

Why Do They Act That Way?

The Media's Enlightening and Shady Influences on Children



Dr. David Walsh



Center of the American Experiment is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt, public policy and educational institution that brings conservative and free market ideas to bear on the hardest problems facing Minnesota and the nation.

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Center of the American Experiment
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Introduction

Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment: David Walsh is partially McLuhanesque, in the sense he acutely recognizes that the *medium* is a very large part of the *message*. But distinguishing our guest, not only from the once famous Marshall McLuhan, is an uncommon and invaluable combination of talents and emphases.

In addition to understanding the potency of form, he recognizes just how rancid the *content* of various media can be.

He understands how that stuffing frequently hurts young people. And how their families—meaning our families—are consequently hurt. In inevitable turn, he fully grasps how our nation increasingly will be held back, economically and in other ways, by media excesses of many sorts—of which violent, misogynist, and otherwise reprehensible video games lead my own list of private sector and First Amendment embarrassments. In sum, he understands that culture matters, powerfully.

But for large and additional measure, Dr. Walsh is a best selling author. As you will discover in a moment, he's also a compelling speaker. As witness the enormous success of the National Institute on Media and the Family, he's likewise a successful policy entrepreneur. And not least, he's the kind of therapist any sane person would go crazy to have.

Dr. David Walsh—who, of course, views the media in full spectrum rather than in

monochromatic rebuke—is the founder and president of the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family, which aims to maximize the benefits, and minimize the harm, of media on children through research, education, and advocacy.

A psychologist, he's in the media himself all the time, starting with all the news shows and major newspapers and magazines you would expect a pathfinder to be in. The best-selling *Why Do They Act That Way*, released in 2004, was his eighth book. Number nine will be released next month [Ed.: It was.]: *No. Why Kids Need It and Ways Parents Can Say It*.

He received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, where he also serves on the faculty. He and his wife Monica have three grown children—upon each, he candidly has written, he has practiced for his books.

Please welcome a major player I've wanted to grace our podium for a decade now, but for the life of me, I don't why I've procrastinated so long to invite him. Then, again, I've been real busy watching ESPN.

David Walsh: The case I'd like to make is that one of the most powerful influences facing us today is the impact of media—the impact on our children, on our families, on our communities, and on our culture. The message I hope I'm able to communicate is that the media are powerful—not inherently good or bad, but powerful. Their goodness or badness depends on how we use them.

To illustrate, I'd like to start with a story—a true story. It takes place in Mexico more than 35 years ago. It was in the early 1970s that Mexican government and business leaders were wrestling with a problem: The information economy was taking hold, so the ability to read and write was becoming more important than ever. At the same time, there were many people in the workplace who could not read very well. They had a number of different strategies to correct the situation. They put reading clinics in the workplace, for example. They created incentives for the workers to enroll. Yet nothing was working, until 1973.

In 1973 Miguel Sabido decided to try an experiment. Now, you're probably wondering who he was: He was the producer of the most popular soap opera on Mexican television at the time. What he did is, for about six months, he cleverly and consistently wove pro-adult-literacy messages through the plot of his popular program. In the 12 months following that experiment, registrations in adult reading classes across Mexico increased by 800 percent. Now, that's power and that's influence.

When we understand how that power and influence are exerted and the impact they have, then I think we come to the conclusion that we need to treat this powerful technology with a lot more respect and a lot more care. Now, we often associate the word “revolution” with political upheaval, wars, and things like that. But revolutions happen in other realms, as well, including the realm of technology. In 1445, we had the invention of the printing press. That didn't just change the way information got disseminated, it literally led to a series of events which brought Western civilization out of the Dark Ages into the Renaissance. Two hundred years ago, we had the early stages of what we eventually called the Industrial Revolution. It didn't just change the way we made widgets, it literally led to a complete reordering of our society. We are in the early stages of another one of those revolutions, because technology is going to be changing very quickly. It's been changing, but it's going to change even more quickly as we go forward.

