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Foreword

America is a nation founded on dreams—the dream of democracy affirmed by the *Declaration of Independence*, which has evolved over the years, becoming more inclusive with emancipation, women’s suffrage, and the civil rights movement. From the beginning, Americans have defined themselves as citizens, actively committed to the realization of their dreams and the education of their children, which Thomas Jefferson saw as the foundation of our democracy. But our changing technology has dramatically transformed how we see our families and ourselves. In a profit-driven culture that substitutes products for the process of active participation, the citizen has become a consumer.

Parenting Well in a Media Age articulates the challenges of parenting in such a culture—a culture Gloria DeGaetano refers to as an “industry-generated culture.” Offering new hope to parents and educators, Gloria DeGaetano presents powerful strategic advice. As a parent, nationally-recognized media literacy expert, and founder of the Parent Coaching Institute, she writes from years of experience, demonstrating how the industry-generated culture has produced a systemic imbalance that has led to diseases of body, mind, and soul. Drawing upon the latest scientific research, DeGaetano explains how excessive exposure to screen media distorts brain development, impacting children’s and teens’ abilities to develop healthy relationships or learn essential lessons in school.

Although our country produces many useful consumer goods, our invasive advertising and obsessive product orientation have usurped our children’s dreams and hijacked their imaginations. In one of the saddest examples in this book, a third grade teacher

says that many of her students cannot play creatively. Unable to make up their own stories or imagine their own futures, they can only repeat stories about cartoon characters or the exploits of the latest action hero. What will become of a country when its young people can no longer dream?

Moving from the industry-generated culture to the living values within and around us, *Parenting Well* provides positive alternatives to the compulsive consumerism that litters our lives. The book tells us how to transform our homes and simplify our lives to make time for appreciative conversation, reflection, interaction, and introspection. Each chapter offers practical solutions, strategies that *work*, supported by research and reinforced by real life stories of parents who have rediscovered the sacred joys of parenting. We learn how to declare our independence from mindless mass conformity to reconnect with our inner lives, our love for our children, and our own deepest values, producing positive change in our families and our culture.

Resisting the industry-generated culture requires the courage to be ourselves. In *Parenting Well*, Gloria DeGaetano shows us how to live more courageously and more joyously, embracing our daily choices as creative acts. In so doing, we can overcome the artificial values that have infected our culture and renew our vocation as parents, helping our children develop as healthy, creative human beings. By upholding human values instead of industry-generated counterfeits, we can reclaim our essential role as citizens, restoring vital balance to our lives, our families, and our collective future.

Diane Dreher, Ph.D.

March 2004

Introduction

*Like cowboys making up songs around the campfire,
we hanker to create the culture we inhabit.*

Michael L. Umphrey¹

You may have heard about the groundwater pollution in the desert town of Hinkley, California, popularized by the movie *Erin Brockovich*. High levels of the carcinogen chromium 6 were dumped into the groundwater around Hinkley and absorbed into the aquifer that provided the town's drinking water. This contributed to the sickness or death of many adults and children who lived in the area. Doctors treated each ill person as if the cause of their declining health was *in* the person. But the real problem was a collective, environmental one. The real problem was *outside* of the people because the water essential to their survival and health was poisoned. For those who had already ingested too much of the carcinogen, there was often little that could be done. And, until the toxins were removed from their drinking water, there was no way to prevent others from becoming ill.

It's often said that "It takes a village to raise a child." To be effective parents, we have to rely upon resources outside of ourselves—social, cultural, and spiritual resources are necessary to support, strengthen, and renew us in our parenting. We may liken these collective resources to an aquifer. We each sink a personal "parenting well" into this collective "aquifer." From it we draw insights and impetus for the most important job on the planet. We naturally expect this aquifer to be free of toxins. But in the

United States today, the aquifer that our parenting wells draw on is being poisoned. Good intentions and caring actions for our children (and for ourselves) are falling short. We can read all the latest parenting books, search for answers from experts on the Internet, and work hard supporting our kids, but ultimately, that's not enough. Nowadays, a significant external force affects our parenting. Until we understand and abate that force, we will lose our power to parent well.

That force is mass culture. It exists outside of ourselves, yet surrounds us and our kids. Mass produced entertainment, like TV, movies, music, radio, video games, computer software, along with mass produced toys, clothes, lunch boxes, and countless other accessories, form a larger culture that we inhabit but don't create. This culture, manufactured for a market, is actually a huge industry that combines advertising conglomerates, media entertainment multi-nationals, and global corporations. I call it an industry-generated culture. The messages of these huge companies are delivered to the masses through mass media. So I refer to our society as a media age. An industry-generated culture relies on the media for its existence. It couldn't exist without a mass delivery system. Screen technologies, particularly, form a historically unprecedented, massive transmission engine, enabling industry-generated messages to reach millions simultaneously.

