

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Violence on TV: Reach for the Remote

RECENTLY I MADE my first entrée into the award-winning TV program *Homeland*, a fictional series dealing with terrorism. I was immediately pulled in two different directions. Some of the torture scenes were so disturbing, I wondered how I would ever erase them from my mind. Yet the suspense of the story line compelled me to keep watching. I likened my mental state to that of a child who loves the adrenaline rush of scary movies but bears the often-invisible effects of violent images in his mind.

At least one of the differences between me and a child is that I have the cognitive ability to understand that I'm watching actors with a script. (Telling a child that what she's watching isn't real doesn't mitigate its effects.) As an adult, I can also try to consciously rid myself of disturbing images, and if I'm unable to do that, Google has lots of suggestions. Still, the images stayed with me.

What effect do violent images have on younger, more impressionable minds? Teachers often see the results: children talking about scary scenes or acting them out again and again in play. Perhaps this repetition can be likened to trying to wash a stain out of fabric.

Parents often report that their children love scary stories or programs. Unfortunately, research overflows with information on the negative effects of watching violence. In addition to promoting hostility and aggression, exposure to disturbing shows relates to inattention, emotional distress, and cold, uncaring behavior. More startling, studies relate watching violence to premature aging of DNA, sometimes associated with later vulnerability to chronic disease.

Early in my career, I got to see the positive effects of lack of TV watching firsthand. As a preschool director for UC Berkeley's married-student housing, I noticed that my new students were different from those in preschools I had directed in the past. They were remarkably peaceful and non-aggressive with each other. My big *aha!* moment came when I realized none of the children had a TV in their homes.

We all want our children to feel internally calm and unafraid, but today children's anxieties and hostile responses can easily get chalked up to developmental problems rather than TV exposure. "He's always restless; maybe he has ADHD." When a child is having a hard time, how often do we reflect on media influences in her life?

Here are some ideas for protecting your child from unsettling images.

Talk about your experience with scary images. Do you remember having memories of frightening scenes as a child? Share your experiences and the ways you try keep your mind peaceful. "I avoid those kinds of programs because I don't want bad dreams."

Dare to turn off the TV. When I took TV away for long periods, my children became more creative and eager to play with each other for extended periods during their downtime.

Regard the news as violent programming. Watching the news often upsets children.

Let's work together. At school, we have a commitment to provide children with uplifting ideas and imagery to help keep their thinking clear and their hearts trusting and open.

January 30, 2013