

# 100 Family Media/Digital Literacy Activities

By *Gloria DeGaetano*, CEO and Founder, Parent Coaching Institute



## Consider Media Literacy

What is “media literacy?” The word *literacy* connotes a high degree of competency and usually means that a person knows how to read and write. A *literate* person, on the other hand, is well read, using and applying high level thinking skills across a broad range of topics. Computer literacy means the capacity to use computers well. Media literacy, then, is the ability to use all forms of media well. A media-literate person uses television, movies, DVDs, computer and video

games for specific purposes, just as a print-literate person reads a book or a magazine, a college text or a newspaper for specific, various reasons.

Using all visual screen technology *intentionally* is the first, and most important element in becoming media literate. Ultimately as parents we want children and teens to be in control of small screens and not be controlled by them. Research has verified and experts know that a child who mindlessly watches a lot of TV or plays video games endlessly is less equipped to develop the capacities for wise media use. A media literate child, on the other hand, would learn to self-monitor screen time, rather than make a habit of it four-five hours a day or more. He or she would want to do other activities because thinking, creative children are curious beings, and there's a whole world out there to explore. Screen technologies are just one small part of it.

In addition to being able to *control* media use, media-literate children and teens know the differences between various presentation forms of media. Just as a print-literate person can tell a fairly tale from a biography, a media-literate person knows how different techniques are used to convey messages. Sitcoms are not documentaries, for instance, and while music videos may look like some commercials with their quick cuts, commercials and music videos have specific audiences, every image carefully constructed to “hook” an intended audience.

While a print-literate person reads words; a media literate person reads images. Using analysis, evaluation, and higher level thinking skills, a media-literate person interprets the subtle messages and overt claims visual messages convey. This is where we want our children to be headed: toward it becoming second nature to think well about all forms of media images. Media literacy consists of four basic skills:

- Ability to use all forms of screen technology purposefully, age-appropriately
- Ability to critique visual messages and understand their intent and intellectual and emotional impact
- Ability to communicate facts, ideas, and thoughtful opinions about media images
- Understanding of media production techniques such as camera angles, lighting, cuts, etc. and how they impact the messages being delivered to influence the viewer

## Consider Digital Literacy

With the explosion of digital technologies and hand-held digital devices, like smart phones and tablets, it's important to include the digital landscape in defining a literate, 21st century, educated person.

The University Library of The University of Illinois defines **digital literacy** as:

- The ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use, and create information.
- The ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers.
- A person's ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment.

Paul Glister defines **Digital Literacy** as follows:

“Digital literacy is the ability to understand information and more important, to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver. Being able to evaluate and interpret information is critical...you can't understand information you find on the Internet without evaluating its sources and placing it in context.”

Mr. Glister provides important emphasis for parents since we want our children to think critically about the information they receive through technologies, as well as understand the context in which they receive it. Social media, for instance may provide information on the same subject as a university website, but the two contexts are very different; as a result the information shared on each may not have equal value. Discussing the context from which children receive information is critically important.

## The Importance of Meta-Awareness and a Healthy Self-Identity

I used to tell my sons as they were growing up, “You are as smart as that script writer.” “You could develop a clever cartoon like that.” “You would be a very thoughtful journalist.” Today I might add, “Yes, it is a fun app and you could create a fun learning app, too.” “You have the smarts to learn anything you need to about digital technologies.”

Children, from early on, benefit from understanding that all media is made up—someone had to think about it and create it before we use it. This meta-level of understanding helps to demystify screen technologies. At the same time, these meta-messages can help develop a sense of identity that “I am a capable creator of my own images and messages.”

With a strong, healthy self-identity of themselves as learners and creators, children can grow up using all forms screen technologies competently and age-appropriately.

## The *100* Family Media/Digital Literacy Activities are Grouped as Follows:

---

- 10 Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Use
- 15 General activities you can adapt for use with children or teens

*Age specific activities grouped in categories of screen violence, advertising, news, and stereotypes:*

- 20 Activities for children, ages 3-5
- 20 Activities for children, ages 6-10
- 20 Activities for teens, ages 11-14
- 15 Activities for teens, ages 15-18

*(Please Note: You can adapt any of the activities for your child or teen, so don't feel constrained to the age groupings. If an activity looks like it will work for your family, go for it!)*



# 10 Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Use

---

## **For babies through age 2**

1. Limit exposure to digital devices; encourage play in 3-D reality, rather than on 2-D small screens.

## **For young children, ages 3-5**

2. Keep screen time limited to a total of one hour a day, best in 15 minute-chunks of time.
3. Provide interactive, educational games and apps that teach colors, shapes, and age-appropriate information.
4. Audio input without visual input is critical. Make sure your child listens to you read a book, or listen to an audio book, for at least one hour a day.

