



The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge

The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge is another educational tool for raising students' awareness of the influence of media on their lives. Most children living in affluent industrialized countries suffer social detachment very early in their lives. In North America, for example, it is estimated that children spend between 20 to 25 hours a week watching television programs or playing video games, while they spend only 37 minutes a week talking with their parents.¹² In order to develop emotionally and

socially, what children really need is interaction with others in activities such as sports, hobbies, or house and garden chores. The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge evolved from the 2001 research findings of Dr. Tom Robinson that, when young people watched less TV and played fewer video games, they were less aggressive at home and school.¹³ While previous research had linked exposure to media violence with increased aggression, few potential solutions had been evaluated. Robinson and his research team set out to change that through a study that compared students in grades 3 and 4 at two elementary schools in California during the 1996-97 school year. One group received no instruction and served as a control. At the other school, specially trained teachers delivered 18 lessons over a six-month period on reducing the use of television, videos and video games. At the beginning of the study, students at the intervention school were asked to report the amount of time they spent each week watching TV and videos or playing video games. They were then challenged to abstain for ten days, and then to watch or play no more than seven hours a week afterward.



Prior to the challenge, the children in Robinson's study reported an average of 15.5 hours of weekly television viewing, 5 hours of viewing videos, and 3 hours of playing video games. By the end of the course, these times fell 33 percent to an average of 9 hours of television viewing, 3.5 hours of viewing videos, and 1.5 hours of playing video games. Children were asked to rate their classmates' aggression at the beginning of the study and at the end. At the outset, peer reports of aggression were similar at the two schools. By the study's end, such reports were down by about 25 percent among participants at the intervention school compared with those in the control school. Researchers also measured changes in verbal and physical aggression by regularly observing the playground behaviour of about 50 participants at each school. At the end of the study, there were 25 percent fewer observed incidents in the intervention group compared with those in the control school. Robinson's findings are consistent with research that suggests that overexposure to even nonviolent media can make young people more aggressive. Children who watch or play lots of TV or video games may spend less time interacting with others and, consequently, have fewer social skills. There is some debate, however, as to whether the decreases noted in the study are long lasting.

When some parents in Québec learned of Tom Robinson's research findings, they convinced 35 schools in the province to stage a 10-Day TV-Free Challenge in 2003. Here

are some suggestions for organizing a 10-Day Challenge in your elementary or middle school, based on their experience. It is important to start with the support of the school's parent-teacher association or parent council, as the success of the challenge will depend on the participation of students' families. Some principals use the first parent meeting in the school year to introduce the challenge. Some schools send special invitations home with students to boost attendance; at one Québec school, teachers declared that the students' only homework assignment was to bring their parents to the meeting! The purpose of the first meeting is to seek parents' support and participation and to inform them that their children's participation is to be voluntary rather than enforced. A separate preparatory meeting with teachers can focus on various ways to encourage students to take up the challenge, to express their feelings, find new hobbies, and discover a better life with their families, neighbours and friends. Teachers will need to discuss how best to answer such typical questions from students as: What are we going to do without TV and video games for ten days? Where can I get books to read? Why is reading the news in newspapers better than watching TV news? What can I say to my Mom when she says it's ridiculous that I don't allow my brother to watch TV when I babysit him? Fortunately, students who pose such questions will also get suggestions from classmates for solving these problems.

At the first meeting with students, teachers can present them with the option of undertaking the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, emphasizing that the decision to turn off the TV and video games is theirs alone. Some students will say it is impossible or that ten days is too long; teachers can ask those students how much they would be willing to do, encouraging them to set personal goals for themselves. Discuss which times of the day and week, including weekends, students feel most vulnerable to the lure of TV or video games, and ask students to brainstorm possible replacement activities. What can be done during good weather? in bad weather? What activities could involve neighbours or friends? and which ones can be done at home or elsewhere? Teachers can provide time for students to plan their own flexible schