

Working with Parents to Reduce Children's Media Exposure

• **Lauren Hickman**

Excerpts from "An Exploration of Parent Education Practices Used by Waldorf Kindergarten Teachers to Reduce Media Exposure for Young Children in the Home," a Master's Thesis by Lauren Hickman.

We are well aware as Waldorf educators of the insidious damaging effects of screen time on the young child, on family life and relationships. Obesity, attention disorders, poor self image, violent or cruel behavior, and increased inability to focus and listen are hallmarks of the media exposed child. Parent education is a key component of a successful Waldorf early childhood program. Today's teachers are charged with introducing parents to the concept of the harmful, limiting effects of movies, computer and cell phone games, and television as they relate to the young child.

How do we inspire parents and caregivers to move to the will activity of actually reducing or eliminating screen time? For my Master's degree research project completed in 2009, I conducted a qualitative and quantitative study to collect parent education practices utilized by fifteen Waldorf kindergarten teachers. For the purposes of the study, I referred to television, video games, cell phone texting and games, computer and DVD/movie consumption as "screen time."

Despite the good intentions of schools, teachers encounter different levels of resistance when striving to educate parents of about the detrimental effects of media exposure. Waldorf schools do not have a standardized parent education curriculum that would clearly outline the risks involved. Schools and teachers try different approaches that have varying degrees of success without always knowing how effective they are in influencing parenting practices in the home.

I found that if the teacher is an effective communi-

cator of the implied values inherent in Waldorf education, such as protecting the child's developing imagination by limiting media exposure, parents can help their children experience positive change. The teachers surveyed utilized a variety of different approaches to parent education methods at different stages of the parent's entry into the school system: as part of the inquiry and enrollment process which includes the application and interview, during the school year via conversations, parent teacher conferences and lectures, and by handing out articles and teaching parents how to observe their children's behavior and reactions to screen time exposure. By collecting anonymous surveys, I found that the parents wanted to make their own observations and decisions about their children and screen time. They did not want to be told what to do, whether by a teacher's recommendation or through comments from a peer. Another area of concern raised by parents that I did not anticipate was the challenges that parents faced in split families with shared custody when it came to decision making about media for their children.

Looking Towards the Future

While individual efforts have been made by Waldorf early childhood educators to connect with and inspire parents to limit media exposure for young children, it is clear that more work needs to be done. Parents today learn differently than a generation ago when the teacher was viewed as the authority. As my study indicated, they want to do their own research and make their own decisions about their children. This includes the need for a greater awareness of media exposure in young children as a public health issue.

Many organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association

have called for reduced media for young children. I hope that more educators, not only Waldorf educators, will join together to create curriculums and to educate the general public about media and young children.

This worthy goal can best be accomplished by teachers developing methods that allow parents to observe and understand their children's behavior and what factors play a role in affecting their behavior. When the parents make their own observations and draw their own conclusions about the way their child acts and is affected by exposure to screen time, then change in media consumption habits can occur. When the teacher and parents have similar observations about a child's behavior and learning style, both at home and in the classroom, they can create a plan together to ensure the child's continued success. A secondary goal would be to have the parent consider the effects his or her choices have on the developing child when it comes to making decisions about media time, diet, family rules, and values.

I have compiled a list of preferred parent education practices used by Waldorf early childhood teachers to inspire parents to reduce or limit media exposure for their young children. The existing research available indicates that there is much more research needed into the effect media exposure has on the developing child—physically, emotionally, academically, mentally, and in family relationships. The study found that a multidisciplinary approach to parent education worked the best from the teachers' perspectives, and that over time, parents could make more informed choices about media exposure for their young children.

Preferred Parent Education Practices compiled by Lauren Hickman, 2009

- 1.** Make a personal connection with the parents. Listen to their hopes and dreams for their child. Ask the parent what he or she wants for the child.
- 2.** In the case of a split household, make a connection with each parent or caregiver for the child. Listen to the hopes and dreams for the child.
- 3.** Is there a habit around media consumption? For instance, does the family have a weekly or monthly "movie" night? Explore some alternatives to this habit—can a tradition be created around a festival observation, a craft night, a family meal night, etc. What can be done to make a festive shared time together as a family?
- 4.** Have an expert on brain development come to your

school community to give a lecture on brain development and the effects of screen time on the developing young child. Some suggested presenters could include Joseph Chilton Pearce, MD, Susan Johnson, MD, Jane Healy, PhD, Bruce Perry, MD, Joan Treadaway, Eugene Schwartz.

