Remote Control Childhood:
Combating the Hazards of Media Culture in Schools

Diane LEVIN

Wheelock College in Boston, USA

Abstract

Background: Media culture touches most aspects of the lives of children growing up today, beginning at the earliest ages. It is profoundly the lessons children learn as well as how they learn, thereby contributing to what this article characterizes as *remote control childhood.* Educators need to understand remote control childhood so they can adapt teaching practices in ways that can optimize children's development and learning in these times.

Overview of Remote Control Childhood: This paper first explores remote control childhood and describes how it came about beginning in the mid 1980's when marketing was deregulated in the United States. This led to a link-up between media producers and marketers to create far-reaching new marketing strategies and thousands of ever-changing products that have forever transformed childhood.

*How Remote Control Childhood Affects Children***:** The multiple ways children are affected are divided into two broad categories. First, children learn harmful content from media culture such as sexualized and violent behavior and consumerism. Second, the very process by which children learn is transformed in ways that undermine play, problem solving, active learning and social development.

Strategies for Dealing with Remote Control Childhood: Once remote control childhood is understood, there is much educators can do to counteract it. Strategies are outlined for both influencing the lessons learned and helping children reclaim the learning process.

Key Words: children and TV, marketing to children, consumerism, play

遙控童年：學校抗衡傳媒不良的文化

Diane LEVIN

Wheelock College in Boston, USA

摘要

*背景：*兒童的成長天空（最早的學習期）與傳媒文化已建立密不可分的關連，兒童學習的內容及方式正是本文所關著的［遙控童年］。教育工作者需要明白遙控童年，以便能採納適合的教學法去讓孩子得到良好的發展和學習。

*遙控童年概述：*本文闡述遙控童年及其由來。自1980年中期，美國市場解除控制，讓媒體製造商與營銷商創造了遠程營銷策略，他們合力製成日新月異的新產品，為不斷改變的孩童期造成深遠的影響。

*遙控童年如何影響兒童發展：*媒體多渠道影響的方式可分為兩大類：第一，兒童由媒體學到有害資訊：例如性、暴力行為及消費主義等；其次，所得到的資訊也削弱了孩童的玩樂心情、解難能力、主動學習及社交活動等。

*破解遙控童年的策略：*當明白遙控童年後，教育工作者有很多方法去抗衡。策略就是針對媒體對孩童學習內容造成的影響，及協助他們修繕學習過程。

關鍵字：兒童與電視、市場到兒童消費主義、遊戲

[A PERSONAL NOTE TO READERS: Much of what I say in this article has been confirmed by teachers with whom I have worked in such other countries as Australia, Ireland and Northern Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and South Korea. However, the ideas voiced here are based primarily on the work I have done with children, families and schools in the United States. As you read, please consider how what I am saying does and does not apply to your work with children in Hong Kong and other Asian countries, and adapt it accordingly. I would very much appreciate hearing from you about how you use and adapt the ideas in this article to your situations in Hong Kong. dlevin@wheelock.edu. Thank you].

A 5-year-old is sitting at a table in the school cafeteria next to her teacher. She points to another table of girls a couple of years older and tells her teacher, "Those are the popular girls." Surprised, the teacher asks how she knows. The girl replies, "They have the right clothes. I saw it on the Disney Channel." And after a moment she volunteers, "My mom won't buy me those. They're too expensive."

A group of 6-and 7-year-old boys is sent to the principal's office. During school recess, they were caught chasing a few 5-year-old boys and tackling them to the ground. When told to stop, the older boys continued their behavior. The principal asks them why they are tackling the younger boys. The boys reply, "It's a game. We're the Power Rangers and they are the bad guys." When asked if the younger boys wanted to play the game, the older boys indignantly replied, "No, of course not. That's not what the Power Rangers do! If we told them they were the bad guys, they would just run away."

An 8-year-old boy starts having nightmares, waking up at night and not being able to go back to sleep. After much reluctance, he tells his parents that his 11-year-old cousin showed him pornography on the Internet when he visited him the previous week.

