

“Find teachable moments without taking the fun out of family movie viewing...”

— Rae Stabosz

HOW TO WATCH



MOVIES

with

KIDS



A Values-Based Strategy

Hosea M. Rupprecht, FSP

HOW TO WATCH MOVIES WITH KIDS

A Values-Based Strategy

Hosea M. Rupprecht, FSP



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*To Sr. Marie Paul Curley, FSP,
for your encouragement and support.*

*To my mentor and colleague,
Sr. Rose Pacatte, FSP, in gratitude.*

*And to my sister, Jacinta,
fellow movie lover and confidante.*

Love you, sis.

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awesome!



Hmmm...

Please,
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Rent it now!

the Mummy
Returns
again!



OR it's
REALLY
GROSS!

Rated R

Introduction

“C’mon, Mom, everyone’s seeing it,” your child says to you. The latest movie is out in the theater, and though other parents are taking their kids, you’re not quite sure if you should take yours. The kids have seen the billboards along the road, the advertisements on TV, and know the characters from the toys in their last fast-food meal. They have heard other kids talking about the movie—and so, says your little one, why can’t I go see it?

What do you do? What is your strategy when it comes to your children and their media consumption?

Catholic parents (or anyone raising kids these days) have their jobs cut out for them when it comes to media. The church calls media “gifts of God,” but the messages presented by the media do not always agree with our core values of love of God and love of neighbor. As a parent, you not only want to pass on to your children good values but also the faith and morals that you believe in. Sometimes the media can help, other times it presents a challenge.

I was nine years old the first time I ventured into a movie theater. The film was *Star Wars* (which we now call *Star Wars Episode IV: A*

New Hope). I watched it over and over on video during many hours of babysitting in the years that followed. Thus began my friendship with movies and the stories they tell. It is a relationship that has endured to this day, but it had a rocky start. I didn't often have the opportunity to see the films I wanted to see, those that other kids I knew were seeing. Instead, my film fare was old westerns, swashbucklers (*The Adventures of Robin Hood* with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland being my favorite), and Humphrey Bogart. Eventually, the desire to see movies that were made in the decade in which I lived grew too strong and I took matters into my own hands.

I began watching movies at the homes of my friends. That's where I saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. I definitely felt guilty, but I was not penitent. I enjoyed the experience of watching movies with my peers, being able to relate to my friends outside of school, and to talk about what we liked and didn't like about the movies. I enjoyed the movies themselves—the humor, relationships, and details of the stories. I now had some movies in common with my friends, and I wasn't the weird kid anymore. I'm not saying sneaking away to see movies was the right thing to do, but since I didn't understand why I couldn't see certain movies, at the time it seemed like my best option.

The media strategy I grew up on was *you're not allowed*. No explanation, no motivation to help me understand why I wasn't allowed. I just wasn't.

Times and parenting methods have changed since the 1970s. The “just say no” strategy is no longer encouraged for twenty-first-century kids. Kids today want to know why their parents make the decisions they do, especially if they have potentially embarrassing consequences for them in relation to their peers. There was a lot of media around when I was growing up, but kids today are born into a world saturated with media. Entertainment through TV, movies, MP3 players, the Internet, and gaming have, to some degree, taken the place of playing

catch, jump rope, and hide and seek. Because media is so prevalent, it is important for children to develop the critical thinking and communication skills they need in order to navigate this media world and grow into discerning media users. In this book, I offer a strategy for Catholic parents (or anyone who is raising children) that can help them communicate with their children about information and entertainment media from an early age.

Why Movies? They're Stories!

We all like to hear stories. When the Campfire Girls troop I belonged to as a child went on weekend campouts, we would sit around the campfire at night and tell spooky stories trying to scare one another! The kids I babysat as a teenager liked to have the same story read to them over and over again. Stories have the ability to draw us into the experiences of the characters as if they were our own. We feel with them because they say something to us of what it means to be human (even if the characters themselves are not human).

When Jesus spoke to the people of his day, he told stories and gave them endings that his audience did not expect. They held a bit of a shock value and made people think about what the story could mean for them. With these stories he not only held people spell-bound but was able to impart his teaching in an entertaining way. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37)? In answer to a question from a lawyer, Jesus begins teaching about loving one's neighbor. But the lawyer, probably feeling a bit uncomfortable with the answer, wants to make sure he understands correctly. He asks for clarification.

Jesus expands by telling a story. A traveler gets beaten up on the road and left for dead. A couple of people, whom you think would

show compassion, instead pass him by. The least expected helper, the foreigner, the outcast, is the one who does what is right. By putting the teaching in the context of a story with good guys, bad guys, plot, a bit of action, and an unexpected twist, Jesus got his point across and challenged the lawyer to “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37).

