

## **Managing the Media's Influence on Families**

Since television was first introduced to the public at the World's Fair in 1939, it has grown to become one of the most influential factors in shaping the values, norms and attitudes in our society. Most of the entertainment, marketing and news/information in our country is communicated through some version of this medium.

Some 99 percent of American households have a TV— in fact, the average home has 2.6 sets and they are “on” an average of seven hours a day. Related products, such as videos and video games, have increased the amount of home-time and activity children spend around the tube to an average of 32 hours per week, plus or minus the amount of time a child devotes to the Internet and other computer activities. Recent studies indicate that 92 percent of children age 2-17 play video games. American children and youth spend more time watching TV than any other activity in their waking lives. The question is: What kinds of messages are they getting and how do they relate to our faith and values?

The media and especially the entertainment industry have affected our lifestyles, priorities and perspectives – including the relationships within families, work and community. Many aspects of this medium are positive and we are grateful for it. But other facets of the TV culture are raising concern and prompting parents, schools, churches and other organizations to raise awareness and recommend ways to monitor and manage its impact, especially in the areas of sex and violence.

Television content and program schedules have also affected the level of commitment and time that people have for other activities, including church involvement.

## **What Your Congregation Can Do**

Here are some ways to build an awareness and understanding of the role TV and related media play in our attitudes, choices, values and daily lifestyles.

- In sermons, forums and Bible studies, address the role of advertising in shaping the attitudes and behavior of children, youth and adults with regard to such things as violence, sex, food, body image and material consumption.
- Refer to specific TV programs and characters to interpret similar biblical characters and lessons.
- Help people of all ages discern the media's content and impact. You can find ideas about this in "Faith Lens," a resource for youth that connects the lectionary with current events. It's on the ELCA Web site at [www.elca.org/dcm/youth](http://www.elca.org/dcm/youth).
- Use specific TV programs as entry points for nurturing other forms of education, recreation and entertainment – for example, plan an indoor/outdoor intergenerational tag-football game before or after the Super Bowl, along with a soup-and-sandwich meal to raise money for the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. You might also use the Oprah Winfrey show as a format for a women's event or tailor the MTV style to create a youth forum on media.
- Promote national TV Turn-Off week, April 22-28. Contact the TV Turn-off Network at 202/518-5556, or check out [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org) for information, along with a variety of other resources.
- Plan and promote ongoing opportunities for children, youth, adults, families and intergenerational groups to engage in community-building activities and other forms of recreation. Consider sponsoring or establishing after-school programs for children and youth with opportunities for recreational reading, homework help and athletic and volunteer activities.

- Provide resources for parents to address and assess media-related activities in their homes. The National Institute on Media and the Family has a variety of print, video and electronic resources to assist you. For instance, on their "Free Family Resources" page, you'll find links to articles such as "12 tips for taming the tube," their "annual video game report card," "Safety tips for surfing the Net" and "TotSmart"—tips about television, reading and preschool children. Contact them at 888/672-5437 or go to [www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org).
- Through Christian education and adult forums, help people ask critical questions about the messages they receive through TV and movies, especially about violence, women, people of color, sexuality, success and materialism. A good resource and discussion starter is the book *Watching What We Watch: Prime Time Television through the Lens of Faith* (from Geneva Press, [www.genevapress.com](http://www.genevapress.com) \$19.95; 800/227-2872).
- Watch for news about possible future regional workshops across the ELCA to train congregational "MediaWise" program leaders. When more information is available about this proposed training project, we'll let you know details here in Seeds.
- Engage congregation members of all ages in prayer, conversation and discernment regarding issues of faith and values in the choices we make every day – in the activities we choose, how we spend our time and how we live out our relationships with family, community and God.

*Miriam Campbell is ELCA associate director for Christian education, children and family ministries.*