CO-VIEWING WITH YOUR KIDS

One of the most important things you can do to raise media-savvy kids is what's called shared media engagement. That includes listening to their music, watching TV, movies and videos together, getting to know their favourite apps and playing the games they enjoy. It also includes talking to them about their media lives: what they like, what they're excited about or looking forward to, and what worries or annoys them. While just being with them is an important step, this is also a great opportunity to help your kids think critically about the media they consume, by asking them questions about it and, sometimes, answering back.

THINKING CRITICALLY

There are ten key ideas that help kids think critically about media. You can start to make your kids aware of these concepts almost as soon as they start asking you questions!

Media are made by people

It's not obvious to kids that somebody made the media products they enjoy, and even older kids and teens may forget that every element of any media product is the result of somebody's decision.

It can be an eye-opener for children to realize that all media are written and created by people with their own biases and experiences, as well as the media the creators themselves have seen. Understanding that media are not "windows on reality" but instead the result of creators' choices has a big effect on media's impact on kids. When you co-view with your children, point out the people who were involved in making it. How did their choices — about what was included, what was left out, and how things were presented — affect its impact on us?

For example: you can show them how families on TV or in books do – and don't – resemble your family or their friends' families.

Media are made to make money

Almost all media are made so that the creators can make money from them, and most cost money to make too. Many of the decisions they make are influenced by wanting to create a product that will make them money and by the costs of making media. Because of that, it's important for kids to understand *how* different media make money—especially with things like social media where you're not paying for it directly.

For example: ask kids whether they think their favourite YouTuber, streamer or influencer was paid to promote a particular game, toy or other product: "Do you think she was paid to unbox that? If not, do you think the company gave it to her for free? Would that change what you think about it?"

Media shape our beliefs and values

We get a lot of our ideas about what the world is like, about what's right and wrong, and even about who we are from media. Media don't actually tell us what to think, but they have a big impact on what we think *about*: these messages come from who the main characters are or who is quoted in a news story who and what are shown as being important, and what things characters do that are rewarded or punished.

That's why even the most "meaningless" media like cartoons, social media posts or video games can still have a big effect on us.

For example: talk about the characters in your kids' favourite shows or games, or their favourite streamers, influencers or YouTubers. Do they see certain types of people (different races, genders, body shapes, abilities, etc.) more or less often? Are different things often associated with different types of people? (Do unboxing videos feature different things depending on the presenter's gender? Do influencers try to fit into a particular body shape?)

People can react differently to the same media work

Though all media have meaning, part of that meaning is determined by each viewer, player or listener. That's because we all bring our own experiences to media: we may get a different meaning from something depending on how alike or unlike we are to the main character, or if what we're watching reflects values that are different from those of our family or our culture. Understanding this is a key step in helping kids to see things from other people's points of view. Things that don't scare one person might be scary for another, too, so tell your kids to come straight to you if anything in media ever upsets them.

For example: ask your kids you can show your kids an ad for a product that's aimed at a very different audience and ask whether it makes the product look appealing to them, and then have them imagine how it might appeal to the audience it's aimed at. How different do the boxes for cereals aimed at kids and cereals aimed at adults look?

The medium a story is told in affects its meaning

Each medium has its own way of telling a story or giving you information, and each one has different strengths and limitations and different ways of getting and directing your attention. Media makers learn the "language" of their medium, and we media *consumers* have to learn them too. A lot of media products also fall into genres (sitcoms, action movies, unboxing videos, and so on) that have their own rules and expectations.

For example: read a book to or with your kids and then watch a cartoon or movie that was adapted from it. How was it changed? Why did those changes have to be made to adapt it to a different medium? How did that change how you felt about the story?

Digital media are easy to make and share

Digital media, like social media or video sites, are different from media like TV or movies. They cost less money to make and to share with an audience. They also let consumers send messages back to media makers and connect with each other. That means that many more people can now make and share media— including our kids!—but it also means that we have to be more careful to watch out for things that are misleading, inappropriate or offensive.

For example: talk to your kids about ways that they can avoid seeing things they don't want to see online. (Most kids are much more interested in blocking inappropriate content than finding it.) You can also explore our Break the Fake tips (https://mediasmarts. ca/break-fake) to help them know whether an online source of information is worth their time and attention.

Digital media can last a long time and may be seen by people you hadn't thought of

Because it's so easy to share digital media, you can never know how many copies of something are out there. Different digital tools make it easier or harder to share or copy than others, but there's always there's always a chance that something you post might be seen by people you hadn't thought of—even a long time in the future.

For example: get in the habit of asking your kids before you post photos or videos of them. Tell them what steps you'll take to limit who can see them. Once they start posting things, help them think what things about themselves they feel okay making public, what things they should keep private, and ways of protecting their privacy.

