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A Generation Immersed in Media

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A new report indicates that the average child in America now spends 45 hours a week immersed in the media — a multiple of the hours spent with parents or in the classroom.

Commonsense Media, a group that advocates for better programming in the media, commissioned and released the report. Researchers looked at 173 studies done on media and its effects on children and adolescents. The results are sobering. Taken together, these reports strongly suggest that significant exposure to the media is related, among other concerns, to behaviors such as smoking and early sexual activity, as well as low academic achievement and obesity.

As *USA Today* reports:

Parents and policymakers need to take action to protect children from being harmed by TV, the Internet and other types of media, a report says.

Researchers have done individual studies for years to learn how media affect children. A review released today, which analyzed 173 of the strongest papers over 28 years, finds that 80% agree that heavy media exposure increases the risk of harm, including obesity, smoking, sex, drug and alcohol use, attention problems and poor grades.



In one sense, this report should not shock any informed parent or observer. The report does offer something new, however, in its analysis of so many published scientific reports and studies. The sheer quantity of the data is impressive. One obvious point comes to the fore — there has already been sufficient concern to prompt the development of the 173 separate studies considered in this report.

Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel of the National Institutes of Health commented, “The idea that this is having a really measurable adverse impact on health makes it important to take this seriously.” What isn’t measured in these studies, of course, is the adverse *spiritual* effects of so much media exposure.

Beyond the question of quantity — 45 hours of media immersion on average — there is the question of media content. Anyone with the slightest awareness of media content knows the problems. Media of all forms and formats are saturated with violence, sexuality, morally troubling themes, alcohol and tobacco use, and the use of drugs.

Furthermore, the boundaries of acceptable content are being pressed back season after season. What was once limited to adult theaters soon makes its appearance in the mainstream media. Themes once off-limits to media in any form are now common on mainstream television. The emergence of the Internet, modern video games, MP3 players, and sophisticated cell phones offers yet more opportunities for increased media immersion and exposure to troubling programming and content.

Another relatively new phenomenon is the digital revolution and the transformation of media consumption from a largely communal activity to one that is more and more solitary. The television set used to be located in a family gathering place and families watched television together. No longer. Now, televisions are distributed throughout various rooms in most houses, and viewing is increasingly solitary. Millions of American children and adolescents have

televisions in their bedrooms — many combined with digital recorders, video games, and other components.

Add to this picture a virtual explosion in the number of children and teenagers with computers and Internet access in bedrooms. Today's children, equipped with iPods, cell phones, laptops, and portable video players, are seldom more than a few feet (if not inches) separated from media technologies.

Parents should look to this new report with interest and concern. The adverse effects of immersion in the media are now beyond refutation. Does anyone really believe that all this media exposure has no ill effects on children and adolescents?

Christian parents come to this issue with deeper concerns. Like other parents, we are rightly concerned about the dangers of obesity and other effects related to physical health and well being. Beyond this, however, we must be concerned with the effects of media exposure on the soul. Though perhaps impossible to measure by scientific study, we have good reason to be concerned that media immersion of this sort leads to a deadening of the soul and hinders the development of spiritual health and maturity.

Here are some suggestions parents might want to consider.

1. Limit the total media exposure experienced by your children. The statistic that the average child and adolescent is immersed in the media for 45 hours a week should be sufficient motivation for parents to hit the brakes and gain control of media exposure. Access to entertainment media should be a privilege earned, not a right assumed by the child.

2. Do not allow children and teenagers to have televisions and Internet-connected computers in the bedroom. There is simply too much danger in unsupervised media exposure, and too much temptation in terms of both quantity and content. No child needs a television in the bedroom, and a computer connected to the Internet is an invitation to disaster.

3. Make entertainment media a family experience. There is a massive difference in the experience of a child watching programming alone and that same child watching with a parent. Parents should be in unquestioned control of media decisions. Parents should also be eager to discuss what is seen with teenagers and children, helping them to grow in discernment and judgment.

4. Parents have to do the hard work of actually knowing what their children and teenagers are watching, playing, hearing, and experiencing through media exposure. No one said parenting was supposed to be easy.

5. Realize that a revolution has taken place in the lives of children and adolescents. The emergence of social media technologies means that children (and adolescents especially) now expect to be in constant communication with their peers. This is not healthy, sane, or helpful. All of us — children and teenagers included — need a break from this immersion. Put a charging dock in the kitchen and confiscate cell phones as the kids come in the door. That will send a message the old fashioned way — in person.

6. Take a regular look at what your child is posting and what others are posting on his or her social media sites. Look at the instant messaging exchanges and emails. You are the parent, after all, and your child's access to these technologies should come with the open and non-negotiable requirement that parents see it all.

7. Remember that saying "no" is a legitimate option. I do not believe that saying "no" is always the right response. The media bring opportunities for good as well as for evil. Children and teenagers who are never allowed access to media technologies and entertainment will emerge into adulthood with no powers of discernment. But "no" is sometimes the best and only appropriate answer, and parents should always be ready to use it when needed.

Today's generation of children and adolescents is, by all accounts, a generation immersed in media. This new report reminds us that this exposure cannot come without real costs. Let's hope America's parents are paying attention.

See coverage in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Washington Post*.

An executive summary of the report is available [here](#) from [Commonsense Media](#).

We will discuss this report and the issue of media immersion on Thursday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*.

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