A teacher had a group meeting with 7-to-8 year old children after a school vacation week. When she asked them to share the favorite thing they did during their vacation, all 12 children gave a media example. For the boys it was video games, often violent ones. For the girls, it was mostly viewing the current female performers popular with "tween" girls. When she teacher asked the children what they would have done if they didn't have any screens to use, they blankly stared at her in seeming disbelief.

Defining friendship and popularity based on how you look and what you can buy, not based on whom you are and what you can do. Imitating aggressive behavior seen on violent TV shows in ways that actually hurt other children. Being confused and distressed seeing pornography on the Internet. Children for whom playing violent videogames is their favorite out-of-school activity. These stories illustrate some of the overt ways media is shaping today's children's behavior, interests, and understanding of sex and violence. They are examples of the kinds of stories I hear regularly from teachers about how the media in children's lives surfaces at school.

The environment in which children are growing up is saturated with a media culture - the screens such as television, movies, video and computer games, the Internet as well all the products that are linked to what children see on the screen. Media culture is a central part of the foundation children build for understanding the world, how it works, and how they fit into it. It affects how they behave and treat each other. It can shape *how* they learn and *what* they want to learn-and much more.

The better we are able to understand how the media culture is influencing children from the earliest ages-their development, learning, behavior, ideas about the world-the better equipped we will be to think about how to build on the positives and counteract the negatives of media culture in children's lives, and to shape appropriate educational and societal practices and policies.

The Roots of Remote Control Childhood

As a developmental psychologist and early childhood educator, I got involved studying media and children through a rather unlikely route. For many years I have taught a course on children's play. In the mid-1980s, teachers started telling me that children's war play was changing. They were concerned. They said that war play was becoming harder and harder to control, especially among boys. Despite bans, children were engaging in play guerrilla wars when adults turned their backs. Some boys actually seemed obsessed with violent play themes.

Was there an explanation for the changes adults were seeing? I decided to take a look and found that there had been sudden and dramatic changes in the childhood media and media culture that seemed to have gone almost unnoticed. In 1984, a couple years before I began hearing the above concerns, the United States government deregulated marketing to children, including how television could be used to market to children. Deregulation made it legal to market to children through TV programs for the first time. Very quickly this led to the licensing of thousands of media-linked products that permeate most aspects of children's lives - including the kinds of toys they want to play with, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, and much more (Levin, in process; Linn, 2005). Deregulation led to many highly successful television programs, many of which had violent themes: "Masters of the Universe," "GI Joe," "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," and the "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers." These were directed at boys whereas shows like "My Little Pony" and "Care Bears" were directed at girls. These "program-length commercials," where children learned that they could buy everything they saw on the show, sold billions of dollars worth of toys to children, and increasingly other products, such as clothing with logos, backpacks, and bed sheets (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2003). Since deregulation, a majority of the best-selling toys have been linked to the media, and the most popular programs sell billions of dollars of products a year. This kind of marketing has continued to escalate since the middle 1980's (for instance, see Federal Trade Commission, 2007).

Since deregulation, many parents and teachers have voiced an increasing array of concerns about how popular media culture is affecting their children. They describe negative aspects of media culture surfacing in children's play, language, social interactions, and gender roles. They report having increasing difficulty trying to limit the impact of the media and products marketed through the media on their children.

There is a growing body of research and anecdotal evidence that supports the validity of concerns about how practices resulting from deregulation have affected children (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995; Linn, 2003, Schor, 2005; Strasburger 2009). Among the concerns are changes in children's attitudes, interests and behavior that adults began to observe, such as girls' increasing concern with appearance and buying the "right" clothing (i.e., stylish, with designer labels and logos) and children's obsessions about getting the "right" toy linked to a TV show

and then quickly becoming bored once they had it. These changes helped explain to me the concerns I was hearing from teachers and, increasingly, parents, and led to the coining of the term, "remote control childhood" (RCC) (Levin, 1998). That is, more and more of children's attitudes, values and behavior is controlled by and tries to imitate what they see on the screen, instead of children actively creating their own behavior and ideas.

