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The Resource Publication for Vancouver Island Parents

Island Parent

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Holiday Book & Gift Recommendations

Love, Life
& the
Laundry Line



Taming

The other day my son was having one of those days. I'm sure you know the kind, where despite almost constant crying he still thought that a five-minute nap was good enough to get him through the day. Practically in tears myself, I did something I rarely do. I plunked him down in front of the television and turned on Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin. The silence was instantaneous. So was my guilt.

Ever since I became pregnant, I've been told of the dangers of letting your children watch television shows and movies. So if I ever did, I felt like a bad parent for succumbing to my desire for quiet. But that day, when I looked at my son smiling and dancing along to the music, I thought surely this can't be all bad.

And maybe it's not...



Like so many other things, moderation is key when watching shows or movies. Dr. Yalda Uhls, the senior researcher at the Children’s Digital Media Center at UCLA and author of *Media Moms and Digital Dads*, said in an email that “kids are looking at mobile devices at a younger and younger age—this is fine if it is minimal, but if it takes away from the child’s natural learning environment (for example, time spent with people and in nature), it should be discouraged.”

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Children can learn from TV shows and movies. In fact, according to Uhl’s research, there is no noticeable difference in what older children are able to learn from reading or watching television and movies. However with younger children, she warns, seeing faces is important when it comes to learning, “especially when kids are very young, they need to look at real faces.”

Debbie Gordon, the director of Centennial College’s Kids Media Centre, says that one of the problems with media use is that so much of it happens on portable devices, which means parents aren’t always aware of what their children are watching. So one way you can turn TV time into a learning experience is to know what your children are watching. Talk to them about



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it and set parameters around the types of shows they are allowed to watch. Content, says Uhls, can matter even more than the amount of time spent watching.

Victoria mom Stephanie Bossler, whose children are two and a half years old and three months old opted to get rid of cable and watch Netflix and DVDs from the library instead so she could have more control over what her children were watching. Not only does she monitor what they watch, but usually, she will watch with them.

What constitutes good content is largely a personal choice and will likely change as your children get older. When I was growing up my parents avoided any shows that they thought were too violent. My two-year-old nephew only watches nature documentaries. A few of my friends who are teachers only have *The Magic School Bus* on DVD. Others, like Bossler, might focus on interactive shows. Gordon suggests that even the news can be a good show for you to watch with your children.

For Victoria mom Angelique Troyer, whose boys are six and 11, the criteria involves how women are portrayed.

“My boys are not allowed to watch any shows that have central female characters that are dumb or hypersexualized,” she says. “They know why and it is an often-discussed topic because there are so many kids’ shows that don’t make the cut.”

To decide whether a show or movie is acceptable, she applies the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test, created in 1985 by cartoonist Alison Bechdel as a tool to measure gender bias in movies, requires that a show must have at least two women, preferably named, who talk to each other about something other than a man. There is some flexibility in her rules because, as she says, “it is unreasonable to expect them to be the only little boys that have never seen *Star Wars*.” They have discussed the fact there appears to be only one woman in the universe, she adds.

That Troyer discusses the content of various shows with her sons is important, many experts would agree, because to make TV time educational, we need to talk to our children about what they are watching.

“It’s not really about parental controls,” says Gordon. “It’s really just about engaging your children in conversation.”

When I was growing up my parents used to talk to me all of the time about what I was watching. They’d ask me questions like “What are you watching? Is it good? What happens? What did you think of what so-and-so did?”

Some of the questions Gordon recommends asking are, “Why do we care? What are the options? Why do so many others care? How does this make me a better person?”

Other questions that parents might consider asking could be: How is the show different from reality? Could a female character have done what the male character did? Was there a better way that the character could have handled a situation?

Sometimes the shows themselves will help you come up with things to talk about. Be-

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cause Bossler’s oldest child is only two and a half, she generally watches television or movies with him.

“We talk throughout the shows about what is going on and most shows we watch are interactive,” she says, referring to the shows that ask the audience questions. Bossler will put shows on pause to give her son time to try and figure answers to the questions. She has also found that her son is at an age where if she relates an issue or lesson back to a show he has watched, he often seems to understand it better.

Both Bossler and Troyer say they have seen a positive impact from letting their children watch television and movies.

“My boys are...immensely understanding of diversity and respectful of females,” says Troyer. For Bossler’s son, watching television has helped him learn his numbers, recognize different shapes and colours, and overcome his fear of going to the dentist. “[He] was scared so we watched the *Paw Patrol* [episode] about the dentist and he relaxed a bunch about going. Once we were there, it became a big thing that he got to go to the dentist just like Chase (the character) did, and then it seemed to become a big accomplishment as opposed to something to be scared of.”

Christina Van Starckenburg is a freelance writer and mother of one.