Let me give a little snapshot of the change I'm talking about. There is a term in the video game industry that serves as a good measure of video game power: “polygons per second.” When I'm playing a video game, the image I see on the screen is composed of little polygons, little geometric shapes of different colors. They quickly come together like a jigsaw puzzle to form an image. The more polygons per second, the more realistic the image, and the more realistic the movement.

With that in mind, let's take a trip through the ancient history of video games, which brings us all the way back to 1999. Now, if you're thinking Pac Man, please note I didn't say *pre*-history, I said *ancient* history. In 1999, all the kids were playing Sony PlayStation and Nintendo 64. The processing power of those two consoles was in the same range, about 350,000 polygons per second. That's a lot of polygons. It all changed in September of that year. The hot new platform in the holiday shopping season of 1999—all of the kids wanted it—was Sega Dreamcast. A lot of people don't even remember Sega Dreamcast because they're already out of business. They had a season of fantastic sales because they boosted the processing power from 350,000 to 3 million polygons per second overnight. Now, why are they out of business? Because it was a year later that Sony released PlayStation 2, boosting the processing power from 3 million to 38 million polygons per second. Then came November 2001: Within one week, Microsoft released the Xbox, and Nintendo released the GameCube; the processing power of each of those was roughly the same, 125 million polygons per second.

That brings us to the present day. Last year [2005], Microsoft released the Xbox 360. Just weeks ago, Sony released PlayStation 3; videogamers were battling in front of Best Buy to get it. Even more recently, Nintendo released its new platform called Wii. The processing power of each of those is roughly the same, 1 billion polygons per second. So we went from 350,000 to 1 billion in a period of six years.

Under development right now is a 360-degree holographic video game. When completed, the

player will be an actor within the scene. When you think of the positive applications of that kind of technology, it's pretty amazing. Imagine, for example, a 360-degree holographic video game called *The Declaration of Independence*. An elementary school teacher could lead her students through a virtual Independence Hall. Students could talk things over with Thomas Jefferson or argue with John Hancock. But that same technology can and will be used for other things, as well.

We're in the process of converting to digital television. Probably everyone in this room has heard of digital television. A lot of people associate digital television with one thing: sharper pictures. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. The significance of digital television goes way beyond sharper pictures. As we convert to digital over the next two years, all the lines separating the various forms of media will disappear. What does that mean? That means little boys and girls born in the Twin Cities today, by the time they go to school, will be able to sit on a couch and go from a website to a video game to a television program to a video-on-demand, all with the click of a remote.

And television programs will not be the same. Imagine, with digital television, I'm watching the *Today Show* with Matt Lauer, and Matt's tie catches my eye. With digital TV, I'll be able to click on that tie, and a dialogue box will appear in the corner of the screen where I'll be able to order his tie in my favorite color and have it FedEx'ed to me overnight so I can wear it to work the next day. The technology to do that already exists; we just need the conversion to digital.

Television will be different in other ways, as well. Imagine you're running around doing errands on a Saturday and you realize, "My gosh, it's early afternoon, and I haven't had lunch yet," so you pull into your local McDonald's for a bite to eat. You go up to the counter and you say, "Could I please have a Big Mac?" Imagine your reaction if the answer you got was, "I'm sorry, we only serve Big Macs on Tuesday at 3 p.m." You'd say, "What?" Our expectation is we should be able to get a Big Mac whenever McDonald's is open.

But a Big Mac on Tuesday, at 3 p.m., is the world of television we're living in today. If I want to watch *ER*, I have to wait until Thursday night. Bummer! In the new world of digital television, I will be able to watch any episode of anything when I want to watch it.

