For 33 years on American public television, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* revolutionized the way children watched TV. The show’s repetition, gentle pace, and intentional language proved that television could be developmentally appropriate, educational, and still captivating to young children. Today, with the success of the documentary *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* and a biopic starring Tom Hanks to be released in 2019, many are looking back to Mister Rogers for guidance in the age of digital media.

On average, children under 8 spend over 2 hours a day with screen media. Many parents are concerned about their children’s screen time, but research can provide some guidance for using media in positive ways. One of the most important takeaways is that children learn more from media when adults are involved and help them understand the material they are encountering.

Much as they do when reading a book with their children, parents can support children’s engagement with media by talking with them about the content. Indeed, the newest media guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics encourage adults to use media with children and help them understand what they are seeing. Here are some research-based tips that may be useful to parents, teachers, and others who work with children.

**Talk about media**

While you are using media together, it is helpful to ask your children questions, comment on what is happening, and relate the story to their lives. For example, you might ask whether they have ever felt sad like the character in the show, or whether they remember a time when your family, like the one in the movie, went to the zoo.

“As they do when reading a book with their children, parents can support children’s engagement with media by talking with them about the content.”

In one study, parents in one group were told to pause a video, ask questions, and encourage their child to talk about the story they were watching. Members of the other group were asked to watch the video with their child as they normally would. Results showed that children learned more from the video when their parents interacted with them.

One of the nice features of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was its slow pacing, which allowed time for conversation. It can feel awkward to interrupt a TV show or video to discuss the content, but with streaming services like Netflix and YouTube, videos can be paused so that you and your child won’t miss any of the action.
Help your child understand the message

While the message of a TV show or movie may be clear to you, as an adult, it may not be clear to your child. Research shows that children have difficulty understanding the lesson behind a TV show until they reach the age of about 10.

In another study, children were shown an episode of Clifford the Big Red Dog that featured a three-legged dog. It was initially feared by the other dogs, but eventually came to be accepted. Adults immediately recognize that the story is intended to promote inclusive attitudes. However, many children drew much more specific lessons, such as “Be nice to three-legged dogs,” and were unable to generalize the moral of the story to other situations. Children may need to hear an explicit explanation in order to understand the intended message.

“It can be tempting to ignore controversial media content, but research suggests that it is more helpful to address it and make sure children know how you feel about it.”

Parents can provide support by discussing the messages that media is trying to send. They might say, for example, “Those dogs were really scared of KC at first, weren’t they? But then they learned that playing with KC wasn’t going to hurt them just because he looked a little different. Do you think that you should be friends with people who are different from you?”

Make connections to the real world

You can also help your child learn from media by connecting what they are seeing to their everyday lives. In yet another study, 3-year-olds watched an episode of Dora the Explorer. When asked afterwards, 75% of the children said the Spanish words in the show weren’t real or that they weren’t sure whether they were real. Not surprisingly, children who didn’t believe the Spanish words were real were less likely to learn them.

Encouraging children to make a connection between what they see in media and the real world may help them understand the role of media as an educational tool, which can promote learning. The parent or teacher might say, “Can you say hello in Spanish like Dora? Dora speaks Spanish just like your friend Luciana at school.”

Address controversial content

Talking to your child about media can also help reduce possible negative effects. Studies have shown that when adults talk to children about the messages conveyed through media, the children are less likely to be affected by negative influences. For example, a study found that when an adult talked to boys about the feelings of the victim of violence in a cartoon, they were less likely to subsequently show increased aggression.

It can be tempting to ignore controversial media content, but research suggests that it is more helpful to address it and make sure children know how you feel about it. You might explain why violence isn’t the best way to solve problems, for example, and suggest alternative ways a character could have handled the situation.

Introduce new concepts

A positive aspect of media is that they can expose your children to new concepts and ideas that they wouldn’t encounter in their everyday lives, such as spaceships or igloos. Research has found
that although parents use less language overall when watching TV with their children, they use more new words, both while they are watching and afterwards.

“Use media thoughtfully, just as you would any other parenting tool, and enjoy spending quality time with your child both with and without screens.”

Like Mister Rogers, many educational shows introduce children to different cultures or even different planets. When you use media with your child, think about how you can use the content to teach your child about the world. After watching Moana, for instance, you might talk about the South Pacific, waves, or sea turtles.

**Use media as a tool**

Media are not only an excellent source of educational content; they also provide an opportunity for emotional bonding between parents and children. Talking to children about what they are seeing can help them process it, making it easier for them to acquire new information and less likely to be affected by negative media influences.

You probably can’t sit down with your children every time they are using media – and that's okay! As Mister Rogers said, “Some days, doing the best we can may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but... doing what we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else.” Use media thoughtfully, just as you would any other parenting tool, and enjoy spending quality time with your child both with and without screens.

This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at https://bold.expert/screen-time-as-story-time-using-media-with-your-child/.