
MIND OVER MEDIA: HELPING KIDS GET THE MESSAGE

Discussion Guide

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter to Educators	1
Introduction to Media Literacy	2
A Quick Glance: Mind Over Media	5
Part One: Getting the Message	6
Part Two: Getting Started	7
Part Three: Multimedia	12
Part Four: Reaching Out	16
Leading a Community Discussion	19
Recommended Resources	22

Dear Educator,

Can violence in the media – television, video games, music, movies, Internet sites – affect the behavior of young people? Many researchers and child advocacy groups say there's a connection – that media violence contributes to youth violence and aggression.



Rikki Klieman



Maurice DuBois

Getting kids to recognize the impact of the media is a first step in breaking that connection, and increasingly educators are turning to media literacy for help. Media literacy helps kids make sense of the media, figuring out how and why media is created, and for whom. Plot, character, purpose, and point of view can be analyzed for non-print as well as print media, which prepares students for all the ways information is delivered to them. Analyzing the uses and consequences of violence is an important part of this process.

Mind Over Media: Helping Kids Get The Message, puts the tools of media literacy into the hands of educators, parents, community leaders, and kids. Hosted by Court TV's Rikki Klieman and WNBC's Maurice DuBois, the program visits classrooms across the country, giving teacher-tested tips for integrating media literacy instruction at every grade level. Al Roker of the *Today* show joins us for follow-up discussions with parents, educators, and kids.

We recognize that teachers and community leaders are under increasing pressure to meet academic standards, often leaving little time for topics outside the mandated curriculum. In this program and resource guide, we show how media literacy can be integrated into the existing curriculum, strengthening students' skills in writing, analysis, and critical thinking in every subject area.

Teaching children alternatives to violence is a responsibility we all share. Media literacy is one important tool to accomplish that goal.

Sincerely,

Taffy Patton
Interim Executive Director
Cable in the Classroom

Henry Schleiff
Chairman and CEO
Court TV

Bob Chase
President
NEA

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA LITERACY

Children are Media Consumers

Television, computers, video games, movies, music, and books are just some of the media students interact with on a daily basis. According to a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the typical American child spends nearly five-and-a-half hours a day consuming media outside of school – that's more than 38 hours a week. It's almost a full-time job for most children, which means now more than ever, they need the tools to help them make sense of all the information they are seeing and hearing.



Research Findings

Since 1965, studies have consistently linked televised violence to negative behaviors among young viewers. Using this body of extensive research, the American Psychological Association stated in 1993 that children who consistently see violent images may:

- ▶ Become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others
- ▶ Be more fearful of the world around them
- ▶ Be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others

Many studies have confirmed the link between short-term and long-term aggressive behavior and viewing violent media, but a study published in 2001 by researchers from Stanford University Medical Center had encouraging news. They found that when children voluntarily reduced the amount of time they



spent watching television and playing video games, their aggressive behavior decreased.

However, as James Garbarino, Cornell University professor notes, exposure to media is not the only factor influencing aggressive behavior. “Television, video games, movies, guns, child maltreatment, unresponsive schools, inadequate mental services, spiritual emptiness, psychoactive substances, economic inequality; is there anyone among us without responsibility? I think not.”

What is Media Literacy?

Liz Thoman, president of the Center for Media Literacy, defines media literacy as “the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in every day through television, radio, computers, newspapers, magazines, and of course advertising.”

The Center for Media Literacy, offers these “key points” that guide students in becoming savvy media consumers:

1. All media are constructions: People choose which stories to tell and how to tell them. These products are not reality,

but are designed to elicit responses in the audience.

2. Media use unique languages: Scary music says the villain is coming, headlines signal importance, and a roaring crowd lets us know the team has scored. Understanding these conventions heightens our appreciation and helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation.

3. Audiences negotiate meaning: No two people watching the same movie or television show have the same reaction. Consumers bring prior experience and knowledge to their media interactions.

4. Media have commercial interests: Most media is produced by corporations with something to sell.

5. Media have embedded values: By analyzing media critically we uncover the value messages that each program, newspaper, book, or song conveys. We can then choose to accept or reject these messages.