Picture this scene, a day in the life of a 12-year-old, boy: The boy walks out of the house in the morning for school and takes out this device, formerly known as a cell phone, and punches in a couple of numbers—a code—which is transmitted immediately to his favorite fast food restaurant where he gets breakfast. Thus, a block and a half later, he picks up that breakfast and is on his way. The cost of that breakfast is already added to his account. Then he goes to get on the bus on his way to school and he waves this device over the turnstile; the amount of his fare is then added to his account. He takes his seat, flips open this device—we still call it a cell phone, though we shouldn't—and watches an episode of his favorite television program, which he missed a couple of days ago. Halfway to school, he realizes he's going to have a quiz on a book chapter that he read and that he'd better review. So he flips out of his television program and into his e-book and starts to review the chapter. He gets to school, all the while text-messaging his friends (some of over 600 text messages he'll send that day) and then, in between classes, he quickly logs on to his online video game to see how his team is doing. It's a big campus, so when they're close by, his device chirps so he knows when his friends are within 50 feet so they can get together and have lunch. On his way home from school that day, he's walking along and there's a poster on the side of a building, and the poster is advertising a concert for his favorite music group. So he takes his cell phone, waves it in front of the poster, punches in a couple of numbers, and he's just bought two e-tickets, the cost of which has just been added to his account. And it goes on and on.

Now, my question for you is, do you think I'm describing something five years down the road? Do you think I'm describing something two years down the road? Or do you think I'm describing the present day? If I were walking down the streets of Seoul, South Korea, I'd be describing

the present day. Everything I just described is already available to kids in South Korea, because they're about two years ahead of us technologically, thanks to Samsung. In about 18 to 24 months, what I just described will be normal for kids in our country. This technology is changing, it's powerful, and it's everywhere.

Screen Time

Two-thirds of American school-age children now have some screen in their bedrooms. Or we could say the same thing by saying two-thirds of American schoolchildren now have a private tutor, because that's the equivalent. Twenty-five percent of babies under two in the United States now have a screen in their bedrooms. The screens are powerful, the screens are changing, the screens are everywhere, and they are taking up more and more of our kids' time. Right now, screen time in the United States for the average American K-12 student is 44 hours a week, up from 28 hours just 15 years ago. That's the equivalent of a full-time job, and the numbers just keep going up and up and up. The only thing that American kids spend more time doing than interacting with some screen is sleeping.

So it seems like we should be paying attention to this. If it's powerful, if it's evolving, if it's everywhere, if it's taking up a larger and larger role in our kids' lives, we should be paying attention. If we're going to pay attention, one of the things we should do is look to the goals.

Now, for example, if we look to the primary goal of television, some people might say the primary goal of television is entertainment. That's not true; that's a secondary goal. The primary goal is to deliver eyeballs to advertisers. We all know how the chain of logic goes, so I'll review it very quickly. What determines what you and I see on television are Nielsen ratings. Why are they a big deal? Because they measure how many people are watching. As those ratings go up, meaning more people are watching, what do I get to do? I get to go to the advertisers and get a bigger check. The more people are watching, the more money I can charge; the more money I can charge, the more money I can make.

How does that business model affect the content? (When I say the content, I mean the program, the video game, or the website.) The content areas become delivery systems. I'm delivering you, an audience, to an advertiser. If I'm in charge of the content, then what's my job? My first job is to get and hold your attention long enough for the advertisers to get their messages in front of you. How do I do that? If I want to get someone's attention, the best way to do it is to stimulate an emotional response—to deliver an emotional jolt. So I want to deliver an emotional jolt. Moreover, I will be financially rewarded if I don't deliver just any old emotional jolt; I'll make the most money by delivering a cheap emotional jolt. Delivering the maximum jolt for the least money is how I make the most. Therefore, I want to deliver cheap emotional jolts.

Now, when I look for cheap emotional jolts, there are certain things that start to bubble to the surface. One thing, for example, is violence. Imagine this scene: After we're finished today, we're starting to leave, and Matt, my colleague who's sitting here at the front table, and I get into a disagreement. It quickly escalates, and Matt and I start swinging at each other. What do you think your first response would be? I would be willing to bet you that your first response would be to stop and look. Why? Because one of the things that reliably gets our attention is violence. It's not the only thing.

