

“See No Evil”

by Jeanette Gardner Littleton

"Nicole is allowed to watch this?" I asked when I saw my new 12-year-old stepdaughter glued to the TV sitcom "Friends."

Mark looked up from his newspaper as the characters launched into a dialogue laden with "mature" themes. He looked at me a bit chagrined.

"I never even thought about it," Mark explained later. "I didn't really pay attention to what the kids were watching on TV. I knew not everything was really good, but I assumed that, since we went to church and read the Bible together, the kids would know stuff was wrong."

After that incident, Mark and I did a lot of research. We learned how the media affect kids. We also evaluated the underlying moral, social and religious philosophies in songs, movies and TV. Then we decided we wanted our kids to develop godly media discernment. Here are some tips that have helped us accomplish this task:

1. Embrace holiness in our own lives.

"I know that's a bad program and I shouldn't watch it," one mom said about a popular TV show. "But it's so funny."

I didn't know what to say, so I just listened. I also just listened a couple of years later when she grieved over her daughter moving in with a boyfriend. My friend and her husband had raised their daughter to know that sex outside marriage was wrong. On the other hand, their family watched movies and TV shows laced with sexual innuendo and immorality. I wondered how much their daughter was influenced by the family's entertainment choices.

If our kids see us watching and listening to media that portray premarital sex as normal, they're more likely to believe this illicit behavior is acceptable. A common leadership principle states, "What leaders allow in moderation, those under them practice in excess." The same is true for parenting. What I allow in my life occasionally, my kids will embrace wholeheartedly.

2. Don't be lazy or naive.

"Yes, Honey, you can watch it; I have things to do," I told my 4-year-old. I didn't know anything about the video series of cuddly animals but figured it was innocuous. Walking by the TV later, however, I saw a witch stirring a magic potion. I paused and watched. I was dismayed at the flagrant occult concepts.

Honestly, I hate watching children's videos. It's so much easier to let my kids enjoy a video while I do chores. But this episode taught me that I needed to take time to know the contents of preschool videos. It's the same with movies for older kids. PG or PG-13 doesn't necessarily mean a movie is safe.

If our kids want to watch a movie, my husband and I often screen it first. At other times, our family watches a movie together with a three-strike system. Each time the movie presents a scene or even a word that we feel is inappropriate, we give it a strike. On the third strike, the movie goes off.

We've also learned to use resources such as pluggedinonline.com before watching any movie.

3. Remember the power of the senses.

"I don't care what my kids watch when they're with us," one friend said. "If content is not good, we can talk about it, and it helps them deal with the real world."

It sounded logical. But I've discovered that a parent's moral lectures can't compete with the millions of dollars that studios spend to bring stories alive in stunning visual detail. What stays in my child's mind is the image of an unmarried couple kissing their way into a bedroom, not my saying, "Now kids, does this movie measure up to what God tells us is right?"

Children are moved more by stories than by reason. Even in their teens, their imaginative abilities are stronger than their logical prowess. They're much more likely to get caught up in the emotion of a young hero and heroine kept apart by unfeeling parents. They cheer when the young couple consummate their love — even if it's illicit.

4. Err on the side of righteousness.

How many times have you done the "parental tango" when contemplating whether to let kids watch a movie, listen to a CD or watch a TV show?

"Well, on one hand, it has some good values. But on the other hand, the language isn't great. On one hand, it's kind of fun. But on the other hand, the story is based on pantheism. On one hand, will the kids really get that? But . . . "

Back and forth. Trying to be good, godly parents. Trying to let our kids have fun. Trying to be balanced.

Fortunately, Scripture offers guidance:

- "For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Ephesians 5:12). If it's shameful to mention, why would we want to watch or listen to it?

- "‘Everything is permissible for me’ — but not everything is beneficial," the apostle Paul points out (1 Corinthians 6:12). Instead of looking at media from the angle of "Well, this isn't too bad," we can ask ourselves, "Will this help my child grow closer to Christ? Will this steady my child's moral compass?"
- "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). You may think, It's not like my child is hanging out with the Hollywood stars. Actually, it's exactly like that. Kids relate with musicians and stars and emulate them.
- "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV). If we wonder whether something is appropriate, we should treat it as if it were inappropriate. Even if we err, it's best to err on the side of being too protective.

When I was a youth worker, teens often questioned, "How far can we go before a behavior becomes sin?" In our quest to live like Jesus, the question shouldn't be, "How close can I get to the edge without actually sinning?" Instead, we should determine, "How far can I stay from the edge? How pure can I be?"

Steering my kids through the torrent of media choices is never easy. But if I don't protect my children's purity, who will?

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