

Jolt Junkies

By Dr. David Walsh

Reprinted with permission from the May, 2001 issue of The Lutheran Witness

“There’s never anything to do around here.”

“I can’t stand school. It’s totally boring.”

How many of us parents have grown accustomed to a constant litany of complaints like these? How many of us feel like we have to be a full-time entertainment bureau to keep our kids engaged? How many teachers feel like they have to stand on their heads to keep their students’ attention?

Have kids always been so easily bored? Have there always been so many antsy kids who can’t sit still in a classroom? George Noble, an elementary school teacher for more than 33 years, has no doubts about the answers to these kinds of questions.

“Kids have always been full of energy,” says Noble, “but there is no question that this generation of kids is really different. They are much more hyper and aggressive than kids in my class just 15 years ago.” There are probably a number of reasons for this change, but there is no doubt that one of the major causes is the impact of mass media, especially television, on kids. To understand how this has happened we need to remember some things about television.

First, television occupies a central role in the lives of American children. They spend more time watching television than any other activity of their lives, except sleeping. The average American child watches three to four hours of television each day. The TV is turned on for an average of seven hours every day in the average family.

Second, we need to remember that the primary goal of television is to “deliver eyeballs to advertisers.” Television is a business. It is paid for by advertisers who have products and services to sell. The more people watch certain programs, the more money the television companies can charge for commercial time. What that means is that the primary goal of a program is to get and hold our attention long enough for the advertisers to get their message in front of us. Entertainment and information are secondary goals.

Surfing for jolts

Getting people’s attention is no easy task. The best way to do it is to “jolt” you. If I can jolt you, you’ll pay attention. I like to talk about it as the “J.P.S. factor.” J.P.S. stands for jolts per show. The higher the “J.P.S. factor,” the more likely you are to pay attention.

The problem is that the “J.P.S. factor” has to keep being raised. Why? There are three reasons. The first is the process called desensitization. Whenever we human beings are exposed to a certain level of stimulation, we get used to it. In order to get the same reaction, the “J.P.S. factor” needs to increase.

The second reason is the increased competition for eyeballs. Cable subscribers receive scores of channels, and families with Direct Broadcast Satellite have access to hundreds.

The third reason for the rising “J.P.S.” factor is the remote control. As soon as the jolts stop, all I need to do is press my thumb to go “surfing” for more jolts.

No group is as adept at manipulating the remote as kids. It’s unnerving to watch TV with kids when they control the remote. You never know what channel you are watching because they are switching around so much.

When asked why they keep changing channels, the usual response is, “It was boring.” That’s another way of saying, “The jolts have slowed down.”

Every moment of television entertainment has to be arousing. As a result, programming is increasingly fast-paced. As children watch more and more TV, the machine-gun pace becomes essential to keep them involved. This explains why shows aimed at youth are often so frenetic. Many adults cannot watch MTV, for example, because it produces a sensory overload. They complain that it’s too loud, too fast, too chaotic, too sexual. This might be true for adults, but not for a generation of kids who are being raised on it.

Imagine children who spend hours and hours watching TV and the effects of this sensory barrage on their developing minds. What happens when these kids get to school? They are often bored because they have a human being for a teacher whose letters do not dance on the blackboard and whose teaching points are not accompanied by catchy jingles. It’s not surprising that they’re bored because their usual diet consists of multi-million dollar productions.

What’s a parent to do?

Is it just inevitable that our children will fidget more and more and have constantly shrinking attention spans? I think the answer is in managing our children’s media diet. Parents of young ones would do well to avoid programs that are extremely fast-paced. There are alternatives. “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood,” for example, has been a slow-paced favorite of kids for years.

The other ingredient in media management is, of course, limiting the amount. The average American child watches too much television. Period. Toddlers should be on a very limited diet, and the older ones shouldn’t be averaging more than seven to 10 hours a week. That’s about a third of what the averages currently are. The time freed

up from the tube should be used for other important activities like listening to stories, drawing, imaginative play and even helping around the house.

I had a conversation recently with a wise parent about this topic. She told me that she always limited the amount of TV her children watched. She also shared some of her tricks with me. Whenever her children would complain of being bored, she had a response ready, "If you don't have anything to do, then I can give you something." She would then reach for the "job jar."

"It's amazing," she told me. "After a while, they would always find something else to do."

Maybe that's a way to break the "jolt junkie" syndrome.

THE DARKER SIDE OF VIDEO GAMES

I maneuver the game's character into a strip club. After enticing the person to remove her clothes, I have my game "alter ego" brutally murder her. This allows me to go to the next level.

Is this scene out of some twisted nightmare? No, this is an actual scene from a very popular video game called "Duke Nukem."

If you are a parent, you're probably surprised and shocked. If you are a kid in junior high school, you're not. The odds are that you or a friend have played the game many times.

These video and computer games are very popular with kids, especially among children ages 8-12. Kids who play do so an average of seven hours a week—equivalent of more than a full day of school each week.

Most parents do not know much about the games or their contents. Video and computer games are foreign territory for most people over 30.

The majority of games developed with this technology are entertaining and appropriate for children. About 20 percent of the electronic game market, however, features violence as a theme. Violence has evolved as a theme from early shooting games to the goriest violence seen today.

Concern about these ultraviolent murder simulations led U.S. Senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl to press the game industry to develop a voluntary rating code. The industry did, and, as a result, virtually all games today carry the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) icons.

Two problems remain, however. The first is that the public remains largely uninformed about the ratings. The second is that only 20 percent of the stores have any enforcement policy. A kid with money can buy any of the violent games.

There is evidence that at least some of the producers market these games to kids in spite of “mature” ratings. For example, the infamous “Duke Nukem” has action figures sold in leading toy stores.

Also, the advertising messages of some games rated for children promote the message that “murder is fun.” An ad for “Point Blank,” a game rated for teens, reads “More fun than shooting your neighbor’s cat.”

Some video game producers have responded to all this by saying, “So what? There is no evidence that these games do any harm.” It is true that the research is only beginning to give us a picture of what these effects might be.

An article by Lt. Col. David Grossman in *Christianity Today* (Aug. 10, 1998) is particularly insightful. Grossman spent more than 25 years learning how to enable soldiers to kill. Because killing does not come naturally, psychological conditioning techniques were systematically applied to eliminate that resistance.

Grossman explained that the techniques used by the army are the very same as those used in today’s violent video games. “Children don’t naturally kill; they learn it from violence in the home and, most pervasively, from violence as entertainment in television, movies and interactive video games.”

We parents may not have the ability or interest to play video games, but we better start paying attention to them because our kids are!
—D.W.

Dr. David Walsh is president and founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family, and a leading authority on the impact of media on children and families.