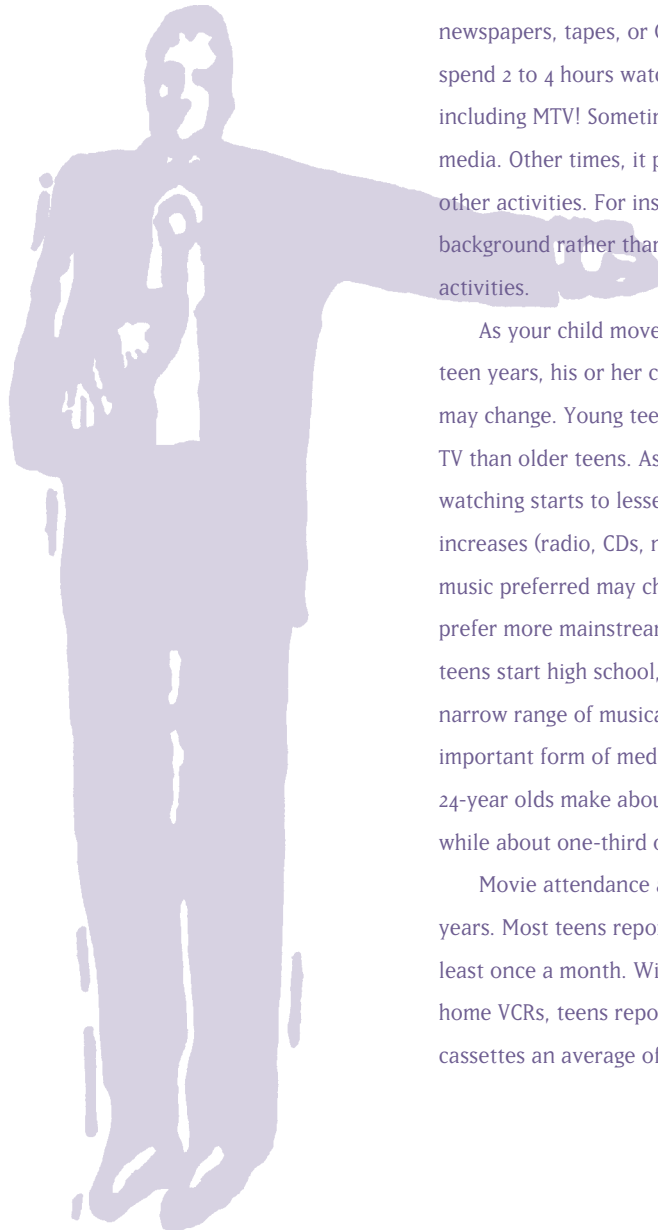


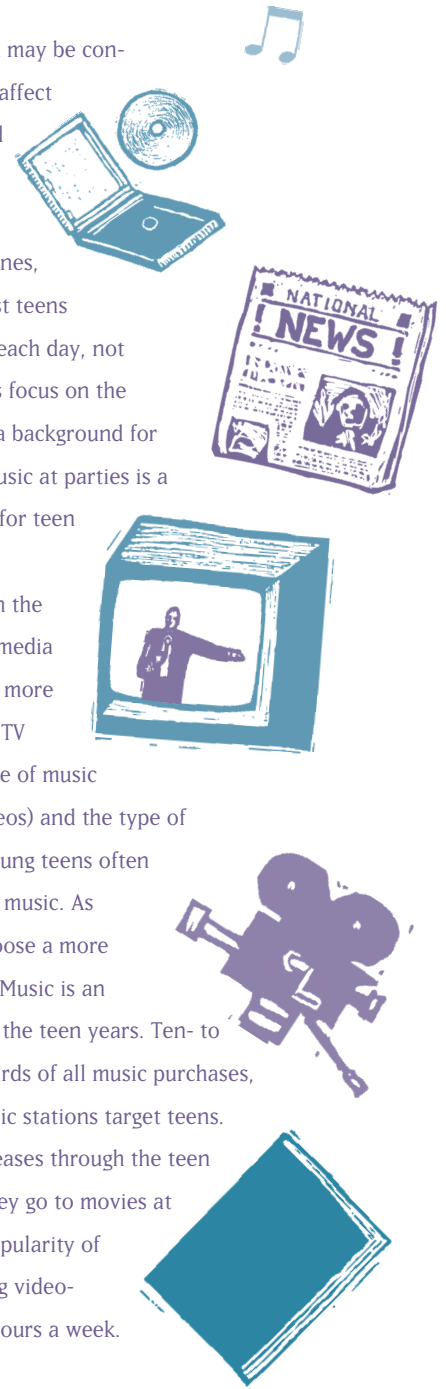
## Teens and the Media



As the parent of a teenager, you may be concerned with how various media affect your teen. Teens typically spend about 6 to 8 hours of their time awake with some type of media (television, radio, books, magazines, newspapers, tapes, or CDs). Most teens spend 2 to 4 hours watching TV each day, not including MTV! Sometimes teens focus on the media. Other times, it provides a background for other activities. For instance, music at parties is a background rather than a focus for teen activities.

As your child moves through the teen years, his or her choice of media may change. Young teens watch more TV than older teens. As a teen's TV watching starts to lessen, the use of music increases (radio, CDs, music videos) and the type of music preferred may change. Young teens often prefer more mainstream, top 40 music. As teens start high school, they choose a more narrow range of musical tastes. Music is an important form of media during the teen years. Ten- to 24-year olds make about two-thirds of all music purchases, while about one-third of all music stations target teens.

Movie attendance also increases through the teen years. Most teens report that they go to movies at least once a month. With the popularity of home VCRs, teens report viewing video-cassettes an average of 5 to 10 hours a week.



Use of printed media also increases during the teen years. Most older teens report that they read at least some of the daily newspaper. Magazine and book reading also increases during this time, although at a slower rate.