Everyone has a Role to Play

Educators, community leaders, parents, and administrators can all help young people become discerning media consumers:

▶ *Educators and community leaders can engage parents in a dialogue about violent content and its potential for affecting behavior.*

▶ *Educational administrators and school personnel can find places to integrate media literacy instruction across the curriculum.*



- ▶ *Parents can monitor their children's exposure to violent content and can help them distinguish between real experiences and media portrayals of reality.*
- ▶ *Both educators and parents can engage older students in discussion about what media choices they are making and why they are making them.*
- ▶ *Educators can help raise awareness in the general community about the benefits of teaching media literacy.*

A QUICK GLANCE

Using the Video and Resource Guide

Each of the four major sections of *Mind Over Media: Helping Kids Get the Message* focuses on a specific aspect of media literacy. This discussion guide can be used in conjunction with the video or as a stand-alone tool.

The following provides a quick glance at each of the video sections:

PART ONE: GETTING THE MESSAGE presents a montage that reflects the range of young people's views on the place of media in their lives.

PART TWO: GETTING STARTED visits Norrback Avenue School, a communications magnet elementary school in Worcester, MA, to see how media literacy is introduced in the early grades.

PART THREE: MULTIMEDIA highlights five different teachers at Concord High School in New Hampshire and shows their individual teaching approaches to media literacy.

PART FOUR: REACHING OUT visits Caesar Chavez School in Salinas, CA where a sixth-grade teacher participates in a coalition that includes parents and community leaders to help his students make sense of adolescent issues and popular culture.

PART 1: GETTING THE MESSAGE

Media Influences Youth Culture

We can help kids recognize the impact of the media and how it influences their behavior. An important part of this process is to look at how violence is portrayed and why. What are the consequences of violence during a police show or cartoon? Who is the victim? Does the portrayal perpetuate stereotypes? How does the viewer feel after seeing the program? How does the producer heighten the experience for the viewer? Music? Camera angles? Lighting?



Looking at these elements transforms a passive experience into an active one. We are no longer blindly accepting the point of view of the people who created the program; we are forming our own opinions and thoughts about the topic and the messages conveyed.

BUILDING BLOCKS

- ▶ *Young people are saturated by media experiences.*
- ▶ *They have a variety of reactions to these experiences and to the messages they receive.*
- ▶ *They are eager for the tools to decipher these messages.*

Introducing Elementary School Students to Media Literacy

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation's 1999 study of media habits among children, kids in the 2-7 age range spend three-and-a-half hours a day using media. Thirty-five percent say that the TV is on in their homes "most of the time," yet parents watch TV with these young children just 19% of the time.

At Norrback Elementary School, media literacy is woven into the curriculum at every grade level. The youngest children



might analyze an advertisement as part of a unit on color: Which colors do you see?

How does each color make you feel? By first grade, children can read print ads and identify verbs, adjectives, and nouns. How are these words used? The children then make

their own advertising posters using writing and drawing skills. Finally, the sixth graders use critical thinking skills to analyze existing advertisements and then use persuasive writing to develop their own radio ads.

In all these cases, media literacy isn't replacing a lesson plan, it is adding depth and new activities to the core concepts.

BUILDING BLOCKS

- ▶ *Lessons build conceptually through the grades.*
- ▶ *Language arts skills are reinforced throughout.*
- ▶ *Materials need not be high-tech to be effective.*

Media Literacy Concepts for Younger Children

Here are some basic media literacy concepts that children can use to begin thinking critically about the media that surrounds them.

REAL vs. PRETEND – It is often difficult for children to distinguish between what is real and what is make believe. Is *Barney* real? What about the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*?

When watching a video in the classroom or at home, engage children with questions to help them distinguish between fantasy and reality: Why do you think that story is in the news? Did it really happen? What else do you want to know about the story? That character isn't a cartoon but is she real? What's an actress? Why is she on TV?

MESSAGE DECIPHERING – All media are constructed reality. Someone has written the words, chosen the pictures, decided what stories are worth telling, and how they will be told. These choices are made to elicit a response. Knowing that there are people who have created every book, newspaper, television

show, commercial, movie, and song can help children start to think about what message the author is trying to convey and what techniques he or she is using.



Every media encounter shared with a child is a chance to ask questions that will help decipher messages and make sense of what is seen. Look at the story's hero and victim. Think about what would happen if the roles were reversed. Discuss how the main character's problem is solved. Is it realistic? Would you have done it differently?