## **For children, ages 6-10**

5. All of the above (keep screen entertainment limited to one hour a day) and include limited time on screen for homework/learning in a common living area in your house.
6. Select age-appropriate, non-violent video games. Look for slower games that require children to think and strategize.
7. Use a timer to help the child know when the time is up for video game or app playtime.
8. Create regular opportunities to discuss media content, family media/digital rules, and the reasons for them. A weekly family meeting provides the structure to do this.

## **For young teens, ages 11-14**

9. All of the above, and discuss use of a cell phone and social media age-appropriately. Emphasize rules that reflect your parenting values and support your child's optimal development—physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, morally.

## **For older teens, ages 15-18**

10. All of the above, and help your teen understand mature uses of screen technologies to support life-long learning and healthy on-going communication with friends. Launch your teen into adulthood as a media/digital literate young adult.

# 15 General Activities To Adapt for Use with Children or Teens

---

## 1. TV/Film Versions of favorite books.

Great discussions can result from comparing the original book and the TV/film version.

## 2. Time capsule.

Ask your child to imagine that he or she has been given the job of choosing five TV shows, films, apps, or video games that will be included in a time capsule, not to be opened for one hundred years. Discuss what type of society these might portray to a child opening the time capsule in the future.

## 3. Different viewpoints.

All family members watch TV program or a movie together. Afterwards, each person writes a few sentences about their opinions about the show/movies. Then discuss and compare everyone's opinions. Point out how different people will have various preferences. Why are all opinions valid? Who had the most persuasive opinion? Why?

## 4. Make up an alternate title.

When you're watching a TV program or movie with your child, ask him or her to exercise imagination and think of another title. To get things rolling, suggest an alternate title yourself. All family members can come up with as many alternates as possible. Discuss how each title conveys the essence of the show/movie.

## 5. Compare what you see with what you expect.

Read a description of a TV show or movie with your child. Predict the plot and what the characters will do based on what you read. After viewing discuss with your child: Were there significant differences between what was written and what you both actually observed as you watched it? Discuss the differences between expectations based on information and actual information based on experience.

## 6. Predict what will happen.

During commercial breaks, mute the commercials and ask each family member: "What will happen next? If you were the scriptwriter what would you put next? How would you end the story?" Discuss each option and its viability. There are no right or wrong responses, just creative ideas to explore.

## 7. The guessing game.

During a favorite family TV program, turn off the volume. As you watch without the volume see if your child can guess what is happening. You can record the show and play back with the volume to see how close s/he came to the original dialogue/action.

## 8. Developing cognitive meta-awareness while watching a show.

This is a great activity for school-age children who may need guidance in watching their favorite programs while you can't be there with them. Give your child a written list of 3-5 general questions that they read before they watch a TV show. Consider such questions as: "What do you think this program will be about? What do you anticipate the main character's troubles will be? How will he/she resolve them? Why are you watching this show and not doing something else?" Instruct your child to think about the questions while viewing—no need to write anything down, just think. As your child watches, he/she won't be able to stop thinking about these questions—it's just how the brain works. Intermittently, ask your child to discuss the TV program with you, along with how this activity has helped him or her think about the program!

### **9. Theme songs.**

Help your child identify the instruments and sound effects used in the theme songs of his favorite movies or TV shows. The score from Star Wars, for instance, is usually immediately recognizable. But we may not talk much about how the music affects the viewing experience. Discuss with your child questions like: “How does background music or a film score set a mood? Tell the story? Evoke feelings such as fear or awe in you?” As you watch favorites with your child, point out how the background music changes to enhance the plot and/or feelings of the characters.

### **10. Sequence the plot: a game.**

To help your child understand logical sequencing, ask her to watch a TV show or movie while you write down its main events, jotting each event on a separate card. At the completion of the program or the film, shuffle the cards and ask your child to put them in the same order in which they appeared during the program. Discuss any lapses in logical sequence.

### **11. A time chart.**

Your child will keep a time chart for one week of all of his/her activities with screens, including TV/movie viewing, playing app games and video games, time spent doing homework on the computer or a screen tablet, and time on social media. Compare the time spent on these activities with other activities, such as imaginative or outdoor play, reading, organized sports, chores, hobbies, visiting friends, and listening to or playing music. Which activities get the most time? The least? Do you or your child think the balance should be altered? Why or why not?

### **12. Body language.**

Observe body language in commercials and/or TV shows and films. Notice head position, hand gestures, and eye movement. How does body language affect how you feel about the intended visual or verbal message? Children could cut out postures and expressions from print ads and see if they can find similar postures and expressions on TV or in movies. How does body language communicate messages?