The concept of RCC has become central to my understanding of children growing up in the ever-expanding media age of today. It has led me to conclude that, as educators, we need to find ways to adapt our teaching practices to take into account how media culture has changed childhood. First, the *content* lessons children are learning from screens are very different than what they learn from hands-on, direct experience with real people and objects in the real world. Second, how children actually learn - the *process* of interacting in the world and learning new concepts and skills-may have actually become more remote controlled in the sense that they become programmed to imitate what they see rather then being active agents in control of their own learning (Levin, 1998). This article summarizes how understanding these two aspects of RCC - the content and the process issues-can help us combat the hazards today's media culture is creating for the learning, development and behavior of the children we teach.

Childhood Transformed

Children today are growing up in an environment saturated with ever-increasing numbers of screens and products that are linked to those screens. The kinds of screens and other media in children's lives range from watching TV, movies or DVDs, to more active and direct involvement playing with computers and video games, and using the Internet, cell phones and MP3 players-with children often multi-tasking with more than one screen at the same time. Media and media culture has transformed childhood, probably forever. Using screens often begins soon after birth for many children and plays a bigger and bigger role in their lives with age. In fact, a 2006 study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) on U.S. children's access to and use of media devices found that 29% of 2-3 year-olds had TV sets in their bedrooms and by age 4 the number went up to 43% (Rideout, et al., 2006). A more recent survey by KFF found that children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend on average 53 hours of "screen time" per week, up by more than an hour a day in the past 5 years (Rideout et al., 2010).

As children are glued to the screen, there are many things they used to do that they are doing less of now or no longer doing at all. For instance, many children are not playing outside or becoming involved with nature. They are becoming couch potatoes instead of being actively involved in physical activity. Many children eat meals, go to sleep at night, and wake up in the morning with screens blaring. They are engaging in second-hand experiences, often learning lessons created by others rather than having hands-on experiences with real objects that they are creating themselves and can directly influence. And as they get older children may begin interacting with others through texting and virtual communities online, they are not interacting in real, give-and-take situations with other people, family members or friends, where they get concrete and immediate feedback about the effects of their interactions on others.

Beyond the screens' impact on how children interact with the world and learn, are all the lessons children learn from the content they see on the screen

- about violence and bullying, sexualization and sex, materialism and body image. They often are exposed to ideas and learn lessons that would not have entered their minds before the media age and that adults do not want them to learn - for instance, about precocious sexuality, the glorification of violence use and an unhealthy focus on consuming. Many parents say they try hard to limit their children's exposure to content they find objectionable, but also voice concern about how easily they lose control of what their children see on and learn from screens. But whether adults like it or not, or are aware of it or not, children are learning all kinds of lessons from the media culture that neither parents nor teachers would choose to teach.

Taking a Closer Look at Remote Control Childhood

I believe media culture contributes to many of the concerns parents' and teachers' have with children growing up today. The concept of RCC has helped me organize many of these concerns, even though the interconnections of all the problems with each other may not always be obvious. RCC provides a powerful lens for understanding what is going on with children today as a result of media culture. Understanding the nature of the media in children's lives and how this media is affecting them is a necessary prerequisite for developing meaningful and effective ways to respond.

Content Issues: Media Culture Teaches Children Harmful Lesson

As I explained earlier, the media of today is teaching children lessons that are harmful to children, their families, schools, and the wider society. These lessons go against what we aim to teach children in school and make our jobs as educators harder.

Buy, buy and buy more: The onslaught of increasingly sophisticated marketing and media-linked products that followed after deregulation has become a major force in children's development and education. Because of how young children think, they are especially vulnerable to the exploitative messages used by marketers to sell them things. For instance, when young children see advertising or product-based programs, they focus on the most graphic, concrete aspects of what they see and do not put the product they see in a meaningful context (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2003; Linn, 2003).

Very quickly after deregulation, children got more and more obsessed with buying the things they saw on the screen. And no matter what they already have, there is always something new and more desirable to feel deprived about not having. This situation creates stress in homes and competition among children in school over who has the latest, most glorified, most coveted new item. Often happiness comes from getting the coveted item, not from using it. This buying frenzy can cause children to focus their energy more on "I want it," than many more important motivators, like "I can do it" (Levin, 2004).

