



PARENTING POLICIES DURING THE EARLY YEARS

By Susan Vogt

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I'm not usually such a pessimist, but it is my experience as a parent that once a child is over 10 (perhaps earlier) that it's really difficult to set new family ground rules. Consider the parent who goes to a workshop and is encouraged to take the TV out of their child's room, limit TV to an hour a day, and prohibit violent video games – all good things, in my opinion. Unfortunately, if that child is not used to such rules, the child will likely prohibit the parent from going to any future workshops.

It's not that family rules don't evolve with the age of the child but as any teacher knows – *Be strict at the beginning of the year; you can always lighten up and make exceptions later.* It's hard to do the reverse. Kids don't take kindly to having their freedom reigned in once they've gotten used to not having a limit. It's so much easier to establish ground rules while children are still at the age that they think their parents are awesome than when they think they are Neanderthal.

What do I mean by family ground rules? Things like:

- How much TV, (video, computer) time is allowed and what are the standards
- How much time should children spend doing chores to help out around the house
- When are sweets and junk food allowed
- Bedtime and homework routines
- Grace before meals, attending weekly religious services, other faith building activities...

Although all of the above are good grist for family ground rules, for now I'd like to focus on the dangers of violence in the media, especially video games. Dave Grossman, a retired U.S. Army colonel and psychologist who used to train soldiers to overcome their natural reluctance to kill offers some sobering insights. Two of the army's techniques relate closely to violent video games.

1. Desensitization

What used to shock or scare a person gradually loses its power when repeated over and over again with no apparent tragic consequences. Thus, seeing one violent video game or scary TV show is probably not going to scar a child for life, but a steady diet of violence numbs a person and creates an acceptance of increasing levels of violence as normal. (Of course the same could be said for the increasing levels of pre-marital and extra-marital sex shown in the media.)

2. Operant conditioning

This method has to do with repeated use of a stimulus and a response. In military training Grossman says, "soldiers learn to fire at realistic, man-shaped silhouettes that pop up in their field of view – that's the stimulus. The trainees only have a split second to engage the target, and then it drops... Later, when they're out on the battlefield, or a police officer is walking a beat, and somebody pops up with a gun, they will shoot reflexively." Sounds like many of the violent video games like *Doom* and *Quake* to me.

It's hard, however, to suddenly say to a 12 year old, "I just read a thought provoking article and why don't we throw out your video games that shoot humans with a joy stick." Your subscription to *that* magazine might mysteriously be cancelled. Children need to learn as preschoolers that certain games are off limits.

So does that mean that those of us with older children just have to resign ourselves to having raised a lost generation? Of course not. It may be possible to touch the child's heart with a plea to help younger children or at least to evaluate whether any of their games might use desensitization or operant conditioning. Perhaps an older child would be willing to sign a family letter to the most offensive video game manufacturers expressing your disapproval. The line would be drawn differently for older children, but that doesn't mean there can't be a line. It's still a lot easier to start when they're young, however. If this doesn't apply to you, do a young family a favor and pass it on.