### **13. Quick problem solving.**

Point out to your child how fast problems are solved on many TV shows. Discuss the differences in dealing effectively with challenges in real life. You may want to include in your discussion what processes you go through to identify, confront, and resolve problems.

### **14. Make a weekly viewing guide.**

Your child could make a TV Guide for the upcoming week. What programs will s/he include? What programs will not be included? Request reasons for all choices. Kids could do the same with planning their apps game or video game playing for the week.

### **15. Encourage your child or teen to be a media creator.**

Some examples: Encourage a child to use a digital camera and make a photo collage of a family trip. Older children and teens can create websites, blogs, and podcasts. Screen technologies are powerful tools and when used intentionally, with specific purposes, our children become media and digital literate while learning about their creativity and skills.

# 20 Activities for Children, ages 3-5

---

## *Violence*

### **1. Talk about real-life consequences.**

If your child sees a cartoon or a movie with someone hurting another person, ask, “In real life what would happen to the person hitting the other person?” Compare what's on the screen to the consequences of what happens when someone hurts another person in the real world, emphasizing, “It’s never OK to hit another person.”

### **2. Violence is not the way to solve problems.**

Emphasize that hurting another person in any way or destroying property is wrong and won't solve a person's problems. Point out to your child that many of the violent cartoon characters never seem to solve their problems from episode to episode, and that to use violence is to act without thinking of the consequences. Tell your child it's powerful and smart to find peaceful, creative ways to solve problems with other human beings.

### **3. Anger is natural.**

Talk about the fact that we all get angry, that it's normal. When screen characters hurt people out of anger, it's because they have not learned how to deal with their anger in positive ways. Your child could make a list of screen characters that know how to deal with their anger in positive ways, showing you examples of what you have told your child when s/he is angry.

### **4. Count the number of violent acts.**

While watching a favorite cartoon with your child, count the number of actual violent actions. Point out that these are harmful to others and you would never allow him/her to do such things to others. Total the number of violent actions at the end of the program and ask your child if he/she thought there were that many. Why or why not? Decide not to watch cartoons or any shows with such violent actions.

### **5. Count the number of kind acts.**

While watching a favorite cartoon with your child, count the number of actual kind and cooperative actions. Point out that these are ways to help others and have good times with others. Total the number of kind and cooperative actions at the end of the program and ask your child if he/she thought there were that many. Decide to watch more shows depicting kind and cooperative actions.

### **6. Talk about real and pretend.**

If your child is exposed to a violent movie or video game, it is especially important to talk with him/her about the fact that the images were pretend-like when your child plays pretend and that no one was actually hurt.

### **7. Choose Non-Violent Apps**

Introduce your child to educational games on apps without any scariness or violence. [www.common-sense-media.org](http://www.common-sense-media.org) reviews recent apps for educational quality. Choose apps that give your child time to think, to ponder, and to process information.

## *Advertising*

### **8. Blind taste test.**

Show your child how she can test the claims of commercials. Have her do a blind taste test. It can be done with a wide range of foods such as three or four kinds of yogurt, spaghetti sauce, and cereal—any of your child's favorite foods. Are the products as great as the commercials claimed? Can she tell the difference between a generic brand and a famous one? Can she identify products by name? Do the commercials make products seem different than they really are? Why or why not? This is a fun activity to do with several children. Have a taste test party!

### **9. Draw pictures of a feeling.**

Suggest that your child draw a picture depicting how he feels after watching two different types of TV commercials. What are the differences between the pictures? Discuss your child's feelings about the different commercial messages. Picture the buyer. Younger children can watch a commercial and then draw a picture of the type of person they think will buy the product. After discussing the child's picture, explain how various audience appeals are used in commercials to attract specific audiences.

### **10. Cartoon ads.**

While watching cartoons, your child can look for specific cartoon characters that appear in popular commercials. Explain the differences between the commercial and the cartoon: In the commercial, the character sells a product; in the cartoon, the character entertains us. The next time s/he watches TV, have her tell you about any cartoon characters selling products.

### **11. The toy connection.**

When visiting a toy store, you and your child can look for toys that have been advertised on TV or promoted by TV/movie personalities or cartoon characters. Talk with your child about why the toy isn't any better than others not endorsed by TV/movie personalities.

### **12. Invent a character.**

Your child can pick a product, such as a favorite cereal, and create an imaginary character that can be used to sell the product. He/she could draw a picture or role-play the character. Or, using puppets, stage an imaginative commercial for a made-up product. Afterwards discuss with your child what she or he did to tell people about the product. Watch a few commercials and point out basic selling techniques such as making the product look larger than life, repeating a jingle, and showing happy children using the product.

### **13. Lookout for brand placement.**

On errands, or while traveling with youngsters, point out the names of stadiums, skyscrapers, schools, and other buildings that may have been named for a company, such as Alaska Airlines Husky Stadium. Discuss the differences between naming a building for a corporation and naming a building for a living person who is a role model, such as Henry David Thoreau Middle School.