Gender stereotypes: Beginning in the preschool years, children try to define their gender identity as a girl or a boy. One way they do this is by looking in the world around them to see what girls and boys do. Often because of how they think, they look for the most graphic examples of differences between boys and girls to figure out what is and is not appropriate for their gender. With deregulation, media producers and marketers use extreme gender divisions and stereotypes-violence for boys and sexualization and appearance for girls as a marketing tool to capture boys' and girls' attention and get them to want their

products. As children rely on these highly stereotyped media messages to define their gender, they develop narrow definitions for themselves, thereby limiting their opportunities to develop a full range of their human potential (Lamb & Brown, 2007: Lamb Brown & Tappan, 2009; Levin & Kilbourne, 2009).

Tough guys: Media culture teaches boys that violence is expected for them. Boys are supposed to be tough, ready to fight, and utterly self-reliant. They see over and over in TV programs, movies, videogames and media-linked toys that violence provides an acceptable, even desirable, way to solve problems and feel powerful. In this situation, instead of experiencing the *real* power that can come from having a meaningful impact in their environment and the people in it, boys instead often experience the *pseudo*-power that comes from the media violence they imitate. But, being a tough guy can cut off boys from the feelings of empathy for others that they need in order to have mutually empowering relationships. "Hurt-don't help" is a message that permeates this culture of masculinity (Katz, 2000).

The violence that boys see in the media is having a worrisome effect. Research has shown that children who view a lot of entertainment violence in the media are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts, to become emotionally desensitized toward violence in real life, and to develop the perception that the world is a violent and mean place. In addition, children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children who are not so exposed (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; Von Feilitzen, 2009).

Sexy girls: Today even preschoolers are exposed to images of sexy appearance, sexualized behavior, and skinny bodies in media and popular culture. On television, in videos, and at the mall, preschoolers see entertainers and cartoon characters wearing short skirts and bellybutton exposing shirts. Preschoolers also see wedged-heeled shoes and make-up kits designed for children their age. Although they cannot fully understand what they see and hear, from a very young age they try to figure it out. As they do it influences how they think about being male and female and their bodies. It affects what they want to be, do, and wear. Girls quickly learn to see themselves and other girls as *objects* judging each other by how they look. Boys learn to judge girls as objects-by how they look-too. (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

Teachers should not be surprised when children bring this sexualized content into the classroom - for instance, girls focusing on being princesses or doing sexy dances like they see on TV, or wearing sexy clothes that inhibit their physical activity that other girls covet. In one classroom, when 5-year-old Jenna had a "High School Musical" birthday party, all the girls began doing sexy "High School Musical" dancing at school in the dramatic play area and at outdoor time. The teacher decided to write parents a newsletter suggesting guidelines for age-appropriate birthday parties.

Girls quickly learn to see themselves and others as *objects*; how they look and what they can buy become the basis of their self-understanding and social judgments. In addition, as the model of the ideal self has become one with a dangerously thin body, more and more girls can develop unhealthy relationships with their objectified bodies in their efforts to meet the ideal. Parents have told me they have girls as young as three who have asked to go on diets.

Age compression: Here is how one teacher in an urban school system in the U.S. saw age compression in her kindergarten-first grade classroom:

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"I saw you on My Space!" "Yesterday after school Trina and Shayla got in a catfight over Brandon!" "My butt is hot!" "I got his phone number!" "She thinks she's cuter than me." These comments may or may not raise an eyebrow in any middle school classroom, but the year they became a common occurrence in my kindergarten and 1st-grade classroom it threw me for a loop (McGlaughlin, 2009).

Age compression is a term used by media professionals and marketers to describe how children at ever-younger ages are doing what older children used to do. The media, the toys, the behavior, the clothing once seen as appropriate for teens are now firmly ensconced in the lives of tweens and are rapidly encroaching on and influencing the lives of younger children. There is a blurring of boundaries between children and adults, as demonstrated by the similarities in clothing marketed to both by the fashion industry (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

When younger children try to do what older children used to do, they are not doing what they should be doing at their age of development to establish the foundation for what should come later at the appropriate age. They also cannot fully understand the older kid behavior that they are trying to engage in, which can lead to harmful experiences and lessons.