5. Create a parent conversation series with a variety of topics including media and screen time. Invite experienced parents and new parents to share in small discussion groups about their observations of their children with regards to media. Create a warm, non-judgmental atmosphere that fosters relaxed conversation.

6. Create a direct experience for the parents to observe and to then relate their experiences to the group. For instance: Do a puppet show, and then show television clips. Have the parents talk about their reactions to the different presentations.

7. Create a wall chart and give parents sticky notes to visually list what priorities they give to media and screen consumption by their young children. Give weekly handouts on various child development topics including screen time.

8. Invite a Waldorf alumni speaker's panel to your school community to discuss various topics such as how Waldorf students do in the real world. Ask the alumni pointed questions about their media/screen time experiences.

9. Have an Experience Waldorf morning on a Saturday, where parents can experience the work and play activities that the young child does. Have them share about their "media free" experience of the morning.

10. Brainstorm with parents about play and technology and use a flip chart to write down the results. What did they play inside? Outside? What toys were available? What technology is available? Break it down by decade—what were parents doing and playing with in the 50s? What technology was available?

11. One Waldorf early childhood educator stated, "Families today have replaced the fireplace or 'hearth' with the television set. This is where they gather to tell stories by the light of the . . . screen. (Only they don't tell stories, they are fed media stories and advertising.) They meet here together, laugh together, get up and get food and drink for each other together. They relax. The TV even resembles a hearth, with the chairs and sofas facing it, with the flat screen anchored to the wall and decor surrounding it. Like a fireplace, the screen

is more satisfying the bigger it is. *Consumer Reports* recommends buying the largest screen you can afford because perceived satisfaction is related to size. You can immediately see the problems with this; there are many. For one, the screen is cold, whereas the hearth emits warmth and scent.” Define screen time to parents—work with them to list the types of screens available on a daily basis and ask them to consider whether this is the “new hearth”?

12. At parent teacher conferences, give a written report. Check in with the parents about the amount of screen time the child is receiving—has there been any shift since the beginning of the school year? What are the parent’s observations? What are the teacher’s observations? Is it time to make a new agreement about the amount of screen time the child is exposed to?

13. In the interview process ask about screen time, explain the school’s media policy, offer understanding and make an agreement that the child will not have media on school nights and before school to start. In addition, agree that if the teacher observes media play in the classroom it will be okay to check in and have a further conversation and subsequent agreement.

14. As a teacher, and possibly as a parent, share personal stories about your own journey in relation to media and how you came to the conclusions you have today. Be willing to express vulnerability and openness to the parents who are listening to you.

15. Explore with the parents the reasons why they have screen time for their children. Babysitting? Fear of being unable to compete in today’s world? Convenience? Appeasing relatives such as grandparents?

16. Help families plan their response to different social scenarios: family party, holidays such as Thanksgiving where the television is on. Brainstorm about what to do, for instance bring along a story basket, some simple toys, take a walk, and play with children instead of visiting with the adults.

17. Your children want to go to a neighbor’s house where the television is on. Create a dress up box, Waldorf toys, etc. Make your home inviting for the neighborhood children—it is a sacrifice, but worth it.

18. Try a two-week media free period and share your experiences. Participate in the national Screen Free campaign each April—visit www.screenfree.org. Share articles about Screen Free Week challenges in the school newsletter.

19. Divide parents into two groups and have them go into two different rooms. In one room, have parents “play” with action figures, in the other room; have the parents “play” with Waldorf toys. Then have the groups switch and experience the other toys. Bring the groups together and have a conversation about the observations.

20. Encourage parents to at least take the television out of the living room and put it in a back room. That way it doesn’t dominate the family space. It is an in-between step but it allows them to experience family space without the television and adjust to “putting it in the garage” as a next step.

21. Parents are becoming increasingly aware that screen time is unhealthy for children, not just physically unhealthy, but also socially unhealthy. Parents are asking how to create a more family-oriented, child-friendly world. Help parents look at how they pay attention to childhood essentials such as loving relationships, conversations, shared meal times, stories, reading, rhythmic days, enjoying nature, games, making things, and celebrating together. Assure them that limiting access to screen time can result in a calmer, more fulfilling family life where all family members can thrive.

22. Encourage parents to talk to their children about electronic media and the reasons for their decisions and rules. From the viewpoint of children, think of strangers on screens as you would think of them in real life. Talk to parents about never leaving the young child unsupervised in the company of anyone in whom they do not have utter confidence.

23. Talk to parents about making it a family rule that no young child has a television or computer in his or her room. If they do, brainstorm with the parents about ways to get the television or computer out.

Web Resources:

www.screenfree.org
www.turnoffyourtv.com
www.truceteachers.org
www.thetvboss.org

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