### **14. Limit Food Ads.**

A 2011 study published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine showed that there has been a significant increase in TV ads from fast-food restaurants viewed by children. (<http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232057.php?trendmd-shared=1>) As much as possible, limit youngsters' viewing of food ads.



## *A Word about Screen News...*

TV news contains elements that may not be appropriate for young children. As much as possible, watch news when your child is in bed or not in the room. Protect your little one from graphic images and topics that she/he is not ready to handle cognitively or emotionally.

### ***Screen Stereotypes***

#### **15. Not better, just different.**

Children are never too young to start learning the message that differences do not make anyone better than anyone else. Point out how each family member has his or her individual preferences, habits, ideas, and behaviors. Differences make us all unique and interesting. When your child sees a racist or sexist stereotype on the screen, explain that the writers of the script made an error in portraying the character in that light.

#### **16. Change the picture.**

Play a game with your child: When she encounters a screen stereotype, ask her whether other types of people could play that role. For instance, if the secretary is a young woman, explain that men are secretaries, too, and that many older women are very competent secretaries.

#### **17. Girls, boys, and toys.**

As you walk through a toy store, point out various toys to your child, asking each time whether the toy is made for a boy or a girl. Ask if any child could just as well play with the toy. Encourage your child to find toys that would be fun for girls and boys to play with. Then, when your child sees toy commercials on TV, point out whether only little boys or little girls are playing with the toys.

#### **18. Play: Who is missing?**

What children see on the screen often does not represent all nationalities and the diversity he or she encounters in preschool, kindergarten, or on the playground. While watching favorite cartoons or movies with your child, discuss who is missing, such as an older person, a disabled person, or a person of a certain race or nationality.

#### **19. Model discussion of screen stereotypes.**

When your family watches a favorite TV program or a popular film, you can help your youngster identify stereotypical roles, behaviors, and attitudes by holding family conversations to involve your spouse and/or older children. While watching the program or movie, the adults and the older children take notes, tracking whenever they spot a stereotype of age, gender, or race. After watching, turn off the TV/VCR and discuss everyone's observations. Using each family member's notes, compile a master list of the stereotypical statements and portrayals that were noted. This discussion can be made more interesting if you taped the program (or replay the film in appropriate scene/s), so you can refer back to it as family members discuss the stereotypes they spotted. Your little one will listen to this family media literacy conversation and absorb important information while the others share their ideas.

#### **20. Speak out against stereotypes.**

When you encounter a cultural, racial, gender, or age stereotype in a TV program or movie the family is viewing, discuss the inequality, misperceptions, and damage these can do. You are modeling the importance of accepting people as they are, along with helping your youngster understand that screen characters don't have to be portrayed in a certain way.

# 20 Activities for Children, ages 6-10

## *Violence*

### **1. Get specific to replace.**

Ask your child: “What type of violence is most predominant in your favorite shows, movies, or video games?” Then encourage him/her to keep a record of how many of the following acts are viewed in a week: threat with weapon, unwanted sexual advances, slap or punch, fistfight, run over or hit by a car, knife wound, gun wound, property destroyed. Discuss with your child how h/she would replace these violent acts with cooperative acts in order to solve the problems in socially acceptable ways.

### **2. Picture a world without media violence.**

Have your child imagine that violence was suddenly eradicated from all television, movies, and video games. Discuss such questions as: “What would take its place? What would you miss? What would the general population think about the eradication of media violence? Would no media violence have any effect on real-life violence?”

### **3. Make a plot line of a favorite show.**

When watching an action TV program or movie ask your child to write down the introduction; the problem; the search for the solution; the solution, and the ending. After the show ask your child to consider if the violence was really necessary to the plot. Other questions to ask might be: “Is violence shown as a solution? Could there have been an equally effective ending without the violence? Why or Why not?”

### **4. Re-write violent scripts.**

In this activity your child acts as a screenwriter or video game designer and uses his/her creative ideas to change the violent script of a program or video game to a non-violent one. The goal is to eliminate the violence and come up with alternative solutions to the problems. Depending on the child's maturity and skills, this activity can involve drawing pictures rather than writing. Or, the writing could consist of an outline. Encourage your child to pay special attention to those elements that must be changed in order to eliminate the violence: Is it the people, the places, the time, the situation? Discuss your child's story with him and point out changes from the original.

