

Television: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

By Diane Trautman

In my childhood, my parents organized us around the TV for programs like “My Three Sons” and the “Ed Sullivan Show.” I may not remember much of 4th grade history, but I can easily recall the lyrics from “Mister Ed.” Not surprisingly, my sons can repeat many advertising slogans for products they’ve seen advertised on television.

The difference between my upbringing and that of my kids is that my husband and I not only spent time watching programs with our children, we took the time to discuss the programs and commercials with them afterwards. We’ve watched our share of fluff programming, but we’ve also enjoyed shows that taught history, science, and other subjects, and we’ve had great conversations about those programs. We’ve also dissected more than a few commercials in the process.

Television viewing can provoke curiosity about new subjects, sending us to the Internet, the library, or a museum for more information. Television and films can inspire us to write a story, paint a picture, or film our own material (as did our younger son when he and a friend created a string of goofy films for their French class). And we can help our children develop verbal and critical thinking skills by asking questions about the characters and the story line, or in the case of commercials, the messages and how they’re conveyed.

The downside to media, including videogames, is that it can mesmerize us and waste precious time that could be spent on homework, friendships, exercise, reading, and general relaxation. It also distorts our idea of reality. Children come away with the idea that they have to look and act like celebrities. Or they become fearful that the world is an unceasingly violent place.

It really is up to us as parents to limit viewing and gaming and to keep lines of communication open with our kids to give them some perspective. Just as we wouldn’t load our kids up with an unending array of junk food, we need to make sure we manage their viewing to help balance their lives.

Sometimes, it takes a few days to break our habits. This might be a good time to get out the board games, get the kids to help you cook their favorite foods, play cards (or even Twister), or just sit out under the stars and dream a little together.