Digital tools shape how we use them

How we use digital tools is shaped by their *affordances* (the things we *can* do with them) and by their *defaults* (the *obvious* or *expected* ways we can use them.) Sometimes these are obvious, like what you can and can't do in a video game, but more often we don't realize how they are shaping what we do or that we can change the defaults. For example, most apps send you notifications by default, but you can turn those off in the Settings of your (and your child's) devices.

For example: have your kids think about which media activities they feel better after doing, and which make them feel worse. Every child is different: some might be affected by just a small amount of something, while for others it might take a large amount and some

might not be affected at all. We can help them reflect on which media activities are good or bad for them and in what amounts.

Digital experiences have a real impact

Digital tools let all of us—even kids—send messages and make media. Some use this power to hurt people, by cyberbullying or sharing embarrassing photos or videos of others, but we can also use it to help others and shape the values of our online and offline communities. Kids have just as much power as anyone else to make things better online and can use digital tools to make a difference in ways they otherwise couldn't offline.

For example: ask kids how their favourite influencers or YouTubers have made a difference online (or offline). Talk about what things are seen as normal, or are rewarded, in their online spaces. Do they agree with them? If not, what can *they* do to change them?

TOP TIPS

Here are a few key things to remember when it comes to encouraging digital media literacy in your kids:

Curate your kids' media diet

It's easier than ever for parents to find good media content.

Make child accounts on streaming services like Netflix or YouTube and subscribe to good quality channels like Sesame Street or CBC Kids on YouTube. Some sites also let you make playlists of videos for your kids to watch.

- For younger kids, choose apps or activities that you and your kids can use together, or that let your kids use their imaginations or make meaningful choices. With older kids, encourage online activities that are creative, that are educational, that encourage physical activity or that involve actually interacting with other people, and help them learn to curate their own media feeds.

- Having clear household rules about where, when and how to use media is helpful for kids of all ages.

- When you see or hear about *positive* examples in media—reliable sources of information, authentic portrayals of diversity, or pro-social behaviour on social networks—make sure to point it out.

Respect their media choices.

While you have a right to decide what media products you'll allow in your home, your kids may develop very different tastes in media than yours. Resist the urge to try to show them what's "wrong" about their media choices, even if some of the content makes you uncomfortable. Instead, give them the tools to ask their own questions and reach their own conclusions. It's important to teach kids from early on that critiquing a part of something doesn't mean you don't like it, and that critiquing a work doesn't mean that you are criticizing anyone who likes it. When you're asking your kids questions, stick to open ones that can't be answered with just "yes" or "no," like "How do you feel about…" or ""What do you like about…"

Don't just critique your kids' media choices: look for things you like in them! Michelle Cove, founder of MEDIAGIRLS, says we should ask kids "who they

follow that they think is a good role model and why. Mention someone you really like in terms of how they post. Share with them a meme that made you laugh; ask who cracks them up or inspires them… By sometimes showcasing the positive, we can get them to think more about what they're contributing to the world."

Look for teachable moments

Co-viewing also involves checking in on what your kids are doing when you bring them a snack, doing some research on the things they like so you can spot anything that you want to talk to them about, and having an ongoing conversation with them about their media lives.

A walk down the street, a trip to the grocery store, and a visit to the library can all be opportunities to explore digital media literacy: if you (or your child) notices their favourite cartoon character on a cereal box, you can explain how marketers chose that image to catch kids' attention.

When you're watching or playing with kids, don't be afraid to use the Pause button so you can talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. To keep them from getting defensive, you can focus on questions: Do you think that's a healthy way to act towards a girlfriend or boyfriend? Are the girls you know in real life like the ones in that show? How might an Indigenous person feel about how they're portrayed in a movie like *Peter Pan*? (The warnings about stereotyped content on some Disney Plus shows can be a teachable moment for talking about this – though you can also ask your kids why some movies

with less overt but still problematic representations, like *Pocahontas*, don't carry the warning.)

Have your kids show you what they like about their favourite app, then go through the settings together. Do they know how to use privacy settings, or report harassment, on their favourite apps or websites. How easy is it to do? How easy is it to find those tools?

Encourage them to make media

Today it's easier than ever for kids to create short movies, music videos and even to add their critical commentary to the latest ad or viral video. There's no substitute for hands-on experience to help kids understand how things like editing and music can influence the way a movie or TV show affects us emotionally. If kids are interested in sharing what they've made, talk to them about how they can protect their privacy (for instance, by not showing their faces) and steer them to platforms like Scratch that don't have advertising or collect personal information. Creating media—whether it's a stop-motion animation, a family social network account, or a home cooking video—can be a great activity to do together, too.

TO LEARN MORE...

To delve more deeply into media literacy, check out the Digital Media Literacy Fundamentals section on our website: https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals

For more specific information on how to talk to your kids about some of the media literacy topics raised here, check out our parent tip sheets on topics like advertising, managing privacy, communicating safely online, cyberbullying, stereotyping and online hate: tiny.cc/tipsheets