### **5. Make-up a different hero.**

Choose a favorite TV program or movie-one that your child is familiar with and enjoys watching, one that contains some violence. An action cartoon works well for this activity. Before the show begins, hold a conversation with your child and say something like: “As you are watching today, I want you to imagine another character being in the show (or cartoon)--someone you make up from your own imagination. This person can be male or female, tall or short, young or old. The only thing you have to make sure is that this person solves all his/her problems through talking, cooperation, and negotiation. Never through hurting anyone or destroying property.” Once the character has been chosen, ask your child to describe him or her in detail and how this imagined character (IC) might act in various situations. Then watch the program or cartoon; while watching ask questions like: “What is your IC doing now? What makes your IC strong? Smart? Creative? How would your IC solve the problem? What does your IC want to tell you about this how?” You can keep an on-going dialogue about your child's non-violent IC and the creative ways he/she solves problems.

## **6. Consider real-world consequences.**

When your child encounters violence on a TV program, video game or in a movie, ask about the real-life consequences of such acts. Discuss what happens to the screen perpetrator as a result of being violent and compare with real-world consequences.

## **7. Honorable vs. Dishonorable Traits**

Superheroes depict many honorable traits such as bravery, care for others, and teamwork. Sometime they are mean and cruel as well. If your child is enamored with a screen or comic book superhero, discuss both sets of traits. You can ask your child to observe how the superhero uses his/her powers for good. Compare and contrast several superheroes to help your child discern honorable from dishonorable traits.

## ***Advertising***

### **8. Commercial tally.**

Ask your child, “How many commercials do you watch in a week?” Then encourage him/her to mark an X on a piece of paper every time a commercial is shown while watching television over one week’s time. You can have your child tally the results, multiplying by four to find out how many commercials watched in a month, then by twelve for how many commercials watched in a year. Ask, “Do you think seeing these commercials influence you to want to buy stuff? Why or why not?”

### **9. Marketing in many places.**

Watch a current popular, age-appropriate movie with your child and count the brand name products shown throughout the film. Then go on line to see how many products there are for this movie and where kids can find them. Discuss how companies often find every way possible to get their products in front of kids to make them want to buy the products.

### **10. Attention grabbers.**

Think of several products or services and have your child come up with dramatic, funny, or unusual approaches to a TV commercial that will grab the viewer. Discuss why these approaches are effective in attracting viewers’ attention. Encourage your child to observe these techniques being used to get him/her to buy something seen on TV or in movies.

### **11. Be an actor or actress.**

While watching a commercial, have your child role-play an actor’s movements. Ask such questions as: “How does it feel to imitate particular positions and gestures? Does it feel normal or does it feel put on? Is it the type of body language used in everyday life? Why or why not?” Encourage your child to make up different body movements and gestures for an actor in a commercial, act them out, and then discuss how this new body language might change the commercial message and how it is received.

### **12. Find the real thing.**

Purchase a food item advertised on television. Children then list the main ingredients found on the package. Discuss why the commercial does not inform viewers about ingredients or give much specific information about the product. Explain that a person needs to buy it and read the packaging in order to find out what’s in the product—the commercial doesn’t usually provide this factual information, by which we can make good choices for ourselves.

## *News*

### **13. Put on a newscast.**

Encourage your child, with several friends, to put on a newscast, using a newspaper or neighborhood event as content. Assign all roles: director, producer, writers, anchors, weather reporter, sportscaster, camera people, etc. Encourage your child to video record the show, if possible. Then watch as a family or with the families of all the kids involved. Discuss such questions: “How did you determine what was important to share with other people? How do you define ‘news?’ How did people react to your newscast? What would you have changed about it if you were to do it again?”

### **14. Watching vs. reading.**

Choose an appropriate age news story and discuss it with your child. Watch an account of the story on a TV news program and then read an account of the same story in a newspaper. Discuss with your child the differences he/she noticed in the two accounts, along with the similarities. If you do this on a regular basis, you will help your child be both a discerning reader and viewer of news stories.

### **15. Check out [www.timeforkids.com](http://www.timeforkids.com).**

Aimed for kids, ages 10-14, *Time for Kids* features kid reporters and their stories, along with kid friendly national and world news.

## *Stereotypes*

### **16. Working people on TV.**

As your child watches TV during one week, encourage him/her to keep a list of men’s and women’s TV occupations. When it comes to work, how are male and female jobs depicted? Do patterns emerge? Are characters’ occupations stereotyped? How do you know? For instance, do you ever see a male nurse or a secretary that is an older woman?

### **17. Inventory of roles.**

During the same week as the activity above, your child could write down the minority group characters he/she sees on television, including occupations and a few character traits. In a discussion with your child, compare and contrast these descriptions to the Caucasian characters on the same or similar programs.

### **18. I know that person!**

Have your child compare a TV character to someone you know who’s about the same age in real life. How are they the same? What differences do you find? How “real” is the TV character, really?

