POSITIVE PARENTING- WHAT CONTENT ARE CHILDREN WATCHING?

There's a rising trend of children watching adult content. Violence and inappropriate language, once shown on television during an adults-only time, are becoming staple viewing for many of today's children.
In a recent poll of 1,800 US parents, 40% admitted allowing their children to watch movies that are unsuitable for their age group. A recent discussion by this writer with parents suggests that the trends are similar in Australia.

The increase in 'adult-only' animation is one factor that blurs the line of suitability for children. Adult-only genres such as Marvel movies and X Men franchise and television programs such as Game of Thrones and The Walking Dead thanks to streaming now count children among their devotees. Computer games, so popular with many children and young people, also cross the line of acceptability in terms of behaviour and attitudes on display.

Can we become desensitised over time?
Viewing standards, like standards of acceptable behaviour, have subtly shifted over time. Physical violence or violent language is now a common part of adult content, which has a desensitising effect on parents. Desensitisation leads to acceptance and a higher level of exposure to children.

Does fitting in play a part?
Advertisers know that children's pester power can play a significant role in the type of foods that go into the shopping trolley, which influences how food is packaged and promoted. Pester power plays a similar role in the choice of movies and television programs that we allow children to watch. "All the other kids have seen this movie?" is the type of comment from a child that hits a nerve for many parents, who rightfully want their child to fit in with their peers.

What are the risks?
There are many concerns about children being exposed to adult content in movies, television programs and the computer games. Here's a summary:

Developmental risks
Exposure to content that requires complex adult interpretation can be deeply confusing and disturbing to children. They often have difficulty discerning reality from what they are viewing on television so that they can developed a warped world view. The impact may not be immediate, but will show itself increasingly over time when children's attitudes towards their peers or authority reflect the on-screen content they've been viewing.

Impact on attitudes and behaviour
Children are like sponges soaking up what they see and hear. Viewing parent-sanctioned programs that display disrespectful behaviour toward women, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and shows violence as normal have a powerful impact on the attitudes and behaviour of children. Viewed often enough, young minds can interpret these types of inappropriate behaviours as normal.

Impact on wellbeing
According to the Australian Council on Children and Media (ACCM) there is significant evidence that exposure by children to adult movies and programs leads to the development of exaggerated fears; causes loss of sleep and increases childhood anxiety. ACCM claims that "these fears are not insignificant and can be long lasting."

What can you do?
There are a number of actions you can take to ensure the content that children consume is appropriate for their age level, including:

Follow classification guidelines
Become familiar with the Government classification guidelines for movies, television programs and games. Understand what they mean and develop the habit of checking the classification rating of each new piece of content that children will be watching or interacting with.

Find out
It's easier than ever to find out for yourself the suitability of content for a child or young person. Research methods include vetting a television program yourself for suitability; searching online for views and opinions before allowing your child to watch a movie; reading reviews of online games to ascertain suitability.

Talk with other parents
It's easy to feel isolated as a parent, which makes you more susceptible to children's pester power. Just as children have a propensity to gang up on parents ("Everyone in my class is watching that movie"), parents can gain the strength that comes with numbers when they talk with each other ("I've just checked with some mums and no one is allowing their child to watch that movie").

Many current community concerns about children such as the increase in anxiety levels, disrespectful relationships and a propensity towards aggression is mirrored in the content many children consume in movies, television and games. It would be folly to suggest that inappropriate content consumption is the root cause of these maladies, however winding back the viewing habits of children to reflect more closely their developmental levels would have a surprisingly positive impact.

Parenting Ideas 2020, accessed October 2020, https://www.parentingideas.com.au/