

National TV-Turnoff Week

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An organization called TV-Free America has sponsored National TV-Turnoff Week for the last two years. This past April 24-30, thousands of schools, libraries and community groups nationwide joined in a coordinated effort to encourage millions of families and individuals to turn off their TV sets for seven days. Perhaps some of your schools also participated. If not, the information is listed below so you can write the organization and plan to participate in the future.

Our school offered a weekend of activities called "Tune Out The TV And Tune In To Life" to kick off the Turnoff week. Friday night we had a lecture for adults only that was geared toward looking at the phenomenon of television and its effects on people. The evening began by playing Simon Says, a game requiring very little mental alertness. It was then pointed out that, even in this very simple game, a person's brain activity and stimulation were far beyond that of the brain activity of a person watching television.

The first part of the presentation was spent on developing a picture of human development from birth to twenty-one (on into adulthood) and how the human being views life and learns during particular life cycles. A very simple diagram was offered as a launching point for this exploration.

Vehicle for Learning:	Senses/ Imitation	Listening/ Recapitulation	Evaluate Cognitive/Judgment
Approach to Life:	Willing	Feeling	Thinking
Expectation:	Goodness	Beauty	Truth
Type of Thinking:	Bodily	In pictures	In concepts
Relationship to World:	Corporeal Self	Earth	Fellow Human Beings

It seemed important to first know some key elements of how a person assimilates life before delving into the question of how television can affect that assimilation. Then three audience volunteers were asked to step forward and demonstrate a physical stance or posture representing these three phases of development: the open-mouthed young child who drinks in everything right into its physical body and has no capacity to filter anything out; the elementary-aged child who, now with mouth closed, still looks out into the world wide-eyed with an anticipation of wonder, yet with a beginning ability of discernment; and the youth, who, with crossed arms and tilted head, indicates a "prove-it to me" posture that has a stronger capacity to close off or filter out things. It was then suggested that the audience take a moment to think about the effects of television in those three phases of child development.

This was immediately followed by a brief look at the content of television and a more intense look at the actual medium of television itself with its cathode ray, electronic dots and dashes, thirty images per second, flashing light, etc., and the physiological impact it can have. This information was drawn from several sources, including Jane Healey's book, Endangered Minds Herbert Fil's, The Mental Breakdown of a Nation and several newspaper clippings and articles including Joan Almon's article quoting various research studies. We did a little exercise called Flashing Fingers where people sit in twos, and while one

waves his own hand in front of his face, the partner flashes her fingers at him closeup. It's an effective simulation to demonstrate what is taking place when one watches a television screen. Earlier on, we also did a little skit of a telephone interview with a parent and a potential babysitter. The babysitter, it turned out, was a television, and the conversation was very revealing.

After this exploration into television and its effects, we gathered into a circle to talk about alternatives, such as spending more time outside, doing work with our children, simple storytelling, conversation, unstructured play time, singing, playing games, reading, etc. A very simple Grimm's story, "Our Household" was told. We also spoke of the importance of not turning ourselves into "entertainment centers" for our children just because the television is gone. It is essential for children to learn how to create out of themselves which, in time, the healthy child can and will do if given the opportunity and a supportive environment.

This created a wonderful lead-in to the next morning's lecture on, "Tones of the Times: The Reality of Electronic Sound" by Veronika Roemer, a woman in our community who is an accomplished musician, a former music teacher at Emerson College and founder of the Rafael Association for the renewal of music. We felt it was important to speak on this subject because many people choose to replace television with yet another electronic intrusion, recorded music. Veronika shared her own insights into what is actually happening when one is listening to electronic sound which she believes ideally should only be used as a learning tool for the adult, who, for example, might want to learn certain songs and cannot read music, so listens to a tape in order to learn to sing them oneself. She indicated that, because electronic sound is not true music, the child who listens to it all the time will grow up with a weakened ability to hear and appreciate live music. In her teaching years, she experienced, repeatedly, adult students who absolutely could not distinguish one tone from another. She ended her presentation by demonstrating several simple instruments for children that one can make. These included coconuts that had been split in two, cleaned out and then covered tightly with leather or wood; bamboo percussion instruments; pots and wooden spoons; a stainless steel bowl filled with marbles; bells; etc. She also demonstrated Choro instruments, including kinderharp, lyre and ended by playing a piece on her viola.

The latter part of the morning, the participants split into various workshops. At this point, their children who had been cared for in another place, joined them for the workshop experiences. They could choose between "Music in the Family", "They Don't Call It 'Remote' and 'Control' for Nothing", "Beyond Bart Simpson: Conversations Within the Family", "Exploring Nature" and "Toy-Making With Children". The ones on music and toy-making were the preferred choices. At noon all gathered together for a marionette presentation of "Little Twig" which we realized later was really the ideal story to tie in with the theme, as it ends with the line: "And never again did Little Twig listen to a false voice".

A few things to note: The number of participants was small, even though some advertising had been done. Our development person who organized the whole thing said that people who spoke to her directly said one of two things: "I'm already converted, so I don't need to come", or "I love my T.V. and don't want to come". Those who did attend, thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the weekend.

It was a very upbeat weekend, and it is important to emphasize that the presenters really strove to come out of a spirit of sharing, not out of dogmatism. In such sensitive issues, it helps to give the facts and speak out of one's experience with these facts, and then to leave people free.

A few years ago, we had a much larger audience when the three Kindergarten teachers had a joint parent evening in which, as part of a presentation, we actually showed a few snippets from particular videos, spoke of our observed effects on the children, and later did a marionette show as a contrast. We then turned the discussion time over to the parents who really reached out to each other in an extraordinary and poignant way (especially the fathers). Interestingly, we did not have the word "television" in the title of

our presentation that time. It was something more along the lines of "the child and modern cultural life". Perhaps people felt freer to come without the title directly addressing television.

We will, however, continue to work with this link to National T.V. Turn-Off Week and encourage you to do the same. One thing we've learned over the years is that it is not always how many people come, but how the ones who do come are affected that really matters. It could also be a time when your faculty might want to study the more esoteric effects of technology on the human being.

The address and telephone number for the TV-Free America organization is: 1322 18th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, (202) 887-0436.

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