Movies can be modern-day parables. They all have some point of view or way of looking at the world that undergirds the story. It might take a little digging (and sometimes a second viewing) to understand what viewpoint a movie is trying to get across. To complicate matters, you may find that your opinion about the movie differs from those of others. A movie might present a story that has values you as a believer can embrace, such as compassion or redemption. It could also present values inconsistent with yours, such as revenge or violence. Just to keep things interesting, most movies will have elements of both.

That being said, how do you make sense of the messages presented in a movie? How do you help your children make sense of it all? Where to begin? I hope that the following chapters will give you ideas on how to sharpen your own skills when it comes to critical thinking about movies and give you suggestions on how to introduce critical thinking to your little ones. Very young children don’t yet have the ability to analyze the subtleties of movie messages. They can, however, ask questions and answer the ones you ask them. You are the one who, by modeling it yourself, can provide for your child the tools they will need to ask meaningful questions about the movies they experience. As they grow older, the questions being asked of the movies can turn into many conversations and teachable moments about all kinds of things: values, what’s right and wrong, and who we are as human persons and children of God. By laying a foundation where conversation as a family is encouraged, you will teach your children that they can talk to you, not only about movies, but about anything and everything—whatever is going on in their lives.

Why Build a Media Strategy?

“Watch movies with my kids and talk about them. That doesn’t sound too hard. Why do I need a strategy?”

Well, why not? As parents, you probably have strategies or plans for who gets up when the baby cries at night, how to potty train the toddler, how to make sure the kids get good nutrition, saving up for their college funds, and making sure they know how much they are loved by you and by God. You may have even received advice from your own parents, other family members, pediatricians, or parenting books about how to go about these tasks. Why not about the media? Among the many influences in your children’s lives, like you and God, media will claim its place. A strategy for teaching your children to ask questions of the media in light of their faith and its values will help you help them grow into people who use their faith and values as a basis for making good media choices.

What to Expect

This book has your needs and expectations in mind as you raise children in a world quite different from your own childhood experience. Your kids are learning right from wrong, being introduced to values and morals first by observation (especially watching you!) and, when they start school, learning from their teachers and peers. It is during the formative years that they take the first steps to developing moral awareness and letting it guide their actions. Whether your kids are older or younger, developing and growing in the ability to communicate values and question media is appropriate.

The chapters in this book are meant to build one on top of another. If you would like a peek at what the end-result of the book will be—a family media strategy—skip ahead to Chapter Five and glance at the questions that make up the strategy. However, these will make

a lot more sense when read along with what comes before. Chapter One introduces you to the media age and the joys and challenges of raising kids in this media-saturated culture. Chapter Two focuses on values: what they are, why they're important, and how they can be a great starting point for introducing children to the art of questioning the media. Chapter Three opens up the world of movie making. Plot, character, and film techniques will help you understand better what goes into a movie story. Chapter Four will take you to the next step of making meaning from movies. Discover the difference between content and context. Learn what kind of questions can be asked of the movie. Knowing what genre a movie belongs to, for example, gives you clues into how it will make meaning. Chapter Six suggests some media-related fun activities for the whole family. Finally, Chapter Seven will provide you with some resources to aid in carrying out your strategy, such as film guides, a list of themes and movies, and helpful Web sites and books. One thing to remember: although this book will focus on the medium of film, what is said about movies also applies to other kinds of media, such as print media, television, Internet, and gaming (to name just a few).

Saints to Guide Us

What a gift we Catholics have in the saints! These people who have lived virtuous and faithful lives, sometimes amid great difficulty and suffering, give us an example of how to live Christ-like lives in our own day and age. The saints can be guides for us in our life journeys, not only through their example, but through prayer and the support that the communion of saints affords us who still await our seat at the heavenly banquet.

Stories about the lives of the saints were abundant in the home of my childhood. I read a lot of them in book form and others I saw on film, *The Song of Bernadette* being the one I remember best. Because

saints are such an integral part of our Catholic tradition, each of the first five chapters of the book will end with the story of a saint or blessed of the Church. This person can be a guide as you explore the information presented in the chapter and work to build your family's media strategy.

There's a song by the Christian group Phillips, Craig & Dean called *I Want to Be Just Like You*.¹ The lyrics of the chorus are: "Lord, I want to be just like you, 'cause he wants to be just like me. I want to be a holy example for his innocent eyes to see. Help me be a living Bible, Lord, that my little boy can read. I want to be just like you 'cause he wants to be like me." So is expressed a father's desire to be a good example to his child. As a Catholic parent, your desire is the same. May our Lord, his blessed Mother, and the saints be with you on this journey.

