

How Children's Media Can Change the World for Good

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When my son was 10 years old, he surprised me by accurately describing Normandy, where I had lived. When I asked where he had gotten his information, he said it was from a video game that taught him the facts about World War II.

Taking it up a few notches, 12-year-old Alec Loorz started the organization Kids vs. Global Warming, after watching and feeling inspired by the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. Now 17, Loorz has given hundreds of keynote presentations about global warming, has worked personally with Al Gore, and has received numerous awards from environmental organizations.

Videos, computer games, and apps consume the time and attention of today's children. These new media technologies are powerful conveyors of information and are easily available. Knowing this fact, parents, teachers, pediatricians, and businesses have the opportunity to focus children on games that enhance positive learning and development — effectively benefiting not only the kids themselves but all of us.

Media is “potent” for children and must be used “in the best possible way,” emphasizes Michael Rich, MD, director of Center on Media and Child Health (CMCH), Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Associate Professor of Society, Human Development, and Health at Harvard School of Public Health.

CMCH was developed to help parents, teachers, and researchers understand and respond to the effects of media on the physical, mental, and social health of children. Similarly, Common Sense Media (CSM) was founded to rate and review games, so that parents and teachers can determine the appropriate media for children.

“Media profoundly affects our kids’ social, emotional, and physical development,” says Seeta Pai, PhD, Vice President of Digital Media at CSM. “We believe that media has truly become ‘the other parent’ in our kids’ lives, which is why quality and quantity are so paramount; so is teaching our kids to be savvy, respectful, and responsible media interpreters, creators and communicators.”

Merriam-Webster defines media as “a medium of cultivation, conveyance or expression,” and experts agree that the technology itself is neutral. “What’s really important to keep in mind is that regardless of the device, it’s the content of that device that will have the true impact on the child,” says Lesli Rotenberg, General Manager of Children’s Programming at PBS.

In other words, don’t shoot the messenger. Media simply conveys the ideas we choose to share with our children. It has just as much power to teach kids math as it does to encourage them to eat junk food.

Thomas Robinson, MD — Stanford Health Policy Associate, as well as Professor in Child Health, Professor of Pediatrics, and Professor of Medicine at Stanford University — notes decades of research indicating that learning difficulties, childhood obesity, and violent behavior all have high correlation with a regular diet of unmonitored hours in front of the display screens. “The environments we are exposed to do have an effect on the brain,” he says.

“We use media because it does affect us — to communicate with each other, to tell stories, to understand and synthesize the world,” Rich says. It is for this very reason that corporations spend billions of dollars on media advertisements: They work. When approached mindfully, Robinson adds, media “can be used for positive social and cognitive development.”

The newer forms of multi-sensory gaming products cause experts to be both optimistic and reproving. “I think that as we get to more and more sensitive human electronic interfaces, like the kinect, we are going to see some very interesting things come out of it,” says Rich. “A word of caution is... they are also making first-person shoot-up or violent video games for those formats. Is [stimulating violence] even worse when you are learning muscle memory?”

Child development specialists also express concern over the amount of time kids spend in front of a screen — depriving kids of the multi-sensory experience that comes with playing in a yard, riding a bike, or visiting an aquarium. “Imagination is necessary for wholesome development,” Robinson emphasizes, adding that imagination is the underpinning of critical thinking, problem solving, and common sense. Early interactions with the real world, he says, are foundational to developing adult life skills.

“All of the senses are extremely important to children, particularly very young children — infants and toddlers,” agrees Rich. When children are fed stories instead of provided the opportunity to create their own, he adds, the problem-solving part of the brain is under-stimulated.

“We know that having a balanced media diet involves setting limits,” says Rotenberg. “That’s why at PBS KIDS, it’s our mission to use media as a launching pad for real-life experiences — helping foster a love of learning that empowers kids to actively pursue an interest, long after the screen is turned off.”

Understanding how new technology can enhance learning, some media corporations are intersecting entertainment with education. “Several games from Nintendo incorporate elements of life skills and critical-thinking skills,” says Cindy Gordon, Vice President of Corporate Affairs at Nintendo of America. “Nintendo has partnered with educators and education organizations, to enable them to incorporate technology in the classroom with their Wii Music and Art Academy games.”

It does appear that industry leaders are beginning to see the educational potential and importance of their products, instead of simply focusing on the bottom dollar of sales, and it is my hope that “edutainment” will be a growing trend. Because new multi-sensory technology teaches so effectively, I believe that companies have the responsibility to choose content that supports wholesome learning. “Media can, and should, spark curiosity, and expand children’s possibilities through stories, characters, and experiences that mirror their enthusiasm and help encourage their natural interests,” agrees Rotenberg.

Good business is a marriage of financial sustainability and social enhancement. The directions that the media industry takes with content will either support or oppose efforts to raise positive and productive world citizens for our future.