The Big Turn Off: Surviving Parenting without Television

I am a retired senior volunteer teaching assistant at the Angier Elementary School in Waban, MA. Recently, the fourth-grade class where I assist had an Open Circle discussion about watching television and its negative aspects. Many of the children expressed their thoughts about how much time they spent watching TV or playing video games. The students agreed to participate in an experiment; they would go “cold turkey” and not use these devices for an entire week.

Dick Hanelin, the teacher in the class, devised a little system to use in the experiment. Each participant was to keep a daily log on whether they watched TV that day, what they did instead, and what their feelings were about dealing with the loss of watching TV. Parents and siblings were encouraged to participate in the experiment. The reasons for the experiment, Mr. Hanelin said, were not only to be aware of how much television we watch, but to be more selective and also to find more enjoyable and productive ways to use one's time—playing with friends, spending time with family members, reading, etc.

At the end of the week, another Open Circle discussion was held in which a number of parents and siblings participated. Each participant was asked to think about the following questions:

- How much time did you spend last week in watching television or playing electronic games?
- How did you spend your time in place of these activities?
- What were your feelings about giving up TV?
- How did the elimination of television affect your relationship with friends and/or family?
- What did you learn about yourself by doing this experiment?
- Are there changes you feel you want to make on a more permanent basis as a result of going through this experiment?

Some of the observations of the participants were quite revealing. One parent stated that she spent more time talking with her husband. Two or three parents said that there was less need to discipline their kids over watching TV because they weren't watching at all. Several parents and children alike spoke of having more time to interact with other family members, play games, read, or even sleep more. Several children said that they used the extra time by interacting more with friends. Parents spoke of reading the newspaper more closely, and two of them even mentioned that they had added a second daily newspaper to read as a result of the time that was freed up. Listening to the radio as a replacement source for news or weather was also mentioned.

A number of the children, as well as their parents, spoke about being pleased with watching less television, even though at the beginning of the experiment they had been dubious.

Mr. Hanelin devised a novel and useful experiment that epitomizes the best form of teaching: don’t preach or talk down to the kids — involve them in the thought process and in freely expressing themselves to one another, as well as to their teacher. And challenge them in an interesting, useful, and creative way. All of us who participated learned a great deal about ourselves and about
making better, more enjoyable and fulfilling use of our time. Those fourth-graders, their siblings and parents—along with myself—were treated to a valuable lesson that will stand us in good stead throughout our lives. It was a pleasure for me to be one of the lucky participants. You might say that we were all “turned on” by the experience of turning off our television sets.