1. Copyright © 1994 Dawn Treader Music (SESAC) (adm. at EMICMGPublishing.com) / Praise Song Press (ASCAP). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Chapter One

Raising Children in a Media Age

Total Access Pass

Think back to when you were a kid. How much access to media did you have? Radio? Television? Movies? Video games? When I was growing up, the video game console and home computers were just beginning to make the circuit. I played Atari video games and was an expert at Space Invaders! Our home computer, a Commodore 64, making its debut in 1982, was a best-seller while it was around.

Now think about your kids' media access. What a difference, right? Kids today have almost instant access to media in so many forms right from the moment they enter the world. When your child was born, was there a family member capturing the moment on video or clicking away with a digital camera? If not in the delivery room, probably fairly soon afterward! The baby of a long-time family friend of mine was born prematurely and spent months in the hospital. During that time she kept everyone updated on her little boy's progress via a blog. People were able to leave comments offering prayers of support and hope. What a wonderful service media can provide!

Media is everywhere. You cannot get around it. Media messages come in many forms: song lyrics, magazine articles, information obtained via the Internet, TV shows, video games, movies, advertisements, instant messaging, and many others. Media is a force to be reckoned with, and as a Catholic parent in this media age, it is something you cannot ignore. Just by being born in this era, your child has a “total access pass” to the media that surrounds her. Once she gets to the age where experiencing media becomes an everyday occurrence, she will need your help to understand the messages she’s getting from the media world.

A while back there was a television advertisement for Windows operating system. In it a little girl named Kylie took a picture of her



fish with a digital camera, downloaded it to the computer, enhanced the photo, and emailed it to her parents. The tagline was, “I’m a PC and I’m four and a half.”

With this kind of access, kids need the guidance of parents not only in making sense out of the messages they receive, but also in balancing their time between media and other activities such as sports, playtime with friends, or school work. Media experiences are fun for kids, but limits set by you provide the balance they need. Developing your family strategy will help.

Communication

Communication is an essential parenting skill. If you communicate about anything and everything with your kids, they will be more likely to communicate with you about everything. Talking about the seemingly insignificant things in life will give them the practice and permission to talk about the really important aspects of life. Communicating about media is included. Being able to enter into

One media-related concern parents today have to deal with is the safety of their children on the Internet. The Church is very aware of the need to protect children, especially after the sufferings of the past decade regarding sexual abuse of children by clergy and others in positions of trust. The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. is dedicated to doing everything possible to help keep children safe. To this end they have instituted Virtus programs, designed to educate people about detecting the signs of abuse and best practice standards for preventing or responding to possible abuse. Many topics are covered in the programs and information available on their Web site: www.virtus.org, including Internet safety for kids. Many parishes now require Virtus training for volunteers or ministers working with children in any way. You may be interested in checking it out.

conversation about media experiences with kids lets them know it's okay to talk about them. You send the message that you want to be open with them about your thoughts and, more importantly, that you want to know *their* thoughts about the media they experience.

When I was manager of one of our Pauline Books & Media Centers, Tess, an employee, would tell me what was going on with her daughter, Kate. I knew Kate personally from the volunteer work she did at the bookstore. I was always impressed at her level of maturity for her age. I remember once telling Tess, "You are doing such a wonderful job with Kate. What's your secret?" She answered, "I don't treat her like a kid, and we talk about everything; we always have."

Communicating about media can be a challenge for parents of older children because they don't want to be interrupted during their favorite TV show or film. But if you start when they're young, communication becomes natural. There was an interesting study done in 2005 in this regard.¹ The researchers studied parental interaction with preschoolers as they watched TV together. A program was broadcast with a "Mommy Bar," a line of scrolling text at the bottom that had information for the parent such as recipes, jokes, etc. The researchers wondered if an educationally enhanced Mommy Bar would increase parent-child interaction. The text at the bottom was changed to give parents suggested ways to comment on the program for the child, such as "Does your room ever get messy?," "Why is she sad?," or "Was that a good thing to do?" They found that the educationally enhanced bar significantly increased parent-child interaction. Parents were better able to help kids connect what was on the screen to their lives.

