

# Parenting

## Families have to learn skills to take on the 'tube'

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Dennis Moriarty, a media education consultant, wants parents and their children to learn how to analyze the constant flow of images and messages streaming to families from the media.

"We teach our children to cross the street," Moriarty said. "Our children are crossing the world before they're crossing the street because of the media."

A parishioner at Mendon's St. Catherine of Siena, Moriarty chairs the media action committee of the Task Force to Reduce Violence, a private group of Rochester-area citizens.

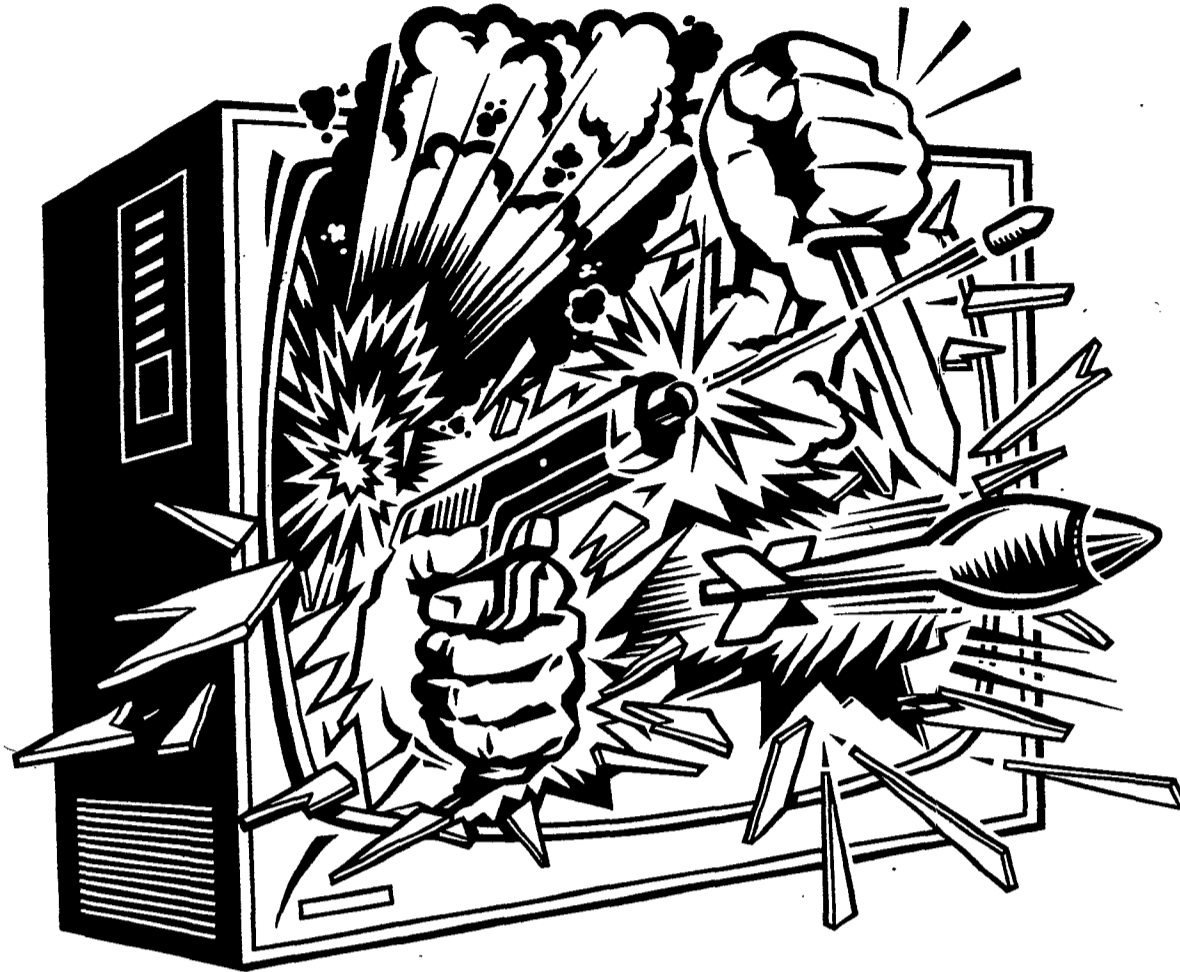
Moriarty also serves as vice president for ChildVision, a not-for-profit research and advocacy organization concerned with the impact television and other media have on children.