Screen machines bring mixed blessings. Don't get me wrong. I love my computer and can't imagine how anyone wrote books without them. I can remember when librarians, instead of scanning a barcode with a computer, had to write a number inside your books before they were checked out. What do librarians do now with all their free time? Computers have brought us many gifts.

So has our networked society. When an earthquake struck the Pacific Northwest, my oldest son called me from Los Angeles to ask if I was OK before the tremors had even stopped. He had heard about the earthquake on television—as it was *happening*. The other day a friend of mine had to hang up quickly from our phone call to take another one. Three minutes later I got a note of apology from her through e-mail. These examples of instantaneous communication made possible by modern-day screen machines demonstrate how screen technologies can draw us closer together as humans. And, of course, when the industry-generated culture works for us, we can parent well. For instance, when we globally gather around the electronic hearth to share the Olympics, a documentary by Ken Burns, or a newscast about an important world event, who cannot be immensely grateful for the potential of television to inform? Likewise, when we see an inspiring film, get alerted to new music, or listen to a radio conversation that causes us to think differently, who cannot be excited about all the wonderful richness of diversity and creativity available to us? Too bad that's not always the case.

The darker side of the industry-generated culture delivered through screen machines means that the messages they deliver are not always compatible with what we want as parents for our children. This type of culture is new to humans, so parenting in it is new as well. And it's tricky. Even if we turn off the televisions in our own homes and rigorously monitor video, movies, video games and computer usage, our kids still live and breathe in an industry-generated culture.

Most of society expects parents to fight industry-generated messages alone. Bill O'Reilly, host of the Fox News Channel's

immensely popular *The O'Reilly Factor*, writes in his book *Who's Looking Out for You?*, "...effective parents will remove the TV's and computers from the kids' rooms. All media absorption should be done in public space. This is a dangerous world and the danger is now in the house. If the parent is really looking out for the kid, subversive material must be kept to an absolute minimum. Corrupting influences on children are everywhere, and parents must be full-time firefighters. . . The demons, the exploiters want your kids. You must look out for them. Fight hard." ² O'Reilly's parental advice makes sense. Many parents I work with don't put TVs or computers in their children's bedrooms. But we must question the underlying, unspoken assumption in his advice. Why do parents have to fight hard to impart their values to their kids? Should not the larger society support us? And shouldn't we expect to parent in a world without "corrupting influences everywhere?"

Ideally, we'd live in a larger culture that affirms the morals, values, attitudes, and behaviors we teach our children, a culture that affirms our parental voice. But we don't.

Parents find themselves in a "Catch-22." As a "self-regulating" industry, the industry-generated culture sets standards and affects wide-spread beliefs. It doesn't, however, bear responsibility for the effects of those standards and beliefs. The media industry will give plenty of lip service to ratings systems. Then it and its ally companies will intentionally market inappropriate content and a range of superfluous items to our youngsters. Their mantras, "It's up to parents to prevent their kids from seeing this stuff," and "Parents shouldn't buy it if they don't like it," are repeated incessantly. As parents strive to stay afloat and in control, they find themselves continually reacting to toxic messages, dealing with

nagging kids, and contradicting corporate hucksters. Kay Hymowitz, an affiliate scholar with the Institute for American Values, reminds us that “parents need to do something they’ve never been required to do before perhaps at any time in history: deliberately and consciously counter many of the dominant messages of their own culture.”³

If we had a relative living with us who frequently acted in anti-social ways, who said and did things that would damage our children, and who often contradicted what we told our children, and if we had to live with this relative because a mental institution was out of the question, how would we parent our kids in such an environment? It would demand far more from us than if we had a relative living with us that we could trust to help us out, someone who reliably reiterated our messages to our kids. Even though we may want to, we can’t confine the industry-generated culture to a mental hospital. We have to address it, no matter what it requires from us.

Since the inception of TV and the varied screen forms that followed, a majority of the viewing public chose and continues to choose mindless entertainment, vicarious violence, and exploitative sexuality. Why? Instead of becoming the “radio of the airwaves,” as initially intended, “inspiring and educating along with entertaining,” much of television today highlights the sensational and trivializes the sacred about the human condition. Why do we stand for this (actually we are sitting for it five hours every night) when there is so much work to be done to solve our social problems and relieve human suffering? What would happen if much of those 1,825 hours every year we spend watching TV were spent with our children and in our communities creatively addressing

the environmental crisis, teen suicide, crime, homelessness? Why are screen machines considered normal background noise seven hours and forty-four minutes each day for most American households when their content has little to do with the daily lives of the individuals watching, or not watching, as the case may be?

Screen technologies are peculiar inventions. They readily appeal to human beings' baser instincts. Sex and violence "sell" so well because as humans we are wired deep in our brains to be attracted to erotic visions and horrific images. Screen technologies can only "hook" people's thinking functions to the degree that the viewers actually want to think. Sensational content with the sole purpose to titillate can be habit forming, leading to lazy minds. Human beings, therefore, can become addicted to screen technologies in ways they can't to vacuum cleaners, toasters, or air conditioners. We must re-invent ourselves to be conscious in how we use screen technologies, or they will use us.