### **19. Who can have these jobs?**

Discuss the type of careers in mass media/digital technology such as software developer, scriptwriter, sound engineer, animator, costume designer, app or video game developer, etc. Emphasize that any and all jobs are available to both boys and girls.

### **20. Expand the roles.**

Choose one or more TV programs your child likes to watch. Tell him/her to pay close attention to characters that display stereotypical behaviors or attitudes. For example, in a sit-com, examine the role of the father. Does he resemble real-life fathers? Why or why not? How can this person be made more “whole” and a unique person if he seems one-dimensional and stereotyped? Have your child do this for a few characters.

Discuss what changes your child made and the reasons for them. Then point out how the roles change when stereotypical attitudes and behaviors are removed. Discuss with your child how the program might differ with the characters' new identities. You might also have your child draw pictures of his new characters engaged in real-life activities.



# 20 Activities for Teens, ages 11-14

## *Violence*

### **1. Sensational or sensitive portrayal?**

In a discussion with your young teen about media violence, ask such questions as: “When a violent act occurs on the screen, how can you tell if it’s there simply to draw viewers’ attention or if it’s there because it’s a necessary part of the action? Does the violence move you in any way to feel compassion? Is the violence more about human suffering and less about blood and gore? How was the violent act presented? Where was the camera? Are you right in there with the action or are you an observer? Are you the perpetrator or the victim? Do hyped up technical effects distance you from the suffering inflicted? How?”

### **2. Emotional violence.**

Encourage your child to keep a tally of the types of emotional violence in favorite shows, such as putdowns disguised as humor, verbal threats, or name-calling. Then discuss how emotional violence harms a person and why it can lead to physical violence. Emphasize ways scriptwriters or video game designers could rewrite verbal abuse and emotional violence to treat human beings with more dignity.

### **3. Talk about about real people who suffered from violence.**

Often kids separate violence in movies and video games from real life. Yet, when playing violent video games, they rehearse violence, and when watching violent films, they are thrilled by murder and mayhem. Bring to your child’s attention accounts of people who suffered from real violence. Discuss the consequences and the healing needed to move on in life when real violence occurs.

### **4. Predict violent screen content.**

When a new movie release, video game, or TV series is announced, ask your child to predict the types of violent content in them just by reading the titles. Depending on the age and maturity level of your child, you can watch a few to assess the predictions. This is a good activity when a new TV show, movie, or video game comes out that your child knows little about. Thinking ahead and considering what factors would make entertainment violent teaches important discerning skills.

### **5. How do you know what’s “cool”?**

Discuss with your child why violent entertainment is often considered “cool.” Some questions to consider are: “What factors must be included to determine a rating of ‘cool?’ Who gets to decide what’s ‘cool’—you, your peers, or the businesses promoting the violent entertainment? Do you think it’s important to be ‘cool?’ Why or why not?”

## *Advertising*

### **6. Understand types of commercials.**

While watching TV with your child, find and discuss examples of these types of commercials: Celebrity endorsements; unique viewpoint (for example, up high on a ladder, or underwater); testimonials or interviews; and use of special effects (animation, high-tech). Many commercials combine two or more of these. Encourage your child to start thinking about how the advertising executives made decisions about what to put *in* the commercial in order to hook attention and entice people to buy the product.

### **7. Are you the target?**

In conjunction with the above activity, or at a different time, you can ask your child to observe who the commercial is targeting and what techniques are used for that specific advertising audience—such as well-dressed, cheery women happily cleaning their homes for household products, or tough Western men wearing wranglers and cowboy hats driving their jeeps through rugged terrain. You can ask such questions as: “What commercials are specifically targeted to your age group? What does this age group respond to? What are its vulnerabilities? What are you and your friends’ character traits that can enable you to reject the advertising ploys?”

### **8. Slogan game.**

Encourage your child, with a group of friends, to make a game by collecting and recording all the advertising slogans you can think of. Do it individually or in teams. Vote on which slogan is thought to be best and discuss why. What emotions do you feel when you see particular slogans? What do you think about when you see them? Why did the ad agency choose those cartoon characters, that actor, those colors? Can you think of another slogan for this product? Discuss what is learned about advertising slogans’ effect on them and others.

### **9. Grade a commercial.**

Children can give a grade to the commercials they see during one program or over the course of a week. Grading is based on how well the commercial succeeds at making your child want the product. Give an A for the best, F for the least effective. Have your child tell you the reason for each particular grade. Explain the manipulative techniques that commercials use. Discuss which of those techniques are the most effective and why.

### **10. Emotions vs. facts.**

Young teens are especially vulnerable to emotional appeals. While you watch TV with your child, point out how the commercials try to hook various *feelings*, such as desire to belong to a crowd, happiness at having what you want, feelings of undesirability if you don’t look a certain way, etc. Point out any facts that are given about the product. Encourage your child to view commercials with an eye to considering emotional appeals as well as any facts.