Each media form may serve its own purposes. Television watching is often something the whole family does together. Videotapes are often used as a context for social activities with other teens. Listening to music is an activity that teens often do alone, and it can be used to help them control their moods. Music also can be used socially, for instance, to create a party atmosphere. Each media type provides your teen with different experiences.

Media play an important role in your child's life. The time that your teen spends with a media source exposes him or her to a great deal of information. However, as with other information sources, there is great variation in what your teen attends to, how your teen makes sense of it, and what the impact may be on his or her life. For instance, television violence has a greater effect on white boys than on black boys. This is probably because many of the "good guys" in action-adventure shows are white males that these boys identify with.

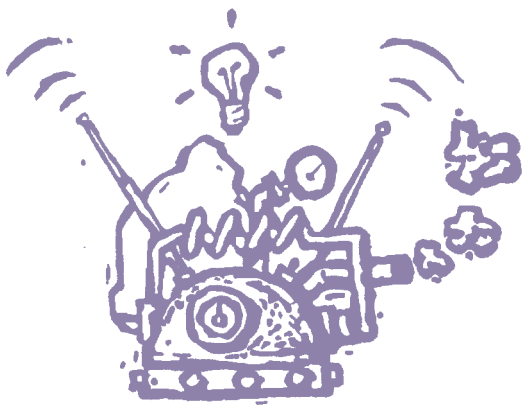
Because TV's influence on our society is so pervasive (and because young teens watch more TV than older teens), in the next sections we will discuss how TV may influence your teen and how you can have a role in that process. As you read this, keep in mind that not much research exists on other forms of media. This is not a small point—as other forms of media tend to be used with a lot less input from adults than does TV. For instance, teen magazines can be read with peers or in the privacy of a bedroom without parents' even knowing about it. It is not as easy to view TV programs without parental knowledge. Without a research base, though, it is hard to know the effects of other media forms on teens.