Premature adolescent rebellions: In the current environment, caring adults have a very important role to play in helping to lessen the impact of media on children. For example, we can try to protect them from the harmful messages as well as provide alternative lessons that promote attitudes, values and skills that are most important to learn in order to become happy, fulfilled and contributing members of society.

But media producers and marketers work hard to undermine caring adults' ability to perform this vital role. For instance, marketers do "nag factor" research on how to use advertising to get children to nag their parents for products that parents often would not choose to buy if their children did not nag for it (Linn, 2005). Marketers work to create a peer culture, devoid of adults, where children live without the assistance of adults. They also create superstar role models, like Hannah Montana, who demonstrate how premature adolescent rebellions work in action, usually ignoring adults and engaging in "age compression" behavior.

The result is that many children today try to rebel against their parents (and teachers) long before they reach adolescence, when many children begin to challenge the authority of adults. So now, instead of seeking advice and support from their parents and other caring adults, children often turn to their peers and media heroes for guidance about how to act and behave. Thus, media culture takes on a more and more powerful role, which has made both parenting and teaching more difficult.

Process Issues: Media Culture Affects How Children Learn

It is not just the content children see on screens but also the *process* they are engaged in when they are involved with media culture and the processes they are *not* engaged in. When children are glued to a screen they are not involved interacting directly with their environment; for instance they are not playing, exploring, interacting. They are not involved with their own agenda which they can control based on their own interests and needs, but rather are taking in someone else's script designed to grab their attention, tell them what to do and sell them things. And then, when they are not directly viewing someone else's

scripts, which should provide an opportunity to make their own meanings and regain control of the agenda, the media-linked toys children play with, often highly realistic replicas of what they see on the screen, channel them into trying to imitate scripts from the media, not engage in creative play.

As a result of growing up in this remote controlled environment, children can easily become disconnected from the real world experiences that they most need for optimal development and learning. Many children become dependent on the fast-paced stimulation, so that the more screen time they have, the more they need.

Play deficit disorder: Play is vital to all aspects of children's development and learning. Children actively use play to master experience and skills and to try out new things. In the process, they learn a lot about how to find interesting problems to work on and how to solve them in creative ways. This helps children feel the sense of power that comes from actively figuring things out on their own and learning new skills and ideas. What children learn as they play is affected by *how* they play. When play is a creation of children's own imaginations, experiences, abilities, and needs, it is likely to more fully meet their social, emotional, and intellectual needs and contribute to a solid foundation for later learning. It also teaches them *how to learn* (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2003; Linn, 2008; Miller & Almond, 2009).

Many teachers (and parents) report having problems promoting children's creative play. Media culture is contributing to this. Children have less time to play at home as more of their time is taken up watching a screen. Similarly, in school, where there used to be many opportunities for play with materials that allowed children to become involved in their own creative play and problem solving, there

is growing pressure to teach basis academic skills at younger ages, which is crowding out play. We need to ask what has changed to make it necessary to teach basic skills at younger ages-and I would argue the answer is at least in part related to RCC.

When children do have time to play in school, the highly realistic media-linked toys they have used at home can make it difficult to use more open-ended materials. They have trouble coming up with their own ideas or putting things together in play in their own unique ways. Here is how one teacher described what she sees going on:

> "It's harder and harder to have 'free play' in my classroom. Some children can't cope with the lack of structure. They roam around the room dabbling with this or that, but rarely getting involved in any activity for long. When they do, it often quickly dissolves into a conflict. I've stopped putting out some of the more traditional materials, like play dough. Children don't do much with it; they just poke at it and then go on to something else. It's often easier to plan structured activities that I lead."

Children who do not engage regularly in creative play are less likely to learn the important skills that creative play can teach. They do not come up with their own interesting questions to answer or problems to work on. When this happens, the foundation that is needed for all kinds of learning in school and beyond can be jeopardized. Furthermore, as these skills are undermined, we would expect to see children who have short attention spans, flit from thing to thing, and are at loose ends during "free play". This sounds quite a bit like the description of play from the above teacher of four-year olds.

