



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Talking to Youth About Television

TV can send powerful messages to children, so it's important to teach them to think critically about what they see on TV.

Help them understand that TV is only a construction of reality

- Explain how everything they see on TV (even news and documentary programming) is a reality that has been created by producers, directors, cinematographers, actors, editors, advertisers and others—and they bring to it their own points of view, biases and commercial interests.
- Ask your kids what points of view are most often seen on TV (i.e. middle class, male, western society, etc.)? Whose views are not being heard and what cultures and lifestyles are not being shown? Why? Explain how, through these omissions, television can teach that some people and ideas are more important than others.

See the [Diversity and Media Toolbox](#) for more information.

Talk about whether TV characters look and act like real people

- Do people on TV look like people in real life? What are the differences?
- How do they feel about the lives they see portrayed on television? Do they envy some aspects of the lives of people on TV? Are they content with their own lives?
- Do they want to look like the people they see on TV? Is this realistic?
- Do kids on TV act like kids do in real life? Should they?
- With young children, talk about "make-believe" and the difference between real life and TV.

Talk with children about violence on TV

- Talk about the different types of violence they see on TV: emotional (yelling, put-downs, name-calling) and physical (threatening, bullying, hitting, shooting, stabbing).
- Explain that we can be hurt emotionally, just as we can be hurt physically. Yelling, put-downs, name-calling and threats are what kids are most likely to experience in the schoolyard. Emotionally violent acts can begin a cycle that leads to physical violence.
- Talk about the violence they see on the shows they like. Why is the violence there? Does it contribute to the plot of the show? Do they find it exciting? Scary? Why?



- How do people on TV handle conflict? Is it appropriate? Are there better ways to handle conflict in real life?
- What are the real consequences of violence, and why are they not always shown on TV?
- How do kids feel about the portrayal of violent events in the news?

See the [Violence](#) section for more information.

Explain what stereotypes are and talk about them

- Talk about stereotypical portrayals of children and teens on television. Seeing inaccurate portraits of themselves will help them to understand the concept of stereotyping.
- Provide some examples of stereotypical roles given to men, women, children, ethnic minorities, the elderly, the disabled and others. Ask your kids to look for these stereotypes in the TV shows they watch.
- Discuss the negative impact of stereotyping by examining the differences between their perceptions of real people, and stereotypes shown on television. For example, negative portrayals of young people affect not only how adults see teenagers, but also how teenagers see themselves.

See the [Diversity and Media Toolbox](#) for more information.

Help kids understand that commercial TV is a business—and its job is to sell viewers to advertisers

- Talk about the television business: producers sell programs to networks, networks sell time to advertisers, and advertisers sell products to viewers.
- Explain that information about which audiences will likely watch which programs is sold to advertisers, who then tailor their ads to appeal to those specific viewers.
- Ask kids if they believe everything the ads say. Can the product actually do what the ad promises? What are some of the tricks used in commercials to sell products?
- Talk about the kinds of commercials aired during the shows they like to watch. Point out that many of them are for fast food, candy and pre-sweetened cereals.
- Watch for commercials with adult content that air when kids will be watching, as well as ads for teen-rated movies (and tie-in merchandise) during shows aimed at young children. Are marketers deliberately targeting kids with these ads? If so, why?
- Explain that when a product appears in a TV show, it's not accidental. This is called "product placement" and it is an increasingly popular revenue-generating device for television producers. Look for examples of product placement in the programs your kids watch.