The industry-generated culture takes extreme advantage of our human vulnerability to screen technologies. One way corporations do this is through the intentional cross-advertising, targeted marketing, and product-placement in movies, TV programs, and video/computer games. Saturating children and youth with visual messages works. Thus, many personal interactions among the young are focused on market-driven distractions.

I agree with media critic Todd Gitlin when he states, "Youngsters' interest is what interests me. Interest is not only an intellectual but an emotional state. Popular culture absorbs a great deal of young people's attention and does so in a fashion that commands feeling."⁴ Listening to our children as they interact on school playgrounds, tuning in on teens' slumber party

conversations, or eavesdropping on their telephone calls, we would hear many references to a culture manufactured by an industry. Why aren't first graders talking about the latest artwork they drew or the poetry they composed? Why are they talking about the cartoon they watched before school and the TV program they must watch after school? Why are many teens today preoccupied with how closely their bodies match the male and female models in the magazines they read more than with their own creative process? Rather than being attentive to their own inner lives, their own creative expressions, and to the people who love them, too much of our children's and teens' attention is focused by corporate agendas. The industry-generated culture captures our kids' interests, often replacing their own inner voices.

As humans we are influenced by personal interactions, by societal institutions, and by the over-arching culture. Personal influences are direct and colored by various degrees of intimacy. We talk with someone over a cup of coffee and exchange an idea, get an insight, or make a decision because of that particular connection. Personal relationships contribute powerfully, for good or ill, to our growth as human beings. Because we are directly engaged emotionally, we can notice fairly quickly if the other person has our best interests at heart. With personal contact it is usually easy to discern if the influence is dangerous, benign, or neutral. It may take some time to discern if it's worth the effort to walk away from a particular personal influence. For instance, when we "grow out of a friendship" with someone, it can be difficult to break the ties. In a more extreme example, a woman in a domestic violence situation may take years to recognize and leave that harmful influence. No matter how unconscious we may

become of the personal influences in our lives, however, they remain the ones we can control most directly.

Societal influences are those influences primarily coming from institutions and the standards, mores, and values communicated by institutions such as school, church, and community interactions. They are less obviously visible in our day-to-day routines than personal influences, but more directly observed than cultural influences. A minister, teacher, or federal court judge may interact personally in their professional role, yet at the same time interact from an impersonal distance, as they have the responsibility to uphold the standards and rules of the institutions they represent. These societal rules and standards are, in turn, shaped by and contained within the underlying cultural belief systems.

Cultural influences are more pervasive than personal or societal influences. In a sense, cultural influences are like the invisible air, always present, such a part of us that we seldom notice, yet powerful because they greatly impact how individuals think about themselves and each other. Cultural influences strongly impact the inner picture each of us holds of the world. This inner picture or mental model consists of deeply ingrained assumptions and generalizations that influence how we understand the world and our place in it. Mental models act as reference points for helping us develop a self-identity, both as individuals and as a group. With mental models we envision our future.

Henry Giroux, Professor of Secondary Education at Pennsylvania State University, observes that “culture is the primary terrain in which adults exercise power over children both ideologically and institutionally.”⁵ An industry-generated culture exercises enormous power over children. It also presents an ideology,

that is, a way of thinking about the world. But it's very different from a people-centered culture. In older societies the collective voice of the people developed the social rules of behavior. Extended family members taught the young, so children were directly influenced by real people. Parents could count on the community of the adults around them to uphold the values they taught to their kids. There was built-in reinforcement of the parental voice. Without encroachment from an industry-generated culture, parents and children were encircled by a societal structure in harmony with their needs. Obviously, we can't go back to such a society. We must find a way, however, for parents to be better supported in directly influencing their children within a highly complex industry-generated culture, owned by global enterprises.

We can no longer rely on the social structure around us to reiterate our messages to our kids. In fact, one of our biggest challenges as parents today is that too many societal influences are corporate clones. Many public schools, for instance, beam Channel One into the classrooms. In doing so, these schools implicitly add their authority to the commercial ads for junk food and violent video games the kids see each day. We also have to be suspect of organizations which purport to exist mainly to support parents. The National PTA, for example, "which for more than a century has promoted the health of children, now lists Coca-Cola Enterprises as a 'proud sponsor.'"⁶ The thinking behind this decision reflects the kind of thinking that in its outward appearance seems to help, but in actuality, thwarts parents. PTA President Shirley Igo told the *Washington Post*, "We really need [corporate sponsors]. Our budget is very thin and if we didn't have them, we wouldn't be able to develop new programs."⁷ The national PTA has now

appointed John Downs Jr., “the point man for Coke regarding the marketing of soft drinks...in schools,” to serve as an at-large member on the National PTA’s Board of Directors.⁸

It’s sad that the national PTA has “bought in” to a common misunderstanding: Organizations that serve the public can’t function apart from large corporations. The need for money is seen as a greater need than keeping a clear focus on the organizational purpose. What our children are starving for, and some literally dying for, are adult role models of strong purpose and vision. Adults who live their values serve as powerful motivators. But what adults do for money also motivates our kids.