# Teens and Television



Because TV is such a strong presence in our society, many parents feel powerless to confront its hold on their children. Most researchers agree, though, that there are ways for parents to control or shape this impact. The following points on the TV-and-violence link are adapted from a lesson entitled "The Impact of Media Violence on Children," by the Prevention and Family Life teams of the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

One way to control the extent to which TV influences your teen is to promote "smart" viewing. Here, we outline five concepts that teens should come to understand.



## How can I help my teen be a smart TV viewer?

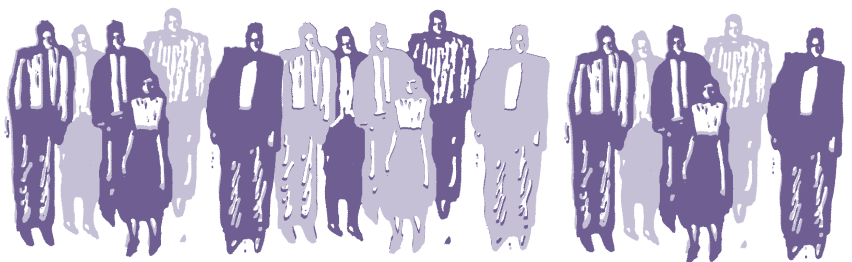
Think about ways to introduce these concepts to your teen.

**1- You're smarter than your TV.** All of us can determine how television affects us. We are smarter than our TVs, and we need to help teens see that they are, too. Teens can take charge of the TV to be in control of what they watch, when they watch TV, and how much they get out of what they watch. Later, we'll discuss how to help your teen do this.

**2- The television world is not real.** Children are especially vulnerable to the illusion of events that are portrayed on television. Adults can make children skeptical of what they see on TV so that they start to raise questions on their own. Comments like "The kids in \_\_\_\_ show never argue. How realistic is that?" or "Have you ever noticed that the teens on the \_\_\_\_ show never have pimples?" help teens start to evaluate what they view. Questions like these help teens remind themselves that not everything they view on TV is based on reality. Help your teen start doing this by posing questions like these to him or her while watching a program.

**3- TV teaches us that some people are more important than others.** Television carries subtle messages about who and what are important. On the whole, it presents a generally male and white perspective on the world—everyone else is much less important and much more likely to be killed. African-Americans, women, Latinos, Asians, or Native Americans are more often shown as criminals, kidnappers, low-paid workers, or victims. For teens to have a viewpoint beyond that of white males, they need help to see these biases. This will help them filter the messages they see and hear on TV.

Whenever you see something biased on TV—in whatever way—add your own editorial. Encourage your teen to do the same as he or she watches a program. Or, when it's over, spend some time talking about the images presented. Identify any biases that existed in the program.





**4- TV programs use identifiable techniques to keep you interested.**

Certain techniques are used because they manipulate viewers in powerful ways. These include use of laugh tracks, scary or romantic music, close-ups and other camera angles, chase scenes, makeup, and special effects. Programs often use action and violence (and these special techniques) to grab our attention and keep us watching.

With your teen, talk about what different televised segments would be like if the scenes did not have the added effects. For instance, would it be as scary without the eerie background music? (Turn the sound down and see!) And what if the police just walked up and arrested the criminal instead of chasing him around the city? Does the kissing scene seem as romantic if there is no background music? Discussions on these topics can help your teen become more aware of how TV manipulates reality to make an exciting presentation.

**5- TV is in the business to make money.** Television commercials make money for the advertisers, for the TV station, and for the producers, actors, actresses, production crew, and all those behind the scenes of each program.

Makers of commercials look for the best program to "sell" their product. Television programs look for the popular products that will appeal to the viewers. Talk with your teen about the products advertised on his or her favorite shows. Does your teen buy any of the products? Has your teen asked you or nagged you to buy any of these featured products? If so, spend some time exploring with your teen the real reasons why he or she wanted the product.



