

1992 book's advice on handling children's TV viewing still timely

WASHINGTON - While recently reading a book from 1992 called "Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society," I ran across a table with suggestions for parents on how to deal with television in the life of their children.

It seems, in one sense, like old advice. Would anyone think that advice given in 1992 would still be relevant in 2009 with the so-called 500-channel universe, plus a host of digital technologies to make TV and other "screen media" even more ubiquitous in the home?

You'll have to judge for yourself. Consider each of the points listed in the excerpts below and see how much they apply today.

The four authors - Aletha C. Huston, Diana Zuckerman, Brian L. Wilcox and Ed Donnerstein - assembled suggestions under a variety of headings.

The first, and longest list, they compiled had to do with regulating time spent with TV:

- "Keep a time chart with the child of his or her activities, including TV viewing, homework and play with friends. Discuss with the child what to eliminate and what to put in its place.
- "Set a weekly viewing limit. Have the child select programs from television schedules at the beginning of the week. Parents can assign points to programs and give the child a point total to spend weekly. Programs that a parent does not want the child to watch can 'cost' more in points.
- "Rule out TV at certain times, such as before breakfast or on school nights.
- "Make a list of alternative activities - riding a bicycle, reading a book, working on a hobby. Before watching TV, the child must choose and do something from the list.
- "Encourage the entire family to have a program choice in mind before turning the

TV set on and to turn it off when the show they planned to watch is over.

- “Remember that you set an example for your child. If you watch a lot of TV, chances are your child will also.”

The authors also drew up four suggestions each on coping with violence, applying TV to real life and understanding advertising.

Under the “coping with violence” heading, they suggested:

- “Watch at least one episode of the program the child watches to know how violent they (shows) are.

- “When viewing TV together, discuss the violence with the child. Talk about why the violence happened and how painful it is. Ask the child how conflict can be solved without violence.

- “Explain to the child how violence on an entertainment program is ‘faked.’

- “Encourage children to watch programs with characters that cooperate, help and care for each other. These programs have been shown to influence children in a positive way.”

Many adults have professed concern that young viewers can’t distinguish between real life and TV. Here’s what the authors suggested:

- “Ask children to compare what they see on the screen with people, places and events they know firsthand, have read about or studied in school.

- “Encourage children to read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk to adults about their work, or meet people from different ethnic or social backgrounds.

- “Tell children what is real and what is make-believe on TV. Explain how television uses stunt people, camera zooms, dream sequences and animation to create fantasy.

- “Explain to the child the values your family holds about sex, alcohol and drugs.”

And let’s not forget advertising, long the bane of anyone who has sat in front of the

tube for any length of time. The “Big World, Small Screen” writers said:

- “Tell children that the purpose of advertising is to sell products to as many viewers as possible.
- “Put advertising disclaimers into words children understand: e.g., ‘partial assembly required’ means ‘you have to put it together before you can play with it.’
- “On shopping trips, let children see the toys that look big, fast and exciting on the screen, but that look disappointingly small and slow close-up.
- “Teach the child a few facts about nutrition and then let him or her use them. For example, if the youngster can read package labels, allow the child to choose the breakfast cereal from those in which sugar is not one of the first ingredients listed.”

The authors continued with a discussion about media literacy training. But, truth be told, they just conducted a fine mini-workshop in less than two pages.