less bothered by violence, and slower to intervene or call for help when they see fighting or destructive behavior.

Post-traumatic stress disorder ("PTSD")

Media viewing of tragic events is sufficient to produce PTSD symptoms in vulnerable populations such as children."¹⁴

Notes

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