Think about it this way. You are reading a storybook to your child. Do you just read the words on the page? You explore the story with

1. Anna Akerman, Shalom M. Fisch, et al., "Coviewing Preschool Television in the US: Eliciting Parent-Child Interaction Via On Screen Prompts," *Journal of Children and Media* 2, no. 2 (July 2008): 163–173.

her. You label things: “Look at the clouds.” You ask questions: “What color is that ball?” You connect with life: “They’re eating ice cream. You like ice cream. What’s your favorite flavor?” You can do the exact same thing when experiencing media with your children. If they learn the skills needed at an early age, they will begin communicating with the media of their own accord as they grow older.

Passing on Values and Beliefs

The Catholic Church has always taught that parents are the primary educators of their children. When a child is baptized, the parents are reminded of their obligation to pass the faith on to the child. This is not seen as a burdensome task, but rather as a privilege. The little one you hold in your arms at his Baptism will need to learn about how much he is loved by God, how to follow the life God wishes for him, and how to live the human and Gospel values demonstrated by Jesus. But how?

I learned the basics of the faith from a question and answer catechism. It asked questions, and I memorized the answers. I was drilled to make sure I had the answers right. Having a pretty good memory, that wasn’t too hard for me. I could list off the seven sacraments, recite my Acts of Faith, Hope, and Love, and Act of Contrition by heart, and knew the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy, plus everything else that marked me as a practicing Catholic. I was a good kid, being taught what was right from wrong. I was rewarded when I did things right and punished when I did things wrong. Living the faith was black and white. Either I knew the answers or I didn’t.

It was not until much later in life, after I entered the convent, that I began to realize that just knowing the answers was not good enough. The faith is not question and answer but a relationship with the God of love. I learned that things are not always black and white, but that living the faith sometimes involves conversations with other

people, learning from what another thinks. Lived faith needs a firmer foundation than just questions and answers.

When you think and pray about how to best pass the faith on to your children, please take this into consideration. Yes, it is important to memorize the prayers, the sacraments, and the responses for Sunday Eucharist. But it is even more important to be for your children a living example of what a vibrant relationship with God looks like. It is easy to understand the “what” of the Catholic faith. It is harder to understand the “why.” Knowing why we believe what we believe and do what we do, and the One who enables us to do it, is key to then being able to teach another to “go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37).

Developing Lasting Relationships

At this point, maybe you have a question in your mind. “What is the underlying purpose of all this talk regarding communicating about the media?” The goal is to develop lasting relationships with your children. Communication with children when they are young can help to develop a pattern that could result in lasting relationships. My friend, Tess, and her daughter have this kind of relationship, built over years of communicating with one another. Kate is now going to college, and she still talks to her mother about all that is going on in her life.

“Control is for the moment. Communication lasts a lifetime.” This phrase was coined by my colleague, Sr. Rose Pacatte. Think of it this way: *how* you teach is *what* you teach. The attitude with which you go about teaching your children about faith, life, and values will be the attitude they will pick up. Communication is one of those abilities that will turn into a life skill if they learn it from you. When children are very young there is definitely a place for control. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages exposure to screen media for

children under the age of two.² But even then that doesn't mean there is no communication. The same AAP report also encourages families to view and discuss television programs together.

I've watched a fair share of ABC's *Supernanny* on TV. I think what first drew me to the show was just how horribly undisciplined some of the kids were. Some of the things that I saw on the show would never have happened in the home of my childhood! I felt bad for the parents. Some of them just needed some help gaining perspective or learning new skills. After watching the program for a while, I realized that Supernanny (Jo Frost) has a consistent technique for "time outs." She calls it the "naughty step technique."³ When the child misbehaves, she first gets a warning that her behavior is unacceptable, and, if she repeats the behavior, she will be put on the naughty step (or chair, or corner). The parent's voice should be calm, not angry, and have a low, authoritative tone. When she misbehaves again, she gets put on the step immediately. The parent explains *why* she is there and how long she must stay (one minute for each year of age). If the child tries to get away, return her with gentle but firm movements and keep on doing this as long as it takes. Once she has done her time, the parent crouches down to her level and explains again, in a low, authoritative voice *why* she was put there and then asks for an apology. Once she apologizes, she's smothered with hugs, kisses, and affirmations from the parent.

I found this methodology a refreshing example of the power of positive communication. When a parent says no to something, be it a snack before dinner, a TV show, or a movie, it is paramount that the motivation be explained. This communicates to your children the

2. American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Public Education, "Children, Adolescents, and Television," *Pediatrics* 107 (2001): 424. This can be found online at: www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/107/2/423.

3. Supernanny Team, "The Naughty Step Technique," October 26, 2006, www.supernanny.com/Advice/-/supernanny-techniques/-/Discipline-and-reward/The-naughty-step-technique.aspx.