Another thing that reliably gets our attention is sex. Another jolt factor that can do it is humor. So if I want to get your attention, three reliable themes to use are violence, sex, and humor. And what is there in great abundance on the screens that kids spend the full-time job in front of? Violence, sex, and humor.

If the primary goal of television were education, would there be so much violence, sex, and humor? Of course not. There'd be other things. But the goal is to get our attention, and for that goal, those three things work like a charm.

If I want to get your attention, what I want to do is maximize what I call the "JPS factor." It's a very technical term, I say facetiously, standing for "jolts per show." The higher the JPS factor, the

more likely you are to watch, which helps me to achieve my goal. There's a problem. I have to keep increasing the JPS factor. Why? There are a few reasons. One is desensitization. We get exposed to a certain level of stimulation, and after a while, we get used to it. So, to get the same reaction, I have to jack it up.

The second reason is increased competition. Some of us are old enough to remember a time when there were only four or five television channels. Kids can't believe that such an era ever existed, because they're growing up in a world of dozens of television stations—hundreds, if they have cable. Over a thousand video games come out every year, and God only knows how many websites there are.

The third reason is the remote control. With the remote control, I don't even have to get up and walk three feet to change the channel. All I need is a thumb that works. So if I have to keep increasing the JPS factor, I have three ways to do that. I can increase the frequency—I'll give you more and more and more, so you're never tempted to use that remote control. Second, I can increase the intensity—I can make the violence more gory, the sex more explicit, and the language more crude. And if I really want to get your attention, I'll start to combine the jolt factors: Sex and humor, the formula for most primetime sitcoms; violence and humor; violence and sex. But if I *really* want to get your attention, I'll go for the trifecta: sexual violence as entertainment. And that's showing up.

One of the places it's showing up is in video games. Let me describe to you, in case you're not familiar with a series of scenes from the best-selling video game ever, the *Grand Theft Auto* series. In *Grand Theft Auto*, which hundreds of thousands of kids play, I can hire a prostitute for sex, and then, after finishing, I can then hack her to death with a chainsaw to get my money back. Now, think of what's going on in the development of our kids, and think of kids spending hour after hour playing a game where hacking a woman to death with a chainsaw is portrayed as entertainment; it's not exactly a combination that makes a lot of sense.

What are the Effects?

What's the impact of all of this? Well, we need to remember—as I hope I was able to state at the beginning—that this technology can be powerful for good. I think every one of us in this room could probably take time to make a list of movies or a list of television programs that have moved us, inspired us, or educated us. But this technology also has great potential for harm. And unfortunately, the way many of our kids are using it today, that potential is being realized.

We could talk about the negative impact being manifested in many, many different ways. We could talk about it, for example, in regards to our kids' physical health. Everybody in this room knows we have a tremendous challenge—a public health emergency is what the CDC calls it—in terms of the risk for obesity. The biggest lifestyle change in the lives of kids in the last generation is not what they're eating. The biggest lifestyle change is increased screen time and decreased physical activity. Do we need to pay attention to nutrition? Absolutely. But we're not really going to be successful in getting our kids fitter and healthier until we start to pry them away from some of those hours of screen time.

We could talk about the impact of the violent media that I've described. Organizations have gone on record saying that the scientific evidence—not a matter of taste or opinion, but the scientific evidence—clearly shows a cause-and-effect relationship between violence on the screen and the behavior of kids: The American Psychological Association, the Centers for Disease Control, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The nature of the effect, I think, is what we need to pay attention to, because it's not necessarily the obvious one. This came home to me in a press conference. I had the opportunity to write the *American Medical Association Physician Guide to Media Violence*, and that was released at a press conference some time back. You know how press conferences go: There are statements followed by questions and answers. After the statements, the first question was this: "I have a question for Dr.