Blurring the boundaries between a well-intentioned service organization and a giant corporation can be dangerous. An industry-generated culture is seeking what it can get *from* the people, rather than what it can give *to* the people. What it gives and how it gives is always based on the monetary profit it gains. Its insatiable desire sets us up as objects—things to be manipulated so that we will buy and consume. In a true culture created by people, not an industry with an agenda, the focus is on providing for the life of the community. In such a culture, people develop talents, learn skills, and make their communities better for the people who come after them. In their book *Where God Lives in the Human Brain*, Carol Rausch Albright and the late James Ashbrook define culture as “the system of information passed from one generation to the next, not by genetic inheritance but by teaching.”⁹ Today’s industry-generated culture actually interferes with our being able to teach and pass on our deepest values because it promotes a superficial life, with addictions and despair likely outcomes for many. It cannot

give us a life-promoting belief system to further the optimal development of future generations because it is not a culture of and for real people, but a culture of and for objects.

An industry-generated culture is, by its very nature, impersonal. It does not care. It does not know our kids and doesn't want to. It can't teach our kids patience or morality or help our children learn about themselves. Only we can do that. If the industry-generated mass culture replaces the basic function of culture in our lives, we are likely headed into increased family and societal dysfunction. We will lose control of what is known as the "symbolic constructs and rituals" that previously gave our lives meaning. For instance, parents and religions still preserve the symbolic meanings of many of our holidays such as Christmas and Hanukah, while the industry-generated culture promotes rampant consumerism. Along with the materialism, comes a forgetting about the true symbolism of these holidays. We don't want to be the last generation to remember that meaning.

Walter Wink, a respected theologian and commentator on modern life, explains how in an industry-generated culture, we can fall prey to a slow erosion of our humanity. "The modern individual stripped of the values, rites, and customs that give a sense of belonging to traditional cultures, is the easy victim of the fads of style...fostered by the communication media. At once isolated and absorbed into the masses, people live under the illusion that the views and feelings they have acquired by attending to the media are their own. Overwhelmed by the giantism of corporations...individuals sense that the only escape from utter insignificance lies in identifying with these giants and idolizing them as the true bearers of their own human identity."¹⁰

If we don't generate our own culture, we relinquish our human identity to an industry-generated culture. If that happens, we lose vitality for our parenting and hope for our children.

Parenting Well in a Media Age turns parental attention away from the industry-generated culture and back where it belongs, on ourselves and on our children. If we want to move forward with a supportive personally-generated culture, we have two major parental obligations. First, we must work intentionally to develop a mature relationship with the industry-generated culture. That means understanding how to mitigate its negative effects. Second, we must work consciously to meet core human needs, not only for children, but for ourselves as well.

Creating a personally-generated culture, that culture of the people so many of us long for, will take effort, determination and rigorous allegiance to what we truly believe. It means parents express their inherent spiritual power and creativity in the world in exciting new ways.

My greatest hope is that *Parenting Well* helps you rediscover or renew your own courage and strength. I believe that we all must recognize and confront the challenges inherent in rearing children in this industry-generated culture. That takes a lot of self-trust, confidence, even boldness. The late Neil Postman, a renowned educator who understood the impact of an industry-generated culture on children, gave us this insight: "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."¹¹ Our "living messages" must live in a personally-generated culture. Together, we can create that culture for our children.

Gloria DeGaetano

March 2004

Today, we can include on our parental “to do” list finding the best schools for our kids, choosing childcare for infants and preschoolers, after-school care for elementary age kids, and making sure our teens are where they should be after school. We also have to teach them about and protect them from drugs. We have to provide relevant sex education. With the emergence of sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS, parental worries increased. With so many forms of screen entertainment, our responsibilities have also come to include monitoring children’s use of television, videos, and video games. With the proliferation of computers, it now means making sure that our kids are computer literate, so they won’t be “left behind.” At the same time, we have to make sure they are protected against pornography, cyber stalking, and cyber bullying. With the widespread labels ADD or ADHD and the use of prescription drugs to treat children, many parents must work with schools and authorities to determine what is really “wrong with” their kids. And, post 9/11, we can add new dilemmas such as explaining terrorism to tots.

Modern-day parental tasks and responsibilities are indeed mind-boggling. Yet, on top of all of this, we face some very specific challenges that are present simply because we parent within an unsupportive culture.