Problem-solving deficit disorder: What if children do *not* become creative players who are

able to find and solve meaningful problems on their own? They can develop what I call PSDD - Problem Solving Deficit Disorder (Levin, 2007). PSDD describes the condition in which children are no longer active agents of their own learning or involvement with the world. It interferes with their ability to engage in the kind of problem finding and problem solving that promotes the active construction of knowledge and skill.

Parents and professionals who work with children with PSDD say these children are bored a lot, and they have trouble becoming deeply engaged in less structured, more open-ended activities. They seem to lack creativity and imagination and experience difficulty in playing cooperatively with others or resolving conflicts without aggression. The children do better when they are told what to do, and prefer structured activities at school or DVDs to watch and videogames to play at home. They ask for new things all the time, but quickly become bored once they have them. Parents who can afford it often enroll their children in organized after-school activities so they will not be bored or nag to spend more and more of their free time involved with a screen.

PSDD undermines optimal academic learning as well as learning how to solve conflicts and social problems with others. In the long run, it can lead to remote controlled people who exhibit conformist behavior, accept orders without questioning, and miss out on the joy that can come from figuring out how to solve an interesting problem on one's own and the sense of power and competence that this can bring.

Compassion deficit disorder: Children learn how to interact positively with others through a slow process of construction. To build their own ideas about how to behave, children use personal experiences - such as how they are treated and how they see people treating each other. They gradually learn what to say and do to work out problems with others in a peaceful manner and to have respectful give-and-take relationships. It is vital that children have experiences that help them learn these skills when they are young, because research suggests that patterns of behavior at age eight are related to behavior in adulthood (Eron et al., 1994).

Screen time takes a great deal of time away from directly interacting and learning how to interact with other children in the real world. Such experiences provide opportunities to receive immediate, direct feedback on the impact of one's actions. When children have many fewer opportunities to learn positive social behavior from direct experience, they can be deprived of developing increasingly reciprocal and empathetic social skills.

As discussed earlier, the content of media culture teaches anti-social lessons about social behavior- the lessons are fraught with violence, aggressive and mean spirited behavior as well as sex, sexualization and a focus on appearance. How girls look and what they can buy determines their value, how they judge themselves and how others judge them. Boys learn to judge themselves and other children judge them based on how strong, independent and ready to fight they are. In a sense, both girls and boys are made into *objects*. Objectification of self and other makes it much easier to be mean and uncaring in relationships. This situation can create a disturbing gap in social development that I have termed, compassion deficit disorder (CDD) (Levin, 2008; Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). Children with CDD have less ability to take the point of view of others, to understand or even care about how their actions affect others, or to experience empathy.

"I find I'm spending more and more time helping

my children settle disputes. Many kids seem to have fewer skills than the children I had when I started teaching [15 years ago]. More kids hurt other children as soon as they can't get their way or they try to bully their way into getting what they want. I keep telling them to 'use words, not fists' but it's often like talking to a wall. I think some kids actually feel scared by what's going on."

What often results from CDD are accounts like the one above, from a teacher of 6-year olds. Many teachers tell me they spend too much time trying to maintain the safety of their classrooms and admit to resorting to more "time outs" and harsher "discipline techniques" than in the past. They also say they are seeing younger children exhibit the kind of bullying and teasing that used to be characteristic of older children (another example of age compression). Children get teased, ridiculed and rejected for not looking right or not having the right clothes. An increase in antisocial behavior has let some schools to abolish recess because children are begin aggressive and hurting each other on the playground. As electronic texting has become more prevalent with children, so has cyber bullying whereby children voice hurtful and compassionless comments about others without actually having to see the direct effects of their hostile actions on their victims. Cases have been reported of the victims of this bullying becoming severely depressed and self-destructive.

What Schools Can Do: From Remote Control to Children in Control

Now, we turn to strategies that will help to counteract RCC in schools and help get children back on track. There are existing media literacy programs that can assist in this effort. Most of these programs focus primarily on helping children deconstruct the specific content they see on the screen, like sex and violence. This is important to do, but these programs often have gaps in what they try to do, especially in relation to the "process" issues discussed above. Any effort that aims to optimally counteract RCC must focus on the full range of ways media culture affects children as well as outline what needs to happen to create a media culture that better supports the healthy development of children (DeGaetano, 2003; Levin, in preparation; Summers, 2004).