Walsh,” said some young reporter. I could tell by the tone of his question it was not going to be a friendly one, and it wasn’t. With as much sarcasm as this reporter could drip on every word, he said, “Do you really expect us to believe that just because a kid watches something on television or plays a violent video game, he’s going to turn out to be violent?” And my response was, “No, I don’t expect you to believe that. In fact, I don’t even *want* you to believe that. Because that’s not the way it works. In my judgment, the most harmful effect of the steady diet of violent images that kids see on the screen is not violent behavior. In my judgment, the most harmful effect is that it has created and nourished a culture of disrespect.”

Whoever tells the stories defines the culture. That’s been true for thousands of years. The reason is because stories are so effective at communicating values and norms from one group to another, from one generation to the next. For this generation of kids, the storytellers on the screens have by and large replaced the storytelling of the elders, our spiritual leaders. Therefore the real impact of media violence is not that a kid’s going to go do it immediately, but that it creates a culture. For every kid who brings a gun to school, there are millions of kids who aren’t doing that. But how many of them are calling each other names, putting each other down, and pushing, shoving, and hitting, with increasing frequency?

We could talk about the impact of media on our kids’ sexual norms and behavior. The studies have been coming out for years. A study came out two years ago that said kids who watch a lot of sexually explicit media, like MTV videos, are much more likely to be sexually active than kids who don’t. Last summer, you may have seen the study that came out that said kids who listen to a lot of sexually explicit music, with sexually explicit lyrics, are more likely to be sexually active than kids who don’t.

My reaction to those studies is, what’s the surprise? Why wouldn’t that be the case? All we have to do is look to our own experiences. Take music, for example. If it’s the 4th of July, and I listen to patriotic music, I feel more patriotic. If

I’m with a loved one and I put on some romantic music, I feel more romantic. And if I’m a normally sexually charged teenager, and I listen to a lot of sexually charged lyrics, how am I likely to feel? More sexually aroused.

More, Easy, Fast, and Fun

In addition to paying attention to things like media violence and the crudeness and the coarseness, I think we also need to pay attention to more subtle messages. Considering that the media are so powerful at shaping attitudes and values, I think we need to pay attention to four very powerful messages that we have all received repeatedly as media have become more powerful: the messages of more, easy, fast, and fun. Those have almost become cultural values. Our kids constantly hear that whatever they have, they should have more of it. Whatever model they have, they should have the latest model. Kids today have 500 percent more spending power than their parents did just one generation earlier. More. Easy. Fast. Fun. Now, should we be concerned about those? I think we should, because I think the values of more, easy, fast, and fun are having a corrosive effect on one of the key success traits for our kids, and that’s the trait of self-discipline.

I believe that our kids are awash in an epidemic, and I’m calling the epidemic “DDD”—discipline-deficit disorder—fueled by a culture of more, easy, fast, and fun. I think the symptoms of discipline deficit disorder are things like the inability to delay gratification, the need for instant gratification, impatience, selfishness, disrespectfulness. The reason I think that’s so important is because self-discipline, it turns out, is the key success trait. Two psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania recently published a very important study in which they showed that self-discipline is twice as strong a predictor of school and career success as intelligence. Our kids are as smart as they’ve ever been. What’s different, the reason that we’re having so much trouble getting our kids to perform competitively with kids in other nations, are the traits of self-discipline. And it’s not just the welfare of our kids that I think we should be paying attention to,

I think it's literally our nation's economic competitiveness.

The latest comparison of American students and peers in other nations came out in 2003, and the not-great place where we were in 1983 is virtually unchanged. I don't think we're going to really be successful in reversing that until we start to address the need for our kids to learn the message of "no." It's not so much the word as it is the strategy, because as we teach our kids those essential skills of self-discipline, we're preparing them for a life of success—not just in school, but in life, in relationships, in their careers.

I started with an ambitious agenda to see if I could make a case for the fact that I think media are one of the most powerful influences in kids' lives today, and in families and communities. It's up to you to decide the extent to which you think that makes sense. If you think it makes sense, then one of the things we need to do is figure out what we should do.