Challenges Specific to Our Time

The negative elements of an industry-generated culture have always in some way been a concern to parents. What about parents’ reactions to Elvis’ seductive hip-swaying in the 1950s? Or the shock of Madonna’s fashion sense in the 1980s? Parents have always voiced their opinions about the ever-changing “pushing

of limits” so integral to the industry-generated culture. This is to be expected. There are significant distinctions today, however, that need to be clearly understood in order to be productively addressed.

Challenge #1: Global conglomerates influence behaviors and attitudes on an unprecedented scale.

In the '50s ten year-olds were not being sold Elvis but by the '80s little girls were dressing like Madonna. Over the years multinational companies have increased their hold on our kids. Judith Rubin, writing in *Mothering*, reminds us that “marketing professionals cross-reference, cross market, and cross-pollinate products and entertainment. By intentionally blurring the distinctions between products, entertainment, school curricula, and advertisements, marketers readily capitalize on young children’s limited ability to differentiate between them. It’s no accident that in the children’s section of Barnes and Noble, the books starring such television-based characters as Blue, Arthur, and Clifford are displayed most prominently, while the classics get the cheap seats.”⁶

This decision of book placement in a popular store chain is one example of how large businesses can be so influential on our kids and impact our parenting on a daily basis. When the people who create, produce, and disseminate the TV programs or movies also have a lot of reach into other sectors, such as bookstores, we are virtually surrounded by focused messages, driven by maximizing profit. In the past, media companies were not nearly as influential. In fact, in 1983, as many as fifty companies owned the majority of the media. By 2001, six companies owned and controlled global media production and dissemination.⁷ Ted Turner, founder of CNN, ironically decries media’s consolidation

of power, “Media concentration is a frightening thing. It’s owned more and more by Disney, General Electric. . . Westinghouse, which now owns CBS. You have two of the four major networks owned by people that have huge investments in nuclear power and nuclear weapons—both GE and Westinghouse.”⁸ Time Warner, the world’s biggest media corporation, is also the second largest book publisher in the world, the largest music company, and the owner of many of America’s leading magazines, including *Time*, *Fortune*, *Life*, *People*, *Money*, and *Teen Magazine*. And, along with TCI, Time Warner is the owner of television cable systems serving 47% of the American cable audience.⁹ The merger of Time and AOL in 2000 opened even more pathways for mass dissemination with Internet users.

Rachel Eden, a mother of a five year old daughter, writing in an article, “Children’s Creative Thinking in the Face of Commercialism,” points out, “The late Herbert Schiller, noted author, professor, and authority on corporate power and the media, gets to the heart of what is really happening with corporate mergers. In a speech titled, ‘The Corporate Packaging of the Public Mind,’ Schiller explains that these mergers between corporate media systems create a ‘corporate packaging’ designed to play on our sensory perceptions and perpetuate an outlook and consciousness shaped by the images they present. This is carried out through the local mall filled with the same stores owned by one chain. Many schools align themselves with corporations in exchange for funding or supplies which brings commercialism directly into the daily lives of students. In essence, our children become conditioned by this homogenized intake and the messages being promoted ‘are reinforced throughout the social order.’”¹⁰

Eden, a third-grade teacher, sees children's imagination eroding every day in her classroom. "I have students who can't come up with an idea for a story unless the current toy can be the main character. It isn't the isolated incidents that concern me but rather a continual inability of children to conjure up their own ideas without relying on what the media has presented to them. There are youngsters who cannot create a story unless it revolves around a TV character or superhero, whose lunch items are colorfully decorated with the latest craze from the box office or Burger King, whose entire outfit and matching backpack are walking commercials for some movie. These children are so immersed in Disney, Nickelodeon, and Nintendo that they no longer have access to their own images and creative imaginations. Instead they are limited to thinking in the images the media has provided for them."¹¹

Mary Burke, a mother and child psychiatrist, worries about the replacement of the imagination with packaged media products. "This was recently made concrete to me when I set out to order a variety of character toys for my sand tray, I was appalled to find that the local sand-tray supplier only carried Disney characters! I could no longer find witches, princesses and heroes, only the Disney versions of Snow White's step-mother, Cinderella, and Aladdin."¹²

This "homogenized intake" pervasively influences our children. One Seattle mother of three children, calls it "Any Child USA." "Malls are Anywhere USA and our children become Any Child USA. Instead of our children being who they are, they now have the wants and needs of people who don't know them." By influencing on a mass scale, the industry-generated culture shapes attitudes and impacts our children's identities in profound ways.

Since it's shaping millions of children simultaneously, peer group pressures to conform increase as corporations get increasingly savvy in selling straight to our kids. Children, of course, have very real needs to fit in and to be like their friends. As we work diligently to help our youngsters develop their unique identity, we have to counter homogenized thoughts and behaviors our kids learn from their peer group, without ostracizing them from their peers. This is a tricky job. Trying to parent well within this framework raises a critical parental question that we all have to answer: Whose messages do we want to be most influential in shaping the emerging identity of our children—the messages from an industry-generated culture or the messages from parents?

