

How to Have Media Discernment in Your House

How to have media discernment for your family in the cluttered world of junky entertainment

The entertainment industry today is an influential world force. Yes, we all probably know that already, but let me illustrate just what I mean. When I am in my office, I am only about 45 miles north of the heart of the industry in Hollywood, Calif. Frequently I am called to speak around the world in far-away places such as Poland, Ukraine, India, Japan or Laos. When I step on the plane, I find Hollywood movies and television programs playing during the flights. When I go into the jungle of the highlands of Thailand, Hollywood is still very close by—there are satellite dishes run by generators connected by exposed wires, which bring the industry's entertainment into the flimsy grass huts of the people. The children in these villages try to dress like the Hollywood stars they idolize and try to mimic their lives—right down to the smoking, drinking and sexual promiscuity. Hollywood is not just a geographic place some 45 miles south of my office. It's a huge entertainment industry that reaches the world—for good or ill. Aided increasingly by foreign investments, it is the voice of the United States to people everywhere, especially the youth.

As Jesus told the leading spokespeople of His day: "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them" (Matt. 15:11, NIV). All too often, what comes out of the mouth of our entertainment-oriented culture are movies such as *Hostel*, *Kill Bill*, *Sex and the City* or *Saw IV*.

Countless scientific studies of different kinds have clearly shown the powerful influence the entertainment media have on

people's cognitive development and behavior, especially on that of children, teenagers and young people—who represent the biggest audience for entertainment programming originating from the mass media, including from Hollywood.

In 2000, the office of the U.S. Surgeon General issued a “Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children” in which it agreed with four top medical groups—the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry—as well as with countless psychological and neurological experts that violence in the mass media is contributing to increased violent behavior among children and teenagers.

Not only that, but scientific studies from other sources, such as education professor Diane Levin, who authored *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*, and numerous psychologists have found that viewing sexual images in the media has led to increased sexual activity among children and teenagers and increased deviant behavior, including rape. Similarly, viewing drug use in movies and TV programs leads to increased drug use among children, according to a 2001 Dartmouth Medical School study of New England middle school students.

Lights, Camera, Take Action!

As one of the primary building blocks of the culture, the mass media are tools of communication, entertainment and art. Although anyone may misuse a tool, most people involved in the mass media as creators, regulators and consumers are conscientious individuals who want to do the right thing, as they understand it.

However, those who make up these groups often forget that their mass media choices have ethical weight and are subject to moral evaluation. To make the right entertainment choices,

they need discernment and understanding, especially in light of studies indicating the extremely negative effects of the entertainment mass media.

Even many of the most astute Christians have become desensitized to cultural degradation. Many of us do not understand the consequences that certain worldviews have when they are culturally accepted. We are ignorant of the persuasive power of the entertainment mass media, which create the culture in which we live and move.

Consequently, we do not know how to develop the discernment, knowledge, understanding and wisdom to be more than conquerors within the cultural turbulence created by all the forms of mass media. The good news is that there are effective ways for us and our families to learn how to be culture-wise and media-wise.

As the director of the TV Center at City University of New York, I helped develop some of the first media literacy courses in the late 1970s. Since then, years of research have produced a very clear understanding of the best way to teach media literacy. Specifically, I developed five pillars of media wisdom to help build the culture-wise family.

Pillar 1: Understand the influence of the media on your children. In the wake of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, CBS President Leslie Moonves told the Associated Press quite bluntly: “Anyone who thinks the media has nothing to do with this is an idiot.”

Of course, the media are only one part of the problem—which can be summed up with the sage biblical injunction of 1 Corinthians 15:33: “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (NIV). As the results of thousands of studies on youth violence prove, watching media violence causes violence among children. Bad company corrupts good character—whether that bad company is gangs, peer pressure or

violent television programs.

Pillar 2: Ascertain your children's susceptibility at each stage of cognitive development. Not only do children see the media differently at each stage of development, but they also are susceptible to different stimuli, depending on the child. As research by the National Institute of Mental Health revealed many years ago, some children want to copy media violence, some are susceptible to other media influences, some become afraid and many become desensitized. Just as a beer commercial would inordinately tempt an alcoholic, so certain types of media may tempt or influence your child at his or her specific stage of development.

Pillar 3: Teach your children how the media communicate their messages. Just as children spend the first 14 years of their lives learning grammar with respect to the written word, they also need to be taught the grammar of 21st century mass media so they can think critically about the messages being programmed for them.

Pillar 4: Help your children know the fundamentals of Christian faith. Children need to be taught the fundamentals of Christian faith so they can apply their beliefs and moral values to the culture and to the mass media of entertainment. Of course, parents typically have an easier time than teachers with this pillar because they can freely discuss their personal beliefs.

Yet even so, it is interesting to note that cultural and media literacy and values education are two of the fastest-growing areas in the academic community—a trend that's due most likely to the fact that educators are beginning to realize something is amiss.

Pillar 5: Help your children learn how to ask the right questions. When children know the right questions to ask, they can arrive at the right answers to the problems presented by

the entertainment mass media. For instance, if the hero in the movie your child is watching wins by murdering and mutilating his victims, will your child be able to question this hero's behavior, no matter how likable the character is?

Know Your Part by Heart

When I make the 45-mile drive from my office to Hollywood to preview a movie at a screening, I also visit studio executives to help them understand this influence they are having on the children and grandchildren of the United States, and the rest of the world. The good news is that many of them are listening.

The type of entertainment being produced is gradually moving away from salacious, ultraviolent R-rated movies to family films with faith—movies such as *Amazing Grace*, *Prince Caspian*, *The Nativity Story*, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Even Rocky Balboa has found faith in Jesus Christ. Now every studio is pursuing the Christian faith-based audience.

Even so, there remains a large residue of movies and TV programs in the bloodstream of the culture that have rotten values. So, although many factors contribute to establishing society's mores, Hollywood no doubt has a secure foothold as the epicenter of what is popular and what is not.

Clearly, what happens in Hollywood does not stay in Hollywood. What Lindsay Lohan wears, Justin Timberlake sings and George Clooney says will ripple its way not only to the heartland of America but also well beyond. Indeed, the culture clash thrives from Kansas to Kiev.

Having cultural and media wisdom involves educating the hearts of children and teenagers so they can make the right decisions throughout their lives. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "If we educate a person's mind but not his heart, we create an educated barbarian."

The truth of the secure hope available only in Jesus Christ is great news that needs to be shouted from the housetops. The people of God have a wonderful opportunity to manifest His grace through the mass media.

However, we first need to ascertain the state of cultural affairs. The work of shaping our culture requires God's wisdom, so that we use the right tools and He is glorified.

Ted Baehr is founder and president of *Movieguide*: The Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment and chairman of the Christian Film & Television Commission, a Christian advocacy group in Hollywood. He's also a noted critic, educator, lecturer and media pundit who educates audiences on how to use discernment in selecting their entertainment. For more information on teaching children how to be media-wise, Ted suggests his book co-authored with actor and entertainer Pat Boone, *The Culture-Wise Family*.