

## Children and Television

*by Novice Joseph*

On any given night, tens of millions of Americans sit hypnotized by some kind of electronic device: stereos, television, or radios. Almost every school-aged child in the United States hungers for and receives his or her "media fix" on a daily basis. With the introduction of "Beta-Max" and cable TV into the American home, the future of Orthodox Christian family life and culture seems doomed.

### The Effects of TV

Just what are the dooming effects of electronic entertainment (primarily television) on the minds and, more importantly, the souls of young Orthodox Christians? Let me suggest five crucial effects:

1. From questioning, curious, family-centered, book-and-art loving five-year-olds, most American children have, by the age of eleven, lost their ability to question their environment. One cannot ask a television for an answer. And schools do precious little, if anything, to promote curiosity or imagination. The television first hypnotizes, and then numbs, the imaginative capabilities of the young person. The young student, therefore, loses interest in books which approach life with any more complexity than that offered on TV (if, indeed, he reads at all). Creative writing, diaries, letter writing and the ability to discuss any topic for more than a few minutes -all of these diminish as the electronic device takes over.
2. By the age of ten, school children usually exhibit changes in speech patterns, as a result of watching TV. Either they become so passive that their verbal expressions are reduced to the minimum, or their speech—especially when describing events—increases in speed and becomes confused. Almost every parent has seen this phenomenon at one time or another. ("And then..., and then.... and then .... ") This is due in major part to the absorption of rapid-fire television language, where silence is non-existent and where a change in subjects is constant. By age eleven, having watched 4,000 hours of television, the normal American child has taken the majority of his English lessons from the TV screen, and not from school teachers or books. And there are few full paragraphs spoken on TV, almost no poetry, and no descriptive materials. Is it any wonder that the average eighteen-year-old American can hardly read or write?
3. Mythological television characters replace parents, relatives, the Saints, and Christ as role models. A normal American fourteen-year-old girl talks with her mother (in terms of actually discussing a subject in an intelligible way and in a sensible context) only about four minutes a week! Listen to your family's dinner conversations. Can they compete with hours of TV? Or for that matter, what do Church services mean to your children in terms of the thousands of hypnotic, mindless hours before the television? As family communication decreases, television watching increases. And as the TV devours more and more hours in young children's lives, almost nothing can compete with it for attention.
4. Creative silence, from which stem our relationships with God, the earth, and even our neighbors, is subconsciously discouraged by the ever-babbling television, radio, or stereo. Children and adults become increasingly "rattled" in the face of extended silence. Children learn that it is

simply not fun to be silent. Prayer, of course, becomes boring. Church is unbearable. Quiet contemplation is unthinkable.

5. The major issues of life are twisted and distorted by the media, which are primarily interested in creating spiritless consumers, rather than spiritual producers. Love, war, death, prejudice, the world of work, history, the future, and, most importantly, God and the fate of the human soul—all of these issues are either twisted, distorted, or ignored. Children—and adults—do not view television in context. For example, during the "Christmas Season" there may be, on any given night, a full length movie on the life of Christ, an inane situation comedy, and some show filled with mindless violence, half-sketched characters, and an infantile plot. The young child has no context in which to put the two shows, subconsciously admiring the criminal who evades the police as much as, or more than, Christ hanging on the Cross. The whole TV schedule is filled with a mixture of history, culture, and junk -with junk predominating at ninety percent of the material. A child equates it all: The Holocaust, Macbeth, the life of Christ, and "Magnum, P.I." Having no historical, cultural, or spiritual values, the good and the bad are swallowed up together, the good more than likely forgotten three days later.

### **What Can We Do?**

What can we as Orthodox Christians do in the face of such an electronic onslaught? How can we compete with Hollywood and the mindless materialistic society that surrounds us?

Schools, unfortunately, offer very little in terms of strengthening the Orthodox family, teaching cultural, historical, and literary skills, and in imparting spiritual and moral guidance to our young. Indeed, a young child in America is lucky to have one teacher in twenty who is capable of preparing the child for an active, productive Orthodox life. Most teachers are television-trained non-readers. They are materialists in their approach to society. And one is more than likely to find that teachers, if they have even heard of the Orthodox Church, are opposed to the Orthodox form of child-rearing.

The battle of the mind versus the media is one which must ultimately be waged in the home and in the Church. The relationship between our society and Orthodox culture is, in many ways, far more dangerous than the relationship which existed between pagan Rome and the Early Church. In pagan Rome, Christians gave up their bodies to society, but retained and elevated their souls. Modern society wants both body and soul! The task before the family and before the Church, therefore, is no small one. Nor will the battle be won by those who are weak or compromising.

There are some practical strategies that we can use in defeating the deleterious effects of television on the development of our Orthodox children. Young children in America are introduced to society, as we previously noted, by means of television and by means of the heroes and champions promoted by the media figures who are anything but inspiring and who almost always violate the true Christian view of man. If there are any non-media figures in their list of heroes and champions, these more often than not come by way of coloring books, fairy tales, and sometimes inane school books, these latter sources themselves often influenced by media personalities and the media "mind-set."