ECONOMICS - Young children are often confused by commercials, which look like mini-programs featuring wonderful toys, happy parents, and content children. By showing your class commercials and print ads as part of a lesson plan, you can help your students critically analyze what is being shown and why.

CHOOSE TO VIEW - An important goal of media literacy is to help children realize that media viewing is a choice. Children can learn at an early age to budget their time. In a unit on health, children can talk about balancing activity with inactivity. The class can use games or create posters that explain the importance of dividing free time among the following: outside time, time to play alone, time with adults and other family members, and time to relax and be entertained. Your class can brainstorm many other activities and decide how much time they would ideally allocate to each.

Activities for Elementary School Students

REAL VS. PRETEND

- ▶ Compare different types of media that deal with the same topic. For instance, if your class is studying the solar system, students can compare a non-fiction book about planets, a *Magic School Bus* episode, and Internet sites on the solar system. Then ask the children questions: Could the students on the *Magic School Bus* really visit all those planets? What was factual and what was fiction in that episode? What information, if any, is consistent from all three sources?

MESSAGE DECIPHERING

- ▶ Children can design posters to promote violence-free problem-solving techniques. As a group, brainstorm alternatives to violence as a solution to common problems children face: bullies, name-calling, exclusion, or intimidation.
- ▶ Take a well-known cartoon that has a violent "funny" ending. Have students re-write the ending using problem-solving techniques. How could they have solved the character's problem without using violence?

ECONOMICS

- ▶ Many classrooms have posters from educational television programs or software. Look at a poster and discuss: Who is it for? What ages? Boys, girls, or both? Why are there different kinds of type or illustrations? Students can work in teams to design their own poster advertisements. Ask about the strategies they used to attract their target audience.

CHOOSE TO VIEW

► Ask children to keep a media diary listing what television



programs, films, videos or video games they watched or played during the course of a week. They should record what they watched or played, who else was with them, why they chose that program or game, and their reaction to each one. Add up the time spent on each category as a class and use the information to chart graphs or calculate percentages.



Challenge the class to think of

alternative activities for some of the times listed as “bored” or “nothing else to do.”

What do you want to do?

**I dunno.
What do you want to do?**

Teach them how to look for creative ways to spend their free time.

PART 3:

MULTIMEDIA

It was a standardized test question about an orange juice ad that got teachers at Concord High School in New Hampshire thinking about media literacy. Many students who did well analyzing fiction did poorly when asked to interpret an advertisement. When Concord High reorganized, moving from a three-year to a four-year configuration, teachers took the opportunity to revamp the 11th-grade English curriculum. Other media, both fiction and non-fiction, took their place alongside the classics.

Now when students discuss symbolism, they can talk about the differences between a novel, play, and movie. When researching information, they are able to evaluate the reliability of different sources and decide what agenda might be influencing the news. And when creating their own brochures, they can determine what information is most compelling and useful for a particular target audience. Whatever the medium, these students get experience in research, writing, editing, and critical thinking.

BUILDING BLOCKS

- *A variety of media can be used to support and augment the teaching of literature.*
- *Teaching critical thinking skills helps students meet academic standards.*
- *Media literacy instruction is engaging and relevant for students at the secondary level.*

Activities for Middle and High School Students

These activities can be incorporated into many different lesson plans. They are arranged using the Center for Media Literacy's "Key Points."

1. All media are constructions:

- ▶ Have groups of students use the Internet to research a topic being studied by the class. Each group must find a different web source. Analyze the material using these criteria:
 - Who created the site?
 - Is the information credible?
 - What is the point of view?
 - What information has been omitted?
 - How does the site compare with information found through traditional sources?
- ▶ Create a web site or brochure that helps kids and parents evaluate television shows, movies, video games, and Internet sites. How can you design your site to make people want to use it?

2. Media use unique languages:

- ▶ Analyze a local newscast, newspaper front page, and an Internet news site covering news for the same day. What stories led in each and why? Who is featured in pictures and what live video is shown? How does each source cover the same story? What words or pictures are used to grab your attention? How do they make you feel? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each medium? Which source seems more credible and why?

- ▶ Look at a clip from a well-known movie, perhaps an adaptation of a book the class has already read. How are music, lighting, and symbols used to heighten viewers' interest and emotions?
- ▶ Count the incidents of violence in five minutes of each of the following: a Saturday morning cartoon, the nightly news, a Western, and a video game promotion. Does each genre use a different type of violence? Why? What did the students regard as violence? Does it matter if the violence is realistic? What if the behavior is "justified?"

