

The Youth Vote

The Youth Vote is an educational tool that was created to help young people learn to be critical of what they see on television and to recognize that, just as polluted water can carry dangerous bacteria, TV and other entertainment products can carry toxic messages. The exercise entails discussing specific TV programs, music videos and other entertainment products, and voting on which have the most influence, both positive and negative, on themselves and their peers.



As it is often easier for young people to observe the influence of media violence on those younger than themselves, the first step in the Youth Vote is to ask students: Who has seen children imitating what they have seen on TV? Encourage students to provide examples of imitative behaviour, language and clothing they have observed in the schoolyard, the neighbourhood and at family gatherings. Some may give examples from their babysitting experience of nightmares or fears that reflect what children have seen on TV. Some may even testify about their own personal behaviour. As students give examples, you may need to help them to clarify what the child was doing and which program, movie, or videogame inspired the behaviour in question. The point of this discussion is not to identify good or bad kids but, rather, to help students become more conscious that they imitate what they have been watching. Adults know this occurs but children need to bring their own experience into focus.

Tracking the toxins

The next step is to provide clues about the toxic “bacteria” inhabiting entertainment products. Just as a microscope helps us to see bacteria in water, critical viewing skills help us to notice the “bacteria” in TV and other forms of entertainment. Students will need some understanding of the four main toxic influences that they will be looking for: sexism, racism, violence and fear. Define each one and ask students to give a real-life example of each. Even grade one students can provide examples of fear and violence, and students in grade four and beyond can readily discuss examples of sexism and racism in their everyday lives.

Once students understand these toxic influences, explain that they will be looking for examples of two of these influences -- violence and fear -- in entertainment. Divide the class into groups of three or four students, and separate entertainment products into six categories: television programs for young children, television programs for teens, movies, music videos/DVDs, video games and commercials. Ask each group to brainstorm examples and, for each category, list the three that contain the highest frequency of aggressive actions, shootings, explosions, and deaths or, more generally, are the most violent or disturbing. (Note: ask students in grades one through three for examples of TV programs only.) Most groups will be able to complete this task with only about 30 seconds’ discussion.

The third step is to select from the groups' many suggestions the class nominees for "Worst of ..." in each of the six categories. To keep the selection manageable, you may wish to have a first ballot to reduce the list to four or five nominees in each category. The names of nominees for each category should be written on the board. Then, ask the students to select their personal choice for each category. It is strongly recommended that, before they make a final decision, students discuss their selections and their reasons for them.

Bear in mind that some teens will say they enjoy violence and cruelty because they think that hiding their fears and appearing to be insensitive makes them look cool. Tough teenagers who are not used to expressing emotions may prefer to speak as if they have none. Rather than address such attitudes directly, teachers can instead focus on the influence of the media on very young children. When this discussion is handled sensitively by a teacher, even the most frequent viewers of toxic productions can become experts who look at the problem in a way that can be very useful for their peers. In their comments, they might reveal, for example, that they care about their younger brother or sister. The Youth Vote can become a powerful exercise in freedom of expression for these students. Before each student votes, therefore, teachers can mention that each student's personal choice in each of the six categories is not intended to — nor does it have to — meet the approval of parents, teachers or friends. Emphasize that students' own views, critical thinking, and free expression are of greater importance. Caution students that the vote is not a poll that seeks to determine what is the most popular program or entertainment, nor are you looking for the program with the most violence. Instead, you want them to state their evaluation of the *influence* that these productions have on young people. Point out that a program that is extremely violent but seen by only a few may not have as much influence as a less violent program seen by many. Once all students have voted for their personal choices for "Worst of ..." in each category, you are ready to ask students the key question: Which program or video or game has the strongest influence on people around them, in their school, in their family, in their community?

Praising the positives

After the voting has been completed, the class should begin its search for the most positive entertainment products in the same six categories as above. Positive productions are those that emphasize any of the following:

- Cooperation instead of competition: programs that bring out the best in everyone rather than celebrating only a winner (i.e., the first, the strongest, the quickest) and dismissing others as losers.
- Non-violent conflict resolution: programs that show how we can all be winners by solving problems and reaching agreements without hitting or insulting each other.
- Equality of men and women: programs in which no one dominates or is forced to serve another.

- International and multicultural understanding: programs that promote understanding and avoid stereotypes. Too often, the Caucasian is the hero with the last-minute solution for justice, while the aboriginal, Arab or Asian person is portrayed as the hypocrite, the criminal or the terrorist.
- Protecting the environment: programs that realistically reflect the need for a global effort to save our planet.

Ask students to list “Best of ...” examples in each of the six categories. Continue with the same process used to select toxic productions to arrive at four or five nominees, from which each student can make a final choice in each category.

Transforming results into power

To enhance the experience of the Youth Vote, teams of two or three high school students could work with younger students at a nearby elementary or middle school to help them conduct their own Youth Vote. Older students usually enjoy this project, and teachers in the elementary or middle schools enjoy watching their former students in action as they develop leadership abilities. In some schools, students in grade 6 have been given the responsibility to help grades 5, 4 and 3 participate in their vote. Another option would be for a group or class of students to prepare its own video before conducting a school-wide vote. The video should include a student commentator, discussion of local arguments, and the nominees for whichever categories the students want to include.

In schools where many or all classes have participated in a Youth Vote, student volunteers can tabulate the results class by class. When students’ choices are known for the entire school, leaders from several classes can be given the responsibility of reporting to the school population, perhaps inviting the media to attend or holding a separate press conference at which they can inform the media of their assessment of entertainment products. Considering the hundreds of hours that young people spend consuming entertainment products, it seems only fair that the media should take a few minutes to listen to young citizens’ evaluations of those products. When properly conducted, Youth Votes represent the voice of youth and send a strong message to broadcasters, TV, movie, music video, and commercial producers as well as videogame designers. While their voices are largely ignored by producers, children and teenagers need to know that some adults helped them to develop some resistance to manipulation and mind control.