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Helping kids make sense of the media

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TERRY PRICE

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"What did you learn in school today?"

It's a frequent parental question and, depending on the age and mood of your child, the response it elicits may range from a dismissive shrug to a torrent of enthusiasm.

But these days, there may be a much more important question to ask: "What did you learn from *the media* today?"

We've known for years that kids spend as much or more time interacting with television, video games and computers than they do in school. The lessons that teachers deliver are constantly scrutinized and tested for their relevance and effectiveness at building informed and responsible future citizens. The same can't be said, however, for the lessons learned from after school sitcoms, Internet immersion and weekend gaming.

Yet the impact of this "alternative curriculum" is being felt in Canadian classrooms every day. Students who watch the news at home regularly show up at school with questions and concerns about everything from birth control to international terrorism. And educators frequently report witnessing kids imitating dangerous stunts and violent behaviour that they've seen on TV.

So the Canadian Teachers' Federation decided to ask the second question itself. We commissioned Erin Research Inc. to conduct a national survey of more than 5,700 students across the country in Grades 3 to 10 to find out what media products they watch and play, and what they think about their experiences.

The results, published in a report released today and titled *Kids' Take On Media*, are illuminating.

Choices: Despite the amount of time students spend watching TV, surfing the Internet or playing video games, both boys and girls rate hanging out with their friends as their preferred activity < and it becomes more popular the older they get.

Conversely, reading for pleasure decreases as students age.

In a finding that should be of interest to TV producers and programmers, "exciting" and "funny" topped the list of attributes of the students' favourite TV programs, the majority of which don't contain violence. Excitement and competition were also key aspects of what attracted both girls and boys to video and computer games.

Violence: However, the survey responses did reflect some stereotypical trends, with girls expressing a decided preference for non-violent TV shows, and being much less interested in games. In fact, violence in video and computer games seems to be one of the attractions for male students and by Grade 10, boys are choosing electronic entertainment as a preferred weekend activity at twice the rate of girls.

One of the favorite games for boys across all grades surveyed is *Grand Theft Auto*, a game designed for mature audiences. The extreme violence in this game < it involves murder, bludgeoning and prostitution < raises questions about the definition of "mature," but more disturbing is the fact that the game is very popular among boys even in Grade 3.

Hundreds of previous studies have documented the impact of media violence on society. We know that repeated exposure to violent depictions, whether real or fictionalized, increases people's fears, desensitizes them to the suffering of others, and encourages aggressive behaviour. And in the real world of schools, that sometimes translates into the kind of bullying and violence that can have a profound effect on students.

In fact, in this survey, 51 per cent of Grade 7 to 10 kids said that they had

personally witnessed the real life imitation of some "violent act" from a movie or TV show. What can we do about this?

Supervision: The results from *Kids' Take On Media* suggest many children receive little or no parental restriction when it comes to their media consumption. Forty-eight per cent have their own TV, and 26 per cent have their own computer and Internet access.

Nearly half of those surveyed say there are no household rules regarding which TV shows they can watch, and two-thirds report that no one dictates which video or computer games they can play, or for how long. Perhaps not surprisingly, kids who experience little supervision of their media use are more likely to regard media violence as benign.

At the same time, many of the students recognized the value of adult restrictions. They identified TV programs such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* that they felt should be off limits to younger children and believed that there should be tighter age restrictions on mature-rated computer and video games than on R-rated movies.

Opportunities: The survey also found that children who do watch TV with their parents and are encouraged to talk about what they see are more aware of the potential impact of media violence, and more likely to have discussed the issues of racism and sexism. They also tend to spend more time doing homework, reading and participating in extra-curricular sports, clubs and hobbies.

Kids' Take On Media demonstrates some of the ways children benefit from adult perspectives on the media's alternative lessons.
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It also shows that the older kids get, the more they themselves see the value of studying media in school.

Clearly, parents and teachers have a crucial role to play in helping young people to sort through the wealth of media that's available to them < much of it intended for older eyes and ears. We can and should provide context for the "lessons" being taught by the news, entertainment and advertising media.

This is why media literacy should not be considered a frill but a life skill we should be teaching our young people. In addition to the traditional literacies of reading and numeracy, students need to learn to understand and analyze some of the messages they see and hear in the media.

Terry Price is the president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation. A summary of the findings of the Kids' Take On Media study is available at <http://www.ctf-fce.ca> and <http://www.erinresearch.com>.

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3Rs in the age of Bart
Half of all Canadian children have their own TV, and educators are struggling to compete

Sarah Schmidt

National Post

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Television and computer games are a much more dominant force in the lives of Canadian children than most parents would like to admit, according to a landmark survey to be released today.