# Teens and Television

## What can parents do to control television's influence?

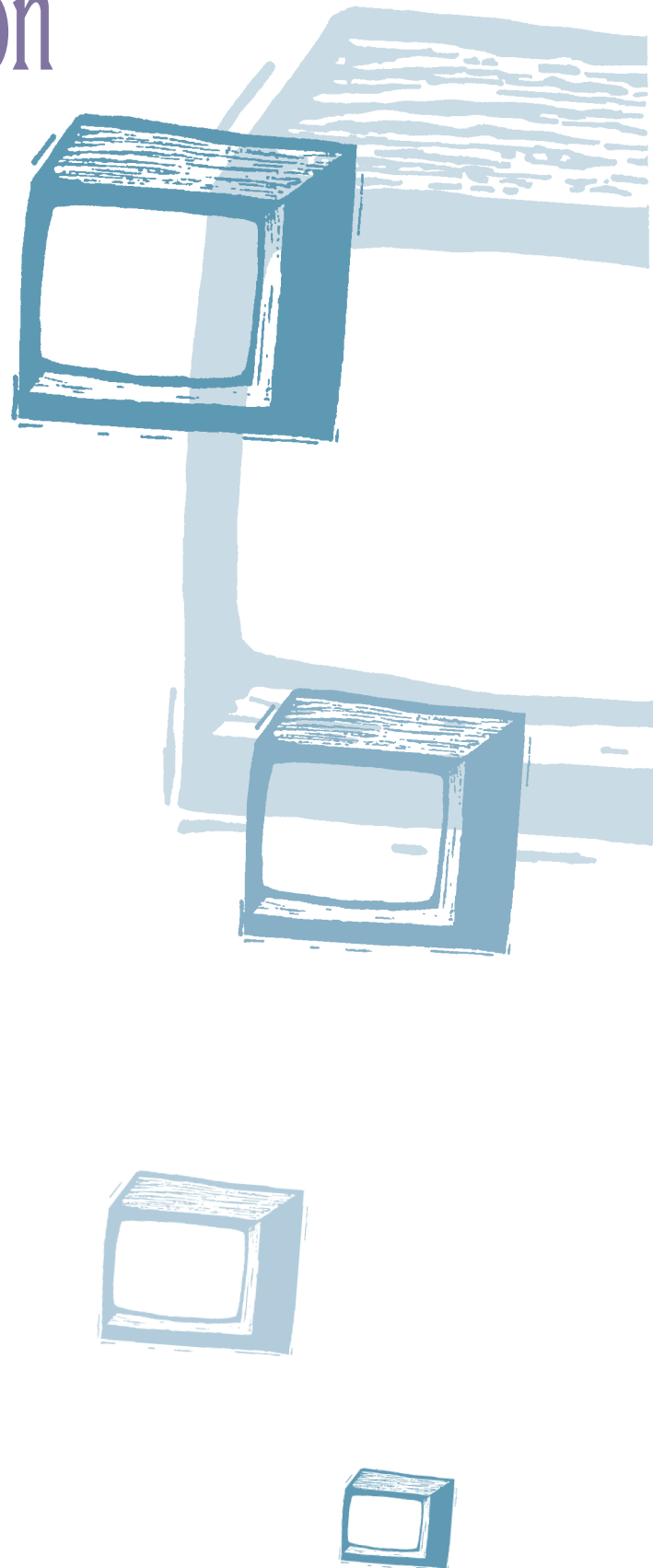
— **Limit the amount of viewing time.** You may want to set a limit on how much TV your children watch each day or each week. Suggest other activities that your whole family can get involved in. Make a list of what you enjoy doing together as a family. Working on a hobby, riding bikes, reading a book, playing cards, and playing basketball are a few alternatives. Help your teen think of what else he or she might enjoy doing alone, rather than just sitting and watching MTV for hours on end.

— **Limit the times of day when television can be watched.** Some parents don't let their children watch TV at mealtimes, before homework is done, or before school in the morning. Limiting viewing in this way can help teens see that the TV shouldn't run from sunup to lights out. This can help your teen to avoid the habit of mindlessly turning the TV on day after day as a backdrop for life.

