

FAMILY GUIDE FOR USING MEDIA¹

USCC Committee for Communications

United States Catholic Conference
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The Second Vatican Council called communication media "marvels" and "gifts" from God, but it also recognized that these gifts can be mixed blessings, depending on how they are used. The media's impact continues to grow, as computer networks and the Internet add powerful and easily accessible new means to the familiar forms of mass communication—print, television, radio, film, video, telephone, and cable services.

Influential enough individually, they are converging into multi-media networks that make them increasingly essential to people's daily lives. The media are so much part of us that to recognize their impact, we must step back and consciously think about how they shape our lives and what they are saying. An intelligent use of media can prevent our being dominated by them and enable us instead to measure them by our standards.

In this way, even many messages with which we cannot agree, inevitably coming to us from a diverse constellation of media, will not hurt us. They can even be turned to our benefit by whetting our understanding and articulation of what we believe. It is important for parents to educate their children in the influence of the media, to take responsibility for monitoring what media their children use, and to become role models for appropriate use of media.

The use of the media involves moral choices. Here are ten actions or attitudes that can guide parents as media consumers to affirm Christian values:

Respect life

In evaluating media, parents should ask whether human life is shown to be a precious gift from God. Is sexuality linked to life? How is the act of dying presented? Is the taking of life portrayed casually and without moral consequences?

Respect human beings and the family

Individual human beings are the concrete focus of respect for life. Each person possesses an inherent dignity, created as we are in God's image and likeness, and each one finds meaning, purpose, and identity within the family and faithful, well-ordered relationships. Ask yourself whether the media you are using respect human dignity. Do they reverence lasting commitments within the context of marriage and the family? Is this respect maintained even when the programming is humorous or satirical? Are exploitation, oppression, or neglect of any group of people condoned or even promoted? Is respect shown for the variety of cultures? Do the media glorify attitudes such as excessive consumerism, promiscuity or other exploitative relationships, prejudice, or violence?

¹ <http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/family-guide.cfm>

Apply gospel values.

In making media choices, parents should take as guides Scripture and Christian belief and morals. Ask yourself whether the media you are using foster a sense of the divine, of human destiny extending beyond the confines of this life, of our obligation to forgive and our need for forgiveness. Are compassion, reconciliation, thanksgiving, and moral responsibility affirmed?

Use your intelligence.

As entertaining and useful as the media can be, they should not be accepted uncritically or thoughtlessly. In subtle and not so subtle ways, most media convey moral messages. Reflect on what ethical standards the media are using. What is portrayed and why? What is it saying about human existence? How does it relate to Christian faith and moral belief? If something seems shocking, is anything of value also being conveyed? Is comedy used for genuine amusement or merely as a put-down? How are you and your family reacting to your media choices? Are you benefiting from them?

Talk back to the media.

All too often we experience media, especially television and film, as one-way communication. Get in the habit of using television, film, and other media to start a dialogue. Where media are interactive, you can engage in an actual dialogue. Where they aren't, you can contact networks, local stations, and newspapers to compliment or complain how the media are or are not helping you as a parent. The dialogue can also go on in your family. For example, a television drama can start you asking one another, "What would you have done or said in that situation? Why?"

Set your own agenda.

The mass media, especially news programming, tend to set the public agenda. They tell us what issues deserve our attention; they highlight certain people and social and political options. Think about this media-set agenda. Does it reflect what is truly important? Are you hearing the things that matter to you and your family? Choose the media that serve your needs rather than just tuning in or logging on. Help your children to pick good programming instead of surfing through what's there.

Look at consequences.

When it comes to film or television drama, ask, "What should happen next?" In real life, actions have consequences. On television or in film, these consequences often don't appear unless they affect the plot. Help your children recognize the difference between fiction/fantasy and real life, especially when it comes to depicting violence, sexual activity, and lavish lifestyles that have no visible means of support.

See the whole picture.