One of the things we're committing ourselves to at the National Institute on Media and Family is creating a movement, which we're calling "MediaWise." There are specific things that we can do, starting off, for example, by keeping screens out of kids' bedrooms and making sure there are limits in terms of time, the kinds of games, and the kinds of media kids consume. Watch what your kids watch. The list goes on and on. If this premise makes sense to you, I hope as community leaders we can start to join together and to create media-wise communities and media-wise families.

The technology is not going away. It's educational, we have to make sure we realize what it's teaching. We were once children, and someone took care of us. Now it's our turn to care. Increasingly, as we go forward, we need to include the impact of media in our definition of caring for kids.

Following his comments, Dr. Walsh answered questions from the audience.

Mitch Pearlstein: Let me ask the first question: Could you talk about the brain and brain research?

Then we'll start taking questions from the audience.

Walsh: I think that when we start to connect the dots between the things we're learning in brain science—about the development of kids' brains—we start to get an inkling of how powerful the media are.

The basic unit or the basic building block of the brain is a brain cell or a neuron, and that's a really basic unit of a vast electrical system. The structure of a brain cell is thus: there's a cable down the middle, it's called an axon, with branches at the end. A baby comes into the world with about 100 billion of those brain cells. Each one of them has, on the average, about 10,000 branches, meaning the possible number of connecting points in a newborn baby's brain is about one quadrillion connections. Just think about how many different ways you could wire one quadrillion connections.

Only 17 percent of those brain cells are wired together at birth. Then what follows in the days, the weeks, the months, the years, and, as we know now, the decades that follow, is that those billions of brain cells wire together, driven by two powerful forces. The first is genetics, what I call the hardwiring. But in addition to the hardwiring, we have the softwiring, the experiences we have. Think of how a child learns language. Babies arrive in the world with the ability to make noise. That's hardwiring. However, which of the 6,500 languages of the world they end up speaking is not hardwired. That's the softwiring, shaped by the experiences that they have.

Neuroscientists have a little phrase to capture that: "the neurons that fire together, wire together." The more they fire together, the stronger the connections become. Therefore, experience is key, but not all experiences are equal. Some experiences have a greater impact than others.

The experiences that have the greatest impact are the ones that happen during a brain's growth spurts. Those billions of neurons that we have are wired together into circuits. But they don't all develop at the same time or at the same pace. They develop in spurts. So while some circuits

are in high-growth mode, others are a little bit less active. What happens in a growth spurt is that those branches grow like crazy, and then experience kicks in. The branches that fire get wired into networks; the ones that don't fire wither back and die. The growth is called blossoming, the withering back is called pruning.

As you can see from that description, experience is key in determining which fire and which don't. That's why experiences we have during our brains' growth spurts have greater impact than at any other time during our lives. We now know that those growth spurts don't stop at the age of 10; they continue all the way through the teenage years. So when we think of the growth spurt going on in a 13-year-old brain, for example, which has to do with impulse control and anger management, and the impact of playing a game like *Grand Theft Auto*, where aggression is reinforced, it's alarming.

Dale Beihoffer: You have painted an excellent picture of the impact of brain development and culture on the education gap between the United States and other countries. You began by illustrating that Seoul is a couple of years ahead of us in technology. Could you comment on strategies that we can learn from other countries on how they have better controlled the negative impact of media?

Walsh: Let me answer a little bit indirectly by telling you why I was in Seoul. I was invited by the Korean government, because it is very worried about how all of this is affecting their kids, as well. I'll give you one example. The Korean government has already set up 40 government-sponsored treatment programs for video game addiction. Because broadband, online games are easily accessible everywhere wirelessly, there are now more and more kids whose games are literally taking over their lives. So other countries are increasingly concerned about this, as well.

Janet Beihoffer: A few years ago, I heard a presentation by an educator who had shown some slides on neural development in the brain of an infant. Her message was that much development occurs before age five, and if those neural connections are not made by age five, they cannot

be recovered. If I heard you correctly today, you said there are growth spurts in the teenage years. So could you explain, is it a lost cause if certain ones don't occur by age five, or is there a way to recover?