The national media survey of 5,756 students in Grades 3 to 10, the first of its scope ever conducted in Canada, found half of children aged 8 to 15 have their own television sets.

By the time they reach Grade 6, half say they have watched "unsuitable" movies on video and claim their parents do not limit how much TV they watch.

By Grade 7, three-quarters of children report having watched R-rated movies on video or DVD; one-quarter have personally rented R-rated movies.

The numbers are even more dismal for video or computer games: Even for children in Grades 3 and 4, parental involvement of any kind never rises above 50%. By the time the children reach Grade 7, almost 75% of parents never tell their children what games they can or cannot play.

Meanwhile, half the children view violence in the media as benign, yet an equal number of students in Grades 7 to 10 said they have witnessed peers imitate a violent scene from a movie or television show, including copying a dangerous stunt.

Grand Theft Auto, the ultra-violent video game rated for mature audiences, is one of the top choices among younger boys and is the favourite among anglophone boys in Grades 7 to 10. The game, which involves murder, bludgeoning and prostitution, was banned in Australia until some of the more extreme content was removed.

The Simpsons is the most popular television show, even though each age group believes the adult-oriented animated show is not something younger children should be watching.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation commissioned the 82-page report, funded by the Department of Justice's National Crime Prevention Centre. The survey was designed and conducted by ERIN Research in consultation with the Media Awareness Network.

Terry Price, president of the teachers' federation, says the findings illustrate the need for comprehensive media literacy programs in schools so students can become discernable consumers of media. "We've always recognized that media is increasingly influential in the lives of students. This really reinforces the importance of media literacy in the schools and the role parents have to play in helping their children understand the media."

She said the media literacy curriculum "has gotten pushed out of the way for reading and writing."

The survey found 33% of students in Grades 7 to 10 believes killing someone in a computer or video game is not an act of violence, while half say there is too much violence in movies and on television.

Seventy-one per cent said there is not too much violence in hockey games on television.

At the same time, the majority of children say their parents have never talked with them about racism, sexism and violence on television. The survey concluded this represents a missed opportunity: For example, children who report their families often discuss what they watch are more likely to understand media violence is not always benign.

There is no doubt there is plenty of material to discuss.

The survey found watching TV is a daily pastime for 75% of all children -- both boys and girls -- from Grades 3 to 10. They also watch a lot of movies on video: 24% of children in Grades 3 to 6 and 17% of those in Grades 7 to 10 watch movies almost every day.

Almost 60% of boys in Grades 3 to 6 play video or computer games most days. Even in Grade 10, 38% of boys report it as a daily activity. Girls are much less likely to play interactive games every day, dropping from 33% in Grades 3 to 6 to just 6% in Grade 7 to 10.

Meanwhile, reading as a pastime steadily decreases as children get older.

Kelly Aleman, guidance counsellor at the Westpark Middle School in Red Deer, Alta., said students are saturated with images, but are often ill-prepared to handle the messages in the absence of a comprehensive media literacy program at school.

"With the Internet and even with satellite TV, kids are exposed to things that we were not

exposed to, images that are potentially harmful if they're not debriefed."

Stephanie Benn, a teacher at Queen Elizabeth Public School in Peterborough, Ont., is aware of how much time her Grade 6 students spend watching television. So she incorporates lessons on marketing and junk-food advertising into her health teaching, and other media literacy tips in her social studies curriculum.

Ms. Benn also knows what she's up against: Many of her students report watching R-rated movies and talk of multiple televisions in their home. Recently, her students pleaded with her -- unsuccessfully -- to let them watch an R-rated movie in class.

"The overwhelming response from the class was, 'We're allowed to watch that stuff all the time. Those sorts of comments go on in the class. There's a culture of sitting down and watching TV. They can name a number of TV shows, but aren't able to name a list of authors,' Ms. Benn says.

Children need to talk about what they see on television. In the survey, 64% of frequent news watchers say the reports make them worry about what is going on in the world (half of infrequent news watchers say they are worried).

Younger children, in particular, are frightened by the news: 43% of girls and 28% of boys in Grades 3 and 4 say they feel their personal safety is at risk. Young news junkies, however, feel more motivated to change the world.

Thirty-seven school boards across Canada participated in the survey, representing 122 public schools in all the provinces and territories. ERIN Research ensured a proper representative sample of urban and rural, French and English, public and Catholic school districts.

The survey was conducted last spring. The margin of error is 1.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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