Work together with parents; stop blaming them. Parents are often criticized for not setting more effective limits with their children around media and commercial culture issues. The fact is, "just saying 'no'" cannot possibly solve all the problems created by RCC (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). Certainly, we can all get better at taming RCC, and I believe working together with parents to counteract the perils children face is the best way to do so.

Work to protect children as much as possible from exposure to media and products that can teach harmful lessons. Often this means helping families: 1) make good decisions about the media and toys in their children's lives (as discussed earlier when the teacher sent home a newsletter about age-appropriate birthday parties), 2) create rules and routines for what media children consume, and 3) set guidelines for what, when, and how children acquire new things and take part in shopping. When children know what will happen and when they are less likely to keep asking their parents for more and more. Home life is less stressful and parents retain better control of their children's access to the media. It can reduce the constant nagging that often leads to more and more screens and screen time creeping into children's lives. It is important to talk with children about these

issues at school and provide resources to parents that will help them do a more effective job. Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (www.truceteachers.org) prepares materials to help families of younger children deal with the media on their children's lives.

Talk with children about what they see to help them make sense and influence the lessons they are learning. Children need a safe place to process what they see and hear in the media. Teachers can create classrooms that recognize and work to meet this need. Adults should let the children know that they are interested in what children see and what questions they have.

For instance, when children pretend to go on dates like Hannah Montana does, try asking, "What do you know about dates? "What do you do when you're on a date?" "What happens if you don't have a date?" "How old do you have to be to go on a date?" From such conversations, children learn they can talk to you without being embarrassed, ridiculed, or punished. The teacher can provide information that clears up misconceptions and make comments that influence children's thinking like: "It's nice having a boy (or girl) who's a friend when you're young. But it's only when you get to be older that boys and girls go on dates." Notice that the teacher listens and gives the children a lot of room to voice their own ideas. The teacher does not try to provide the "right" answers, based on how adults think. Remember: it will be easier to develop responses if the adult is familiar with what children are seeing on the screen and the current fads capturing their attention.

Help children develop a broad range of interests, skills, and behaviors that get beyond what they see on the screen. This can often involve taking a narrow, remote controlled interest that children have learned from the screen and helping to expand it into something over which children can have control and expand in a variety ways. For instance, in one class where girls were obsessed with being princesses and would rarely play with boys, the teacher created a curriculum project with the theme "Princesses and Princes." One area of the classroom became a castle; the reading area had fiction and non-fiction books about competent and strong princesses and princes from many cultures; and the art area became the place to made crowns and swords out of cardboard and foil. At the end of the project, the children and their families had a royal banquet where each family contributed a culturally favorite food dish.

A project like this: 1) helps children become more creative players, using toys, props, and ideas in open-ended rather than scripted ways; 2) counteracts PSDD by helping children develop their own solutions to problems that come up as they create their characters and scripts; 3) promotes expanded gender roles; and, 4) combats CDD by fostering positive relationships as children work together and take each other's point of view to build new ideas together.

Other ways to help children counteract RCC include: Work in large and small ways at all levels to build a society that supports children's healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development in today's media saturated world; beyond the school, make phone calls, talk to store managers, write letters to voice concerns about harmful media and marketing practices that are directed at children; and advocate for public policies that better protect children from harmful practices and limit the power of corporations to market to children. For instance, there is an effort in the United States to give the Federal Communications Commission more power to regulate media directed at children

and to give back to the Federal Trade Commission its power to regulate marketing to children. The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www. commercialfreechildhood.org) has played a big role in these efforts and many others as well.

Conclusion

Many children growing up today spend more time involved with screens than doing anything else but sleeping. As educators we must confront the implications of this reality for the children with whom we work in order to be effective in promoting children's optimal development and learning.

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Author:

Diane LEVIN, Professor of Education,
 Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts.
[dlevin@wheelock.edu]