Walsh: The thinking on the zero- to five-year-old range has changed a little bit as we've come to know a little bit more about the brain. Early childhood development is absolutely very important. Those growth spurts I talked about have two nicknames: Window of opportunity and window of sensitivity. The window of opportunity denotes the potential for brains during those growth spurts. The window of sensitivity denotes the vulnerability. So experiences that we have become very important. I like the word "window" because we can almost get an image of the window closing. Once the window is closed, then it's very difficult to go back in and wire those circuits.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no media for kids under the age of two. Their recommendation is based on brain science. Their point is there are so many things kids should be doing in the real world. And I would argue that it's in those first three years that the message of *no*, the basic building block for self-discipline, actually gets laid, particularly between the ages of 18 and 24 months.

David Hann: Let's stipulate that you've made your case in your presentation. If so, are you suggesting that, as a society, we ought to manage aggressively the content of what goes on in the media, otherwise known as censorship?

Walsh: One of the great gifts we have in the United States is the First Amendment. And the First Amendment protects speech, even speech we don't particularly like. The courts have been very consistent that any efforts at censorship violate the First Amendment. So I have two reactions. On the one hand, I wish we could do something about this. On the other hand, I don't want to go down a path that might create more problems than we solve.

So we need to educate and take responsibility. I think a lot of the responsibility really rests on

parents. You know, if some people knocked on my door tonight and said, “Can we come in and talk to your kids?” And if, for some crazy reason, I let them in and then they said, “Oh, by the way, do you mind if we have this conversation in the privacy of their bedroom?” And if, for some crazy reason, I let them do that, and then they stayed in there for 44 hours, and then I went over to the door to listen to what was going on and found that they were promoting a whole set of values and attitudes that were completely antagonistic to everything I wanted my kids to learn, what would I do? Well, of course, I’d toss them out. I never would have let them enter in the first place, in that preposterous example.

We need to understand, that’s what’s happening. We are bringing very powerful teachers into our kids’ lives. We have to pay attention to what they’re teaching. All media are educational. The question is, what are they teaching?

Bob Osburn: The Founders’ assumption was that to have a republic like ours, you had to have self-government, which meant virtue, and to have virtue, you had to have religion. Obviously, you’re pointing to the whole virtue of self-discipline as a key idea here. What do you think about the impact of religion, broadly speaking, on this question of self-discipline, and does it really make any difference for kids in the way they handle media?

Walsh: I think one of the big casualties of a culture of more, easy, fast, and fun is not only the erosion of self-discipline but the erosion of spiritual and religious values. I think we are really suffering from a hyper-consumerism and a “me-first-and-the-heck-with-everybody-else” attitude. “More, easy, fast, and fun” says I should be able to do whatever I want when I want, and I should be able to have whatever I want when I want it. This runs counter to many of our religious traditions. Some words that we’ve traditionally used have gone out of style—like the word “temptation.” We have to be able to have self-discipline to be able to resist impulses. That’s called resisting temptation. It sounds like such old language, but we could actually explain that completely in terms of modern brain research.

Lani Muchulas: The South Korean government seems to have been very responsive and called on you to help address these problems. Has Washington called on you and, if not, how can we help your institute in support of that? How can we help?

Walsh: What a great concluding question. First of all, what we’re talking about today is one of the few issues that does not polarize, and I think we should take advantage of that. We have allies in Washington: we work with Ed Markie, a Massachusetts congressman on the left; we work with Sam Brownback, who is on the right; and we work with Joe Lieberman, who’s in the middle. So this issue cuts across the entire political spectrum, which I think gives us a real advantage.

I think we need to come together around this issue so we can start to bridge some of the polarization that has driven us apart. I think we need to have a broader conversation about how our kids are doing. I think we have to pay attention to what’s happening to kids before they even walk into school, no matter what or where the school is.

Pearlstein: Let me speak on behalf of the audience. That was absolutely superior. Thank you very much.

Walsh: And thank you. ■



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