Challenge #2: The erosion of community standards through the co-opting of social institutions.

The second major distinction between parenting today and parenting in the past is the erosion of community standards through the co-opting of social institutions. From the 1950s through the early 1980s, social institutions kept corporate intrusion to a minimum. Gary Ruskin, president of Commercial Alert, a non-profit dedicated to countering commercial messages, points out: “Junk food marketers, for instance, tried to invade schools, but for decades their presence was relatively insignificant. . . . The curriculum of junk nutrition began in earnest in 1989, with the launch of Channel One, an in-school TV marketing program. Chris Whittle, Channel One’s founder, had the ingenious idea of harnessing the schools to show daily twelve-minute TV broadcasts that included two minutes of ads. Since then, Channel One, now owned by Primedia, has been adopted by 12,000 schools. About eight million children watch its ads for

Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Hostess Twinkies, M&M's, Snicker's and the like."¹³ We expect MacDonald's to be more interested in selling Happy Meals than they are concerned about our kids' health; we don't expect schools to ignore our kids health needs. When schools join to amplify corporate messages, they dismiss parental concerns.

The local communities of those eight million kids watching Channel One most likely have YMCAs, YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, church organizations and intramural sports teams that give children messages about proper nutrition. In fact, most of the schools that show Channel One have well-developed sports programs, promoting optimal health. Giving kids mixed messages makes life difficult for parents. Children and teens need the culture outside the home to be supportive of the family's priorities. For instance, in order for a child to change an unhealthy eating pattern into a healthy one, two main things need to occur. First, the child must internalize the positive messages. He or she needs to "take them in" and believe in them. Industry-generated messages for unhealthy food choices, though, are repeated so often in the child's environment, making it virtually impossible for the child to come to value the seemingly dissonant message from the parent wanting to instill healthy eating habits. The second thing that must happen after internalization is integration. This refers to making the new behavior one's own. This integration can't easily happen if a social institution like a school where the child spends so much time—a place he or she relies upon for positive direction and nurturing guidance—cannot be counted on to echo parental messages. How will kids adopt parents' healthy eating habits when so many of their friends at school are eating junk food?

It should give us pause to realize that despite the well-researched facts and enormous individual efforts on the part of parents, teachers, doctors, and other professionals, child obesity continues to climb. In 1988, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report which revealed that forty percent of youngsters ages five through eight exhibit one risk factor for heart disease. In 2003, they issued a policy statement saying that a television in a child's bedroom is a strong predictor of childhood obesity.¹⁴ Other medical research indicated that at least forty percent of all children under the age of twelve are overweight, and another study found an increased risk of obesity and diabetes for every two hours of television watched daily.¹⁵

Countering children's health problems within an industry-generated culture and unsupportive social structures pushing opposing messages is just one example of this trying parental challenge. Whenever the local community doesn't align itself in the best interests of children, we parents have more work cut out for us. This brings us an important question: How do we help our children intentionally choose what is in their best interests when the industry-generated culture and social institutions in our communities persist in urging them to make choices not in their best interests?

Challenge #3: Corporations market specifically to children and their inherent vulnerabilities with the intention of undermining parental authority and responsibility.

A third parenting challenge unique to our times is the corporate intention to undermine parental authority and responsibility. By intentionally driving a wedge between the parent

and child over a specified product, parental concern becomes scorned and the product becomes glamorized, almost magical. Parents are seen as stupid and unfair. The child's peer group may as well have an umbilical cord tied directly to global conglomerates. Since children are inundated with seemingly important messages, corporations become significant authorities in children's lives. Marketers' successfully appeal to the child's state of "precritical naivete, that childhood state in which we take for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true."¹⁶

Sneaky business tactics often infiltrate our homes. PG-I3 movies are sometimes advertised on television during shows designed for young children. Parents, thinking the shows benign, let their children watch, unaware of the offensive, tantalizing trailers that come on between the shows. Sony, for example, tried to advertise *The Fifth Element*, a violent PG-I3-rated movie, on Nickelodeon.¹⁷ And they probably would have, if they weren't "caught." In a detailed report the Federal Trade Commission found that film, videogame, and television companies, including Sony, were marketing violent entertainment to young children. In one of the hearings, "Senator John McCain read aloud a segment from a marketing report for one R-rated movie which said, 'it seems to make sense to interview 10 to 11 year-olds. . .In addition, we will survey African American and Latino moviegoers between the ages of 10 and 24.'¹⁸ Even though the industry has defined R-rated movies as "no one under seventeen admitted unless accompanied by an adult," it fails to follow its own self-imposed standard. "Condemning industry execs for warning parents and simultaneously wooing children, McCain pointed out

that ‘it is your responsibility to refrain from making much more difficult a parent’s responsibility to see that their children grow up healthy in mind and body into adults who are capable of judging for themselves the quality or lack thereof of your art.’”¹⁹