— **Limit which programs are watched.** Be selective about what you watch, and help your teen do the same. If you find that you will watch anything just to have the TV on, you may be giving your teen the message that it's all right to sit in front of the TV watching anything, no matter what the content of the show is.

— **Talk with your teen about suitable shows to watch and shows that you do not want him or her to watch.** If you object to a certain program, for instance, one that is very sexist, let your teen know why you don't want him or her watching it. Help your teen look for shows that are violence-free and that expand his or her world. Spend some time with your teen looking at the TV listings each week, and select shows that are suitable. When a program you picked is over, turn off the TV.

— **Limit where the TV can be watched.** Setting and enforcing limits of how much, when, and what is watched may be easier depending on where you place the TV in your home. Some parents find it easier if the TV set is not in a room that is a central gathering place for the family, like the family room. Others find that it is easier to limit viewing if the TV is in a central spot where they can monitor its use. Parents who want to limit television viewing for their teens might not want their children to have sets in their rooms.



# Television

Because TV shows so many violent acts, the effect on your child's aggressiveness and possible violent behavior is an issue that may concern you.

**+** **Facts on television and violence.** According to a recent study, TV depicts more violence than exists in the real world. On an average 18-hour day on TV, about 100 acts of violence are shown each hour. Most of the violence involves a gun, and about one-tenth of the violent acts involve murder. Cable TV is much more violent than network programs.

Most of the violence portrayed on TV has no critical judgment made against it; people commit violent crimes and see no negative consequences for their behavior.

Local and national TV news also amplifies violence. As you view newscasts, help your teen become more aware that crime stories are one of the most frequent topics of newscasts.

**+** **When are the most violent programs shown?** You may be surprised to learn that the afternoon, from 2 to 5 pm, leads with an average of about 203 violent acts per hour. The slot from 6 to 9 am is the next highest, with 166 violent acts per hour. Note that young people are likely to be watching TV at these times.

## What effect does television violence have on teens?

Researchers point out four ways in which watching violence on TV might negatively affect children.

1. Teens may become "immune" to the horror of violence and less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
2. Bit by bit, teens come to accept violence as a way to solve problems.
3. Teens may imitate the violence they observe on TV and act in aggressive or harmful ways towards others.
4. Teens may become more fearful of the world around them.

Although research evidence relates exposure to televised violence to aggressive behavior, it is not clear how much of an impact TV violence really has. This is because the children most affected by TV violence are often those already at risk for violent behavior because of other factors. For instance, children and teens who are already aggressive or have those tendencies are drawn to and tend to watch more violent shows. Also, kids who are not adequately supervised are more likely to spend time in front of a TV and to be influenced by what they see.



# and Violence

## How do I manage all the violence on television?

Restrict violent programs or videos in your home. Change the channel, or turn the set off if something violent or offensive comes on.

- View shows with your teen so that you can monitor the content. Discuss the violence in the program. Ask your teen if violence solved a problem or created more problems? How could the problem have been solved in a nonviolent way? Encourage your teen to take into account these issues whenever he or she views a violent program.
- Communicate your values by commenting (approving or disapproving) in front of your children about programs and what certain characters do. Talk with your child about why you believe certain behaviors are wrong, or point out when a character acts in an admirable way. Use TV as a tool to discuss your values about violence, resolving conflicts, and getting along with others.
- Talk about how TV violence is faked and made stylish with stunt people and special effects. Point out the outcomes of violence that TV might not show, especially those to victims and to families of both the victims and the victimizers.
- Critically watch the news. What messages does the news convey about our world? Much of the news focuses on crime or tragedy, but you can point out "good" news that often is overlooked or hidden behind a tragedy. For instance, during the Oklahoma City bombing, many people helped their children focus their attention on all the good people who helped rescue victims, who donated time or money, or who sent good wishes.



## Suggested reading

"Leisure, work, and the mass media," by Gary Alan Fine, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Donald F. Roberts. In *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*, by S. Shirley Feldman and Glen R. Elliott (1990). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

# G W A Y T E

GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human and Community Development, 905 South Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

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