Parents are a child's primary educators, Moriarty noted, and part of their job in today's world includes teaching their children how to cope with the mass media. Moriarty and other media experts noted that the price for ignoring this task is allowing the commercial media — which often pushes casual sex, violence and materialism — to form your offspring without any values to counteract its influence.

The California-based Center for Media and Values and the National Catholic Education Association co-produced a pamphlet titled "Catholic Connections to Media Literacy" that states the issue even more bluntly.

"The fact is, media no longer just influence our culture," the pamphlet asserts. "Media are our culture."

The pamphlet quoted another expert as saying: "We have allowed the most powerful communications tool ever invented to become the command center of a consumer society defining our lives and cul-



ture the way family, community and spiritual values once did."

According to the Center for Media and Values, viewers need to know that the TV industry's primary purpose is to make money, and that TV programs and advertisements will promote questionable ideas to bring in the audience that will spend this cash.

For example, TV shows and commercials stress that some people and ideas are more important than others, the center's research revealed. To uncover underlying viewpoints in the media, ask "Who benefits?" or "Who loses?" the center's literature stresses, using the example of a situation comedy that portrays the elderly in a certain way as a program worthy of scrutiny.

Despite television's often negative influence, most me-

dia experts like Moriarty, dismiss the idea that parents can simply turn off the tube, or any other media source, as a means of dealing with commercial media's pervasive influence in their children's lives.

Instead, organizations like the Center for Media & Values have developed the following "media literacy" tips for parents to help them and their children develop control of their television viewing:

- Set limits on how much time your children watch TV each day, for example, two hours a day or 10 hours a week. If you enforce your limits, children will learn to prioritize and watch what they really like.
- Decide ahead of time what your criteria are for selecting shows that may contain offensive or disturbing content.
- Watch shows that you and your children have selected

ahead of time, and don't leave the TV on once the show or shows have concluded. Moriarty and others suggest marking specific programs in TV Guide or other television weeklies at the beginning of each week.

- Talk back to your TV, and let your children know of your opinions about what's on by voicing them. This will teach children how to form perspective.

- Try structured activities while you watch. For example, by keeping a globe or an atlas next to the TV, parents can teach geography to their children by asking them to find places mentioned on the news.

- Attempt to predict the kinds of commercials that will appear in a selected show. This helps kids connect program content with commercial intent.

- It's OK to buy your child that toy-action figure he's been

ping for ever since he saw it on a Saturday-morning cartoon, but resist the urge to go out and buy every product connected to such shows. Otherwise, your child may grow up convinced he needs to buy loads of products in order to be fulfilled.

Although such suggestions have been compiled by media experts, parents don't have to be experts to become media-literate, Moriarty emphasized. Everyone, no matter what their educational level, can learn to become more aware of what they're watching — or for that matter, what they're hearing and reading, too.

"When you learn the skills and you incorporate them into your viewing, you automatically deconstruct and analyze," he said. "As we become more educated consumers, we become more discriminating."

Moriarty added that churches, civic and social groups, schools and other organizations are excellent vehicles for media literacy programming. Such groups and institutions can hold workshops and meetings for parents and families who wish to scrutinize the mass media better, he explained.

In the end, if parents become more media-literate, television producers and programmers will respond to an audience that makes its desire for quality programming known, Moriarty insisted, because the networks want to give the public what it wants to deliver audiences to advertisers.

"The bottom line is, as the consumer, we do have power, and media literacy gives us more power," he concluded.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** To learn more about media literacy, write the Center for Media and Values, 1962 S. Shennandoah, Los Angeles, Calif. 90034, or call 310-559-2944 (fax: 310/559-9396).

ChildVision can be contacted at 716/251-4430.  
Dennis Moriarty is available at 716/624-9334.

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