3. Audiences negotiate meaning:

- ▶ Mention a controversial musician, such as Eminem. Would a grandparent and a teen interpret his music the same way? Would a preschooler understand his music videos?
- ▶ Ask for examples of students' favorite television programs. Would a teen from another country or culture understand these shows? If not, why not? What makes them uniquely suited for an American audience?

4. Media have commercial interests:

- ▶ Ask students to figure out their economic value as viewers. Use the Nielsen Media Research ratings, usually available through USAtoday.com, and have the students research national advertising rates. How much did sponsors pay for different shows? Why?
- ▶ Ask students to keep a list of sponsors for a half-hour television program. Without revealing the program's name, have the students list the sponsors and analyze the demographics of the intended viewers. See if the class can guess

the program based on the sponsors.

5. Media have embedded values:

- ▶ Show clips of television programs from different decades. Have students watch for stereotypes of women, minorities, men, teenagers. Have the stereotypes changed over time? Within each clip, who has the power and who doesn't? How do values portrayed in the media at any given decade influence or reflect our culture's attitudes?
- ▶ Show a music video without the sound. Ask students to analyze what messages the video is sending based on: dress, scene, vignette, body language. Do they agree with these messages?
- ▶ Have a speaker from a local organization that helps victims of violent crime come and talk about the consequences of violent crime. Compare the speaker's comments about violence with its portrayal in a movie or video game. Does the film or video game glorify violence? Show consequences? Suggest alternative courses of action?



PART 4:

REACHING OUT

It Takes A Community

In Salinas, California, a grass-roots media literacy effort includes the mayor, local university, parent organizations, and teachers. Part of a multi-faceted commitment to non-violence, media literacy is a community priority, which means getting a variety of partners – from representatives of the media to law enforcement officials to educators – to work toward a common goal.

A parent workshop at the local community center draws a capacity crowd to learn how to choose a media “diet” balanced for family viewing. Free pizza and day care, simultaneous translation for Spanish-speaking participants, and Parent Passports good for discounts at local merchants encourage a good turnout.

While the parent workshop gives families the tools to help incorporate media literacy into daily life, the school also serves an important role. Sixth-grade teacher, Martin Cisneros, helps students interpret media messages while also bridging American and Mexican cultures.

BUILDING BLOCKS

- ▶ *Build a coalition of those interested in media literacy.*
- ▶ *Give parents the tools to help kids become more media savvy.*
- ▶ *Take advantage of community resources.*

Involving Families

The following can be photocopied and given to parents as part of a media literacy community event.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: FAMILIES AND MEDIA LITERACY

Watching television and playing video games with your children, surfing the Internet and listening to the radio in the car together – the simple act of sharing these experiences can influence the quality of your children’s media interactions. Children look to their parents for guidance, and if you look at media critically, soon they will also.

Ask your child how a commercial uses music, color, story, and lighting to sell its product. Share your reactions to the lyrics in a song or CD they like. Read the newspaper together and discuss the way a reporter has told a story. All these activities employ strategies that sharpen your child’s ability to analyze material. These skills will help enrich their experiences with the media, with academics, and with life.

INCREASING MEDIA LITERACY FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- ▶ Teach your children to choose television programs rather than randomly surfing channels.
- ▶ Discuss your children’s favorite TV commercials and why they like them. Does a good commercial ensure a good product?
- ▶ When you watch television with your children, ask questions to stimulate their thinking. Are the family relationships on TV like real life? Are the characters disrespectful to each other because that’s funnier? Are problems really resolved in 30 minutes? Would the solutions seen on TV work in real life?
- ▶ If your child sees a headline in a newspaper, overhears a radio news story, or sees a television news report about a violent act, take time to discuss it with your child.

- ▶ Talk to the parents of your children’s friends. Will your child be watching TV on a play date? What video games will they play?