## *News*

### **11. Comparing various news sources.**

Encourage your child to read/listen to a variety of news sources on the same story, such as TV (CNN, FOX PBS), the Internet (NY Times, Washington Post, Forbes), and social media. Discuss: “Which source would you go to for the latest breaking news? Why? Which source would you go to in order to understand the issues more deeply? Why? What did you learn about understanding a news story from different news sources?”

## **12. News story tally.**

Either for TV news programs or Internet sites, or both, have your child track, for a week, a few major stories. He/she decides whether each story is negative, neutral, or positive. What's the final count? What does this say about the kind of news that is being broadcast? Encourage your child to think about how he or she would bring more balance into news stories, giving people more information about the positive things that are going on around them.

## **13. Study news anchors.**

In this activity your child will study a variety of news anchors to observe what they look like; how they deliver the news; if they deliver the news with or without bias or comment, etc. Encourage your child to frame in his/her mind the "ideal news anchor." Observing popular news anchors, which one/s fit more to the ideal? Why? You may want to check out from the library old footage of Walter Cronkite—there is a popular one of him reporting the assassination of JFK. Your child can observe the differences of how news was reported then with how the news is reported currently. The slower pace of yesteryear, along with more detailed reporting are a striking contrast to today's hurried pace, fast speech, and surface comments.

## **14. Spotting reporter bias.**

In conjunction with the above activity, or as a separate activity, have your child observe both TV news anchors and reporters in the field delivering news. See if he/she can spot any bias through subjective comments, opinions, or even through their mannerisms. What are the real issues that need to be kept in mind when listening to any news anchor or reporter?

## **15. Local, national, or international?**

As your child watches TV news, point out which stories are local, national, or international ones. Consider comparing channels to find out which one/s provide more international coverage, for instance. This can be an ongoing activity to help your child understand the three distinct areas of coverage, and where we can best learn about what is happening in these distinct parts of our world.

## **16. Letter to news personality.**

Help your child write a letter to a specific personality on a local news broadcast, encouraging him/her to ask questions or make comments. Your child might ask about how the person first became involved in TV news, and what it would take today to begin the same career.

## ***Stereotypes***

### **17. Secret wishes.**

Find out if your young teen has secret wishes to be like or look like or act like a certain celebrity or screen hero. Discuss the realistic parts of wishing we could be like someone else, and the unrealistic part, emphasizing the importance of embracing fully our unique selves. Discuss how screen portrayals can amplify stereotypical images of people and can even get in the way of accepting ourselves as we truly are.

### **18. Spotting realistic "whole" people on TV and in the movies.**

In conjunction with the above activity, you might have your child discuss celebrities or screen heroes who seem well rounded and like ordinary people. What makes them seem well rounded? More ordinary? Have your child observe the celebrities over time and decide on the qualities that are worthy of emulation.



### **19. What do others think about screen stereotypes?**

Have your child interview people who are different ages, genders, and from various cultures, to find out what they think of stereotypes they encounter on TV, in movies and video games. A few questions for the interview could be: “What are some stereotypical images you have seen recently? Do they offend you? Why or why not? Do you feel your (age, sex, race) is well represented in the media? Why or why not? What advice would you give to creators of TV shows, movies, and video games when they begin to develop a certain character?”

### **20. TV, movie and video game heroes.**

Encourage your child to list the qualities of what makes a hero/heroine. Add to the list over a week or two. Then point out people in your child’s life who also have these same qualities. Discuss the contribution of “everyday real-life heroes/heroines” to your child’s life and what these uncelebrated celebrities bring to it.



# 15 Activities for Teens, Ages 15-18

## *Violence*

### **1. Debate with your teen.**

Structure a conversation to make it an intentional debate. One topic could be: “Screen violence influences kids to be more aggressive.” Have your child develop a few pro and con arguments. You do the same, then present the debate at a family gathering. Encourage your teen to discuss this issue with friends or ask a social studies teacher if a debate can be set up in the classroom.

### **2. Discuss the value and the problems with violence rating systems.**

Provide opportunities for your teen to discuss movies or TV programs they saw or video games they played which were “off limits.” Provide non-judgmental guidance about what is appropriate viewing for people their age, explaining the reasons why you have reservations about this content. Go over the suggested ratings for the film or video game, and discuss what your child considers age appropriate and why. Include in your discussion, your teen’s opinions of the ratings, along with the impact of peer pressure to go outside the age-related ratings when choosing films or video games. What can be done so your teen will stay within your guidelines and avoid the inappropriate content’?

### **3. Develop a non-violent TV/movie/video game list for younger teens.**

Have your teen research on the web and through interviews with teachers, what TV programs, video games, and movies are appropriate for teens, ages 11-14. Have him/her share the list with friends, or on his/her blog, or a community service website.

