



Mixed Messages

Teaching your kids to surf the tsunami of media messages – the good, the bad and the ugly – just might make you a better father

If the media has one message, it's that media is good. All media. For everyone.

Give in to that idea and not only will your kids have less of a childhood, but you'll be less of a dad, says Dr Karen Brooks, author of *Consuming Innocence: Popular Culture and our Children*.

"We've lost the confidence to be parents," says Brooks. "No-one knows our children better than we do. It's time to put adults back into the equation."

PRESENCE, NOT PRESENTS

"When you're time-poor, there's this idea that if you say no to something, you're depriving your child," says Brooks. Make them feel that they're not missing out by giving them some access to your stuff. Kids who don't have the "right stuff" can be made to feel like outsiders by other children, she maintains, but give in to every whinge and "you'll nurture acquisitive children, not inquisitive ones".

THE RIGHT BOUNDARIES

Consumer advice on toys, films and games – ages three and up, PG, etc – is useful but should be taken with a grain of salt, says Brooks. You know best. "And don't be tempted to allow them material that isn't age-appropriate because you think they're clever or special in some way."

YOUR VALUES

"When you buy a DVD or sit down to watch a TV program, ask yourself, 'Does it reflect my values and those I want to instill in my child?'" says Brooks. "If it contradicts them, don't buy it."

START EARLY

Open a dialogue with your kids, advises Brooks. "If they're hooked on something, watch it with them. Ask what it is they like about it."

Where appropriate, share your favourite shows and games with your kids. "That way, they'll come to understand your opinions."

BE A DAD, NOT A BUDDY

Don't pretend to share their tastes, says Brooks. "Children want and need boundaries. They test us so we can prove to them we can protect them, look after them. They want reassurance."

BE THE GOOD COP

Get other parents on the same page, advises Brooks. If there's a sleepover, talk to the parents about what guidelines you set for your kids.

"You can't completely control what they consume outside the family home, but make it clear that when they're in your house, it's your rules that apply."

HIT THE SWITCH

"Never allow your children to have a web connection in their own room," says Brooks. Same goes for mobile phones and TVs.

"Kids don't switch off if they're not made to. Studies show that high levels of connectivity affect circadian sleep rhythms."



Expert advice on the curliest questions a kid can ask

Daddy ... Why does everybody die?

► WHY THEY'RE ASKING

"It's a developmental milestone," says Kimberley O'Brien, lead child psychologist at Sydney's Quirky Kids psychology clinic. "It marks a child's ability to see life as a series of beginnings and endings. From about the age of three or four, they start to understand that things aren't forever. They start to mature to a point where they don't feel that they are invincible. That goes for you as a parent, too. Also, by now they may have experienced a death – a pet or a grandparent."

► THE ANSWER

"It's always good to have them reading stories that cover the process of dying and death – even before they can understand the concept fully," says O'Brien. "Some people will explain the process in religious terms – Fido's gone to heaven, for example – but in general, don't use explanations like that if you don't subscribe to those beliefs yourself. You'll only have to backtrack later on."

► THE PAY-OFF

Get this one right and your kid will be better able to cope with loss when it arises, empathise with others affected by death and dying, and be equipped to deal with the resurgence of thoughts about mortality that often strike in the teenage years.

► USEFUL BOOK

Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes in Between. Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (illus.); Paper Tiger, 1983.

PHOTOLIBRARY

AGES TWO AND UP

Elmo's Potty Time (Madman; \$16.95)

And you thought the loveable mini-Muppet could only sing and dance. Elmo's brand of toilet training teaches that accidents are OKAY. There's even a certificate for straight aiming.



AGES FOUR TO EIGHT

LeapFrog Tag Reading System

Recently gonged as Australia's Toy of the Year, this is a sure-fire way to encourage little wrigglers to curl up with a book. The system uses special dot-patterned books and a small stylus that "reads" words, letters and symbols when touched to the pages. Find it in all good toy stores; \$99.95.



Picks of the month from *Practical Parenting* magazine