Be aware of the potential for receiving partial information or biased views. No communication medium can supply all details about anything. The Internet, in particular, offers a vast amount of unevaluated information. You and your children need to use a variety of media

sources to learn about the world in which we live. When using media, be ready to ask what aspects of life are being neglected, what issues are being ignored, and whether bias or manipulation is involved.

Be alert to the effects of advertising.

Advertising and media are closely allied. Advertisers need the media to get their message out. Most forms of media are supported by advertising. Parents need to ask whether their families are consuming what they need or what the media make them *think* they need. How are you helping your children to avoid being manipulated by advertisers? Do you and your family take into account Gospel values in making consumer choices?

Talk to each other.

People are more important than things. Media usage should help build each family's community of faith as one source that can lead family members out of themselves and toward each other. Ask yourselves whether your family's way of using media does or isolates family members instead. How can your media usage improve family communication and enrich your conversation? Look for ways to balance media involvement with other family activities.

Resources

- *Renewing the Mind of the Media: A Statement on Overcoming the Exploitation of Sex and Violence in Communications.*

This major statement of the Catholic bishops of the United States deals extensively with media issues. Available from USCC Publishing Services at 800-235-8722. Pamphlet overview also available.

- Office for Film and Broadcasting at the United States Catholic Conference. The USCC Department for Communications, through its Office for Film and Broadcasting, regularly produces reviews of motion pictures currently available in theaters, on television, and on videotape. USCC classifications are a useful reference for concerned, busy parents in exercising their responsibility to protect their youngsters, especially teenagers, from films that may be morally harmful. The USCC's reviews and classifications are available to the public in a variety of ways (see below).
- Catholic newspapers that carry USCC motion picture and television reviews, capsules, and classifications provided to them via the Catholic News Service (CNS).
- The *TV & Movie Guide*, a weekly newsletter designed for distribution by parishes and schools, which carries USCC reviews and classifications of movies currently in theaters, evaluations of upcoming TV shows, classifications of movies scheduled for cable channels, and other information. A subscription with rights to distribute to all members of a single parish or school is \$97 per year. Individuals may subscribe for \$47 per year. Sample copies and further details may be obtained from Catholic News Service at 202-541-3279.
- *Movie Guide Monthly*

, a monthly newsletter designed for individuals who want movie information on a less frequent basis. It contains USCC classifications of theatrical movies in current distribution and capsule reviews of newly released movies. A subscription costs \$12 per year. Sample copies and further information may be obtained from Catholic News Service at 202-541-3279.

- *The Family Guide to Movies and Videos*

, a book containing USCC capsule reviews of more than 7,500 movies released from 1966 through 1993, as well as recommended family films from earlier years. Classifications by the USCC and ratings by the MPAA are included. Available from USCC Publishing Services at 800-235-8722.

- A toll-free phone line, 800-311-4CCC (4222), sponsored by the Catholic Communication Campaign. Updated every Friday, this service provides capsule reviews of six leading box office attractions and a recommended "Family Video of the Week."
- The NCCB/USCC Internet site. Find weekly reviews by logging onto www.nccbuscc.org, click on "News&Events," and then click on "Movie Reviews." There is also an alphabetical listing of recent reviews here. America Online subscribers can find reviews by entering the keyword "CNS."

Additional Resources

- *Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media*

, from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Available from USCC Publishing Services at 800-235-8722.

- *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy*

, a multimedia learning program linking Catholic values and today's media culture. The program was developed and produced for The Catholic Communication Campaign by the Center for Media Literacy in collaboration with the National Catholic Educational Association. Provided are a variety of teaching materials: a video, background resources on media and values, a leader's guide and accompanying handout masters, a media literacy resource directory, and *Forming Values in a Media Age*, a source book for infusing media literacy into parish religious education, youth ministry and parish family life programs, as well as Catholic schools. Available from the Center for Media Literacy at 800-226-9494.