INCREASING MEDIA LITERACY FOR FAMILIES WITH OLDER CHILDREN

- ▶ When viewing programs as a family, analyze together what message the medium is sending. For example, “all people have value” vs. “only beautiful or glamorous people are valued.” Discuss as a family what types of Internet sites, musicians, television programs, and video games are “off-limits” and why.
- ▶ Plan a video night for the whole family. Ask your kids to take charge, planning the menu, choosing the video, and inviting everyone in the household to participate.
- ▶ If your child is watching a program with violent content, sit down and watch it with them. Is the story realistic? What are the consequences of the character’s actions? What stereotypes are presented and how does your child feel about them?
- ▶ Talk to your child about the interactive video or Internet games he or she plays with friends. Look up their ratings together and discuss your feelings about the content with them.
- ▶ When your teenager asks for money because he or she “has to have” a product, investigate it together. Can you find any reviews of the product? You may or may not decide to help your teenager buy the product, but by conducting research together, you will help him or her make an informed decision. *Consumer Reports for Kids* is a good resource.

LEADING A COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

How to Use this Guide

This videotape and discussion guide can be used with groups of adults who are interested in learning more about media literacy and how it can be incorporated into the lesson plans and daily life experiences of children. As discussion leader, familiarize yourself with the program's format ahead of time. Each section of the videotape corresponds with a section of the discussion guide. They are designed to be used together, but each one also functions independently. You may photocopy sections of this guide for the group.

Establish Goals for Session as a Group

Each person has a different reason for participating in this media literacy discussion. Ask the group to establish goals: concrete plans for next year's curriculum, an activity for a group of high school students that will be visible in the community, or ideas for parents to take home and use with their own children. Whatever the goals are, they will help you tailor the discussion to the needs of the group.

Establish Rules for the Discussion

It is important that everyone has the chance to participate in the discussion. Your role as leader is to prompt, question, and listen. Don't dominate the discussion. Let everyone know that their ideas and suggestions are important.

Watch the Broadcast

You may want to watch each section of the show and stop the videotape for discussion after each section. Ask participants some of the suggested discussion questions before the section begins so they can think them over as they watch the broadcast.

Next Steps

Depending on the group's goals, you may want to identify a next step to be taken individually or as a group. Making a plan and identifying something concrete that the group or individuals can do leads to further actions and solutions.

Suggested Discussion Questions

PART ONE: GETTING THE MESSAGE

- ▶ How is teen culture influenced by family, school, community, and media? How does each differ in the way they influence teens?
- ▶ What role can teachers play in helping teens realize the effect media has on their values and behaviors?

PART TWO: GETTING STARTED

- ▶ At what age should schools and parents begin teaching the concepts of media literacy? How can we combine media literacy with existing subjects or units?
- ▶ Parents of young children often look to teachers and community leaders for guidance in setting standards. How can

we help parents set reasonable standards? What advice should we give?

PART THREE: MULTIMEDIA

- ▶ How can we incorporate media literacy into science? Math? Health?
- ▶ Critical thinking skills are the key to analyzing pre-packaged images. How can we enhance the information-gathering skills teens are already learning? Are there particular challenges with the Internet where “information” is so easily obtained?
- ▶ What opportunities for creating media do students have in our school? Some schools have access to video equipment, computers, and other tools, but what if your school has limited resources? Can these experiences be replicated with other means? In what ways can parents support the school in acquiring up-to-date equipment?

PART FOUR: REACHING OUT

- ▶ How can we help parents to make good media choices? Studies show that much of what small children see on television is not intended for their viewing, but is on because a parent or caregiver in the same room is watching the program.
- ▶ Parents of middle and high school students may feel they have little influence over the media choices their children make. How can parents promote media literacy even as a child grows and becomes increasingly independent?

The three sponsors of this program have a history of producing shows that focus on societal problems and offer a forum for community involvement.



Cable in the Classroom is a public service of the cable communications industry. Members, such as Court TV, provide approved K-12 schools with free cable connections and more than 500 hours of commercial-free copyright-cleared educational programming each month. For more information go to: www.ciconline.org.



Court TV is the only 24-hour cable network dedicated to crime and justice in America. *Mind Over Media* is part of Court TV’s ongoing commitment to produce original programs that challenge adolescents to consider the consequence of their actions. For more information go to: www.courtstv.com.



The National Education Association’s sponsorship of this broadcast comes through its Safe Schools Now Network, which has produced eight other programs on reducing violence in schools. It is part of this organization’s commitment to its 2.6 million members – teachers and support staff in 14,000 communities across the country. For more information on NEA go to: www.nea.org. For more information on the Safe Schools Now Network go to: www.safeschoolsnow.org