In this process of development, at least for Orthodox children, Church and prayer play some role. But by the time that the child reaches eight years old, the effect of the media bombardment is such that the Church and prayer rank almost last in his priorities. Any parish Priest can verify this fact. And the reason

for this, again, is that there is no reinforcement for religious belief in the media-created and media-dominated world in which the child operates. What one must do is substitute television and normal reading with activities that are conducive to good Orthodox development. Before the age of eight, the following activities should be seriously considered by every Orthodox parent. They are activities that help to form the soul and to create a world-view that is compatible with that which one encounters in Church and which promotes prayerful introspection (of which children are really quite capable).

1. Instead of art by way of infantile coloring books and school projects, which tend to treat children as though they were artistic morons, teach your child to draw and to paint Icons. Start with teaching the child to trace Icons. In almost every town in America there are public libraries with large Icon books or with loan systems through which such books can be ordered. Start with just the face of Christ, the Theotokos, and the Saints, then move on to other parts of the Icon. In this exercise, you should teach the child to begin with a prayer, to sketch a cross at the top of the paper on which he is working, and to go without an afternoon snack or evening dessert, so that the child will learn something about the sacred nature of iconography. One should stress to the child that, the more effort he puts forth in prayerfully sketching holy figures, the more that God will reward that effort with a good product. This, too, helps the child to understand better the mystical nature of an Icon.

In order to teach your child perspective and drawing from nature, have him trace, draw, and paint scenes from nature by the great masters of western and oriental painting. In this way he will understand the diversity in perspective and learn to appreciate other cultures. Chinese and Japanese painters, moreover, are quite skilled in portraying landscapes and animals, which children especially love at a young age. Drawing will thus acquire the same importance that printing did, when your child first printed his name. These early skills will help to prepare the child for later skills in painting and, most importantly, will have helped him to learn to see something which the media can never do. We might also stress that, in approaching secular art as something separate from iconography, the child intuitively learns that iconography is not an art form as such, but a spiritual skill which is tied to spiritual vision.

2. Instead of reading the usual children's material (fairy tales and the incredibly far-fetched literature available in the public school system), read to your children each night from the lives of the Saints, from the life of Christ, and from the Old and New Testaments, weaving the Icons that the child is working on into the stories. In fact, there are some texts of the Bible illustrated with Orthodox Icons, which is an excellent way to reach children with verbal and pictorial images at the same time.

Many children under eight years of age are terribly afraid of the dark and of death. They think, indeed, about metaphysical as well as physical matters—albeit in a somewhat crude way. The lives of Saints especially give the child a healthy view of the interaction of the Physical and metaphysical, helping him to overcome his fears. The questions which the children will have, after reading the lives of the Saints, will astound you in their directness and force. Both the child and the parent will thus grow spiritually.

3. If your child has a vivid dream or some striking experience, have him tell it to you and tape record it. If you do this, and then let the child go back and write about the experience after a few weeks, while listening to the tape, he will be able to see how his emotions change over time, how time changes our perceptions of events, and how we naturally forget much. It will also teach your child to read and to write better. Ask the child, in these writing exercises, to keep a word

bank. What words cause him to smile? To frown? To be happy? To think about God? Your child will thus make associations between words and the mental world—something that television will never allow him to do.

4. Attend Church services on Saturday night and on Sunday morning. It is important for your child to be away from the "prime-time" television shows, which tend to concentrate their perverting messages into inane and harmful "features." The Orthodox Church's cycle of services gives you an opportunity to do just this, by always attending both Vespers and Matins and Liturgy. These services will help the child to understand that God belongs to the night and the day (thus helping him overcome his fear of the night), that God is not just someone whom we remember on Sunday morning, and that the Church is for every season, day, and time. The more that your child is in Church, the more that what he has learned about Icons and the holy heroes and champions about whom he has read will impress him.
5. Use the library extensively. There is no excuse for anyone in America to claim that he cannot find materials to help instruct his children. Even tiny towns have excellent libraries. You can even use tapes and records available through the library to introduce a child to classical music and the like. All of this will distract him from America's notorious "idiot box," the television. It will also provide him with an alternative to the sterile and sometimes stupid books that the common child finds at school.
6. Your children should know the nature of hard work and of physical exercise. However old-fashioned it may sound, hard work builds character. If anyone doubts this, simply think about children who do not work. They become hopelessly incapacitated. As well, exercise helps keep the body alert, which in turns helps keep the mind alert, which in turn helps keep the soul watchful.
7. Stress fasting and good eating habits. One of the most pernicious parts of television is that it exposes children to foods full of chemicals and sugar, the result being poor physical and mental health. Teach your children to fast each Wednesday and Friday and to eat good foods. As a result, their minds will be healthier and they will be less attracted to media idiocy. One way that the media are able to keep their control over the mind is by weakening it, by forming poor eating habits through commercials.

If these steps (and others that the reader may come up with on his own) are followed, by the time your child reaches the "magic" age of eight, he will be able to confront the temptations and perversions of society and the values which are taught in a media age. He will have an Orthodox outlook and an Orthodox way of approaching the trials of the world. His moral life, his spiritual life, and his personal life will be formed in an atmosphere that, while at odds with the world, will nonetheless feel familiar to him. How this attitude is maintained through the teenage years will be the subject of our last comments on children and television.

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