### **4. Share and discuss the research.**

There are over 3,000 reliable research studies linking media violence with real-life violence. The correlation between media violence and aggression is higher than the correlation between smoking and lung cancer! Have your teen read one or more of these studies and discuss them with you.

## *Advertising*

### **5. Use satire or spoofs to show misguided causality.**

With friends, your teen may enjoy creating a layout for an original TV commercial that spoofs a real commercial. It can be fun making an exaggerated version of a familiar commercial. You may want to pick up a copy of *AdBusters Magazine*. Your teen will enjoy the satire and you will enjoy having a lot of great information for interesting family discussions.

### **6. Which product, which program?**

Have your teen think about how advertisers appeal to certain audiences for specific programs—such as advertising beer and video games for major sports events on television. Ask him/her to list two products that might be advertised on each of these shows: basketball game, daytime soap opera, evening news, cartoon show, golf tournament, MTV reality shows, etc. It may be interesting to have your child track advertisers’ patterns over time and explore what insights were gained from the activity.

## **7. Commercials in other parts of the world.**

What kind of advertising is on TV in other areas of the United States and in other countries? Your teen can find out in any library or through web-based research. Ask your teen to consider such questions as: “How and why are foreign commercials different from what you see at home? Are the differences merely in the kinds of products and services being sold, or are different appeals made to foreign audiences?”

## *News*

### **8. Distinctions and similarities between news and talk shows.**

Ask your teen to watch for one week and list all the topics covered by one talk show and one news program. Then discuss such questions with him/her: “How many of the topics covered had to do with strange or abnormal human behavior? sex? crime? abuse? Which had more of these, the news program or the talk show? Which would you recommend watching on a regular basis? Why?”

### **9. What is different about Public Broadcast News?**

After your teen watches a Public Broadcast Service news program and another network’s news program, have him/her think about the differences between the two. Discuss what might account for the differences, and what a viewer gains from each type of news program.

## *Stereotypes*

### **10. Is advertising turning you into a stereotype?**

If teens follow their friends who follow the latest fads promoted by popular culture, does that mean that your teen is being stereotyped without him or her knowing it? Explore this issue with your son or daughter and how she or he may feel about becoming an industry-generated stereotype.

### **11. Consider screen and school stereotypes.**

Discuss with your teen the different groups of students at the school he/she attends. Some questions to consider could be: “Are there jocks, nerds? goths? etc.? How do media contribute to the creation of these groupings? Do most teens feel compelled to belong to a certain group? Why or why not?”

### **12. Stereotypes and bullying.**

In the discussion of screen-generated school stereotypes, you may want to ask: “What happens to kids who don’t fit into any of the identified categories? Do kids who are different get bullied more often? Why or why not? Would eliminating the categories of types of students help stop the bullying? Why or why not?”

### **13. Gender representation.**

Ask your teen to consider how males and females are represented in his/her favorite programming, movies, and video games. Consider such questions as: “Are these representations accurate? Fair? What do you learn about males and females from these representations? How would you change these images if you could? Why?”

#### 14. Does branding create a collective universal stereotype?

Explore this question with your teen. One example is the Pepsi brand that always is associated with young, happy, “with-it” people drinking Pepsi. “When these types of images are repeated so often to masses of people, do the people viewing them come to believe that is who they are?” As your teen answers this question, and others you discuss, be sure to ask your teen, “How do you know?” This will encourage him/her to think specifically about the reasons for any answer given.

#### 15. Compare the old with the new.

With your teen, view older comedies such as *I Love Lucy* or older westerns or any older film. Compare gender, racial, and ethnic representations with current ones. Amplify to your teen how media reflects current trends in our society and provides political and social messages as well as entertains its viewers.



---

*Permission is granted to reprint this document as is for use with parents. For permission for any other use, please contact Gloria DeGaetano: 425-753-0955 or [gloria@thepci.org](mailto:gloria@thepci.org).*

#### **About Gloria**

Gloria DeGaetano is an acclaimed educator, speaker, and parent coach, who developed the Parent Coach Certification® Training Program in 2000 with the establishment of the Parent Coaching Institute ([www.thePCI.org](http://www.thePCI.org)). Gloria’s programs for supporting families are available worldwide through Parent Coach International ([www.ParentCoachInternational.com](http://www.ParentCoachInternational.com)). With over 25 years experience helping parents with screen technology issues, Gloria is the author of *Parenting Well in a Media Age* and the co-author of *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call for Action Against TV, Movie, and Video Game Violence*. For more information about Gloria and her services to parents and family professionals, please see: [www.GloriaDeGaetano.com](http://www.GloriaDeGaetano.com).