Parents can’t trust the movie industry’s rating system. Teens going to PG-13 movies see bunches of inappropriate content. Strippers, lap dancing, and references to oral sex are common. “How does it feel to have your head in a congressman’s lap?” says one Washington staffer to another in *Legally Blonde 2*. In *Laura Croft: Tomb Raider*, a woman starts to perform oral sex on her crime-fighting partner, then changes her mind and handcuffs him to the bed. *The Spy Who Shagged Me* “includes a comic scene of a naked woman inserting a homing device into the anus of. . . the man she just had sex with.”²⁰ Since the movie industry thinks this type of content is appropriate for teens, parents must act as the “bad guys” and prevent their kids from seeing such stuff “when all the other kids get to go.” Filmmakers know that as long as there are slumber parties and VCRs, or TVs in teens’ bedrooms, many kids will see these types of movies, more than once, despite parent opposition.

Manufacturers of inappropriate toys even brag about their strategies for side-stepping parents. Stink Blasters, squeezable three-inch dolls, “designed to break wind up to 30,000 times on demand,” are priced for young allowances. Most parents don’t want these toys in their house. “But you know that only makes the kids want them even more,” says Harold Chizick, director of marketing for Spin Master, the toys’ manufacturer. “Kids love them, but the parents hate them. So we priced them as an impulse, lower-priced item, and the kids can make their own decision when purchasing them.”²¹

That parents “hate” the toys, movies, or music the industry-generated culture feeds our kids is of utmost importance. It needs to make parents superfluous in order to market directly to children. Because a lot of parents give kids their own spending money and don't monitor every purchase the kids make, a lot of inappropriate stuff is bought. On one hand, we want to empower our kids, give them opportunities to make wise choices on their own. On the other hand, we also want to keep toxic influences to a minimum. Knowing what to do is often difficult, further eroding our confidence and making it easier for the kids to take advantage of our wavering.

We want our kids to become independent thinkers. Supporting their autonomy is critical to their optimal development. Decades of research in child and adolescent development shows that parents who help kids feel empowered to make their own decisions, also help their kids to become well-functioning adults. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, social psychologists from the University of Rochester, have done seminal research on autonomy in humans since the 1970s. Their work points out that people will not try to change their behaviors unless they feel a certain degree of autonomy to make positive choices. Indeed, autonomy is seen as one of the main conditions for healthy social development and personal well-being.²²

It's easy for parents to get tripped up here and “buy into” an untimely autonomy for kids. Because the industry-generated culture pushes youngsters to make decisions without their parents' permission at earlier and earlier ages, a lot of parents don't take into consideration the developmental appropriateness of making decisions without parental influence. Both advertisers and parents

want to empower children. But for different reasons. Kay Hymowitz, in the article “The Contradictions of Parenting in a Media Age,” describes how advertisers, in the post World War II era of greater parental permissiveness, were quick to promote empowerment of children by disempowering adults. “Advertisers knew that empowered children could make better consumers than dependent, compliant ones. . . One way that the media could hasten the empowerment of children was by reducing authorities, and parents especially, in the child-consumer’s eyes. This was a project media ‘creatives’ undertook with a vengeance.”²³

The message to parents, reflected through the lens of the industry-generated culture is that they are ridiculously up-tight and stupid if they try to exercise any authority in relationship to their children. Unfortunately this attitude has been supported by many “experts.” That leaves parents in a state of confusion about what their proper role is in relationship to their children. Hymowitz goes on to add, “Caught between their distaste for a coarse and degraded popular culture and their belief in a free flow of information, parents. . . are in a bind that makes them ill-equipped to deal with the new realities of contemporary childhood.”²⁴

Over the last few decades, our parental authority gradually weakened while advertisers gained strength by devising improved ways to entice kids to make choices without our approval. A key question involves reclaiming our appropriate authority in such an environment: How do we nurture our children’s and teens’ healthy autonomy within an industry-generated culture determined to undermine our authority and responsibility?

Challenge #4: Lack of relevant information and a pattern of disinformation keep parents in a state of confusion, unsure and unaware.

The fourth major challenge combines a lack of relevant information and a pattern of disinformation that keeps parents in a state of confusion. Corporations spend millions each day to guide our attention in specific directions—often leaving out critical information that would be important to us as parents. This “intentional omission habit” means we focus on what is given. We can forget that other ideas and other perspectives actually exist. A simple test of how this works is to see how clear you are on two important parental issues—the appropriate amount of screen time for children and the effects of media violence. How would you answer these questions?

Questions:

1. What is the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) most recent recommendation on the amount of screen time for your children? Why did they change their initial recommendation? (Did you know that the AAP even has a clear recommendation?)
2. What does research show about the impact of media violence on your kids?

Answers:

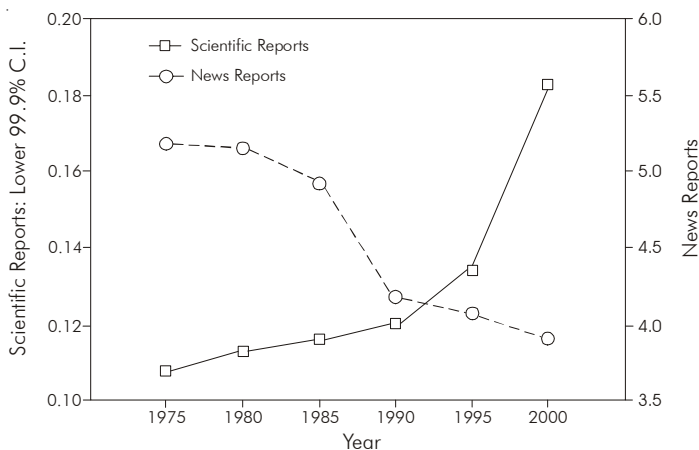
1. The AAP has had long standing recommendation of two to three hours per day of TV for children. Recently the AAP changed this to one to two hours of *all* screen time per day and *no* screen time for babies and children under the age of two. If you did not know this, you are not alone.²⁵ Most parents I meet are unaware that the AAP even has a recommendation. It was changed

because pediatricians could no longer ignore the latest brain research and its implications. Overuse of screen technologies has devastating effects on children's brain development. In fact, many doctors and other professionals think the AAP's recommendation not strong enough. Dr. Robert Hill and Dr. Eduardo Castro, authors of the book, *Getting Rid of Ritalin*, recommend no television before the age of five. Having conducted on-going research and investigation into the matter, they state in no uncertain terms, "We can say with confidence that excessive television, particularly in young children, causes neurological damage. TV watching causes the brain to slow down, producing a constant pattern of low-frequency brainwaves consistent with ADD behavior."²⁶

This relevant information for parents of kids of all ages is not something that you will see on television, the most prominent avenue for keeping parents abreast of new breakthroughs. Sitcom characters will not address these facts. Cartoons, of course, avoid them, and even news programs do not report this information.

2. If you are unaware of the impact of media violence, again you are not alone, as most parents don't know the basic information that would help them make important daily decisions about TV, movie, and video game content. Unless you are searching for the scholarly studies you would not know that there are over 3,000 studies demonstrating the negative influence of media violence. Yet, there persists a major gap between what is known about the effects of media violence and the actual news reports about these effects. In the chart below you can see that "as the state of scientific knowledge supporting a significant and causal link between media violence and aggression grew stronger, news media reports actually grew weaker."²⁷

Scientific vs. News Reports of the Effects of Media Violence on Aggression



(Based on data reported in Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson, "Media Violence and the American Public: Scientific Facts Versus Media Misinformation," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 6/7 (2001): pp. 477-89.)

The amplified voice of the industry culture sends messages to parents that are counter to what the experts know, believe, and actually insist upon. Even when the information given parents seems valuable, the lens gets spotty and the importance of what parents must do becomes muddled. At times, while citing experts about the importance of play for young children's healthy development, for instance, the author ends with the notion that parents are too overwhelmed to do anything about the issue, too busy to follow the experts' advice. Here's "Just another thing" to add to the perennial parent to-do list.

Can you imagine an article in *Business Weekly* discussing what a bank president must do to make more money and then adding: "Poor bank presidents, how can we expect them to make money

when they are too busy and overwhelmed?” If business consultants told CEOs they were too victimized to have the will to carry through on proven methods, they would be out of a job quickly. Anything less than a proactive, laser-like focus on what works is not acceptable when material productivity is at stake. In the parenting business, however, bewilderment and confusion are the status quo. And the gap in parent’s knowledge about early childhood development continues to widen. *What Grown-ups Understand about Child Development* documents a survey done in 2000 and commissioned by the groups Zero to Three, Civitas Initiative, and Brio Corporation. It concluded that adults need better information “delivered in more accessible ways on understanding the depth of a baby’s emotional life; theories on spoiling and spanking; expectations of young children at different ages; and choices of activities to promote development,” including understanding the importance of play in a young child’s life.²⁸

Information about the need to control screen usage, protect kids of all ages from horrific violence, and to play more with youngsters, often gets no attention from the mainstream media. Yet, at the same time, Gameboys are marketed heavily to young children, cartoons and PG-13 movies contain unacceptable levels of violence, and children are beginning a “passive screen habit” at younger and younger ages.²⁹ What gets amplified is what sells. So many parents tell me, “I didn’t know. If I knew this was harmful to my kids’ brains or their best development, I wouldn’t have done it.” They often feel guilty for the choices they made. We parent with what information we have. If we have skewed or inaccurate information, that’s what we use. We must be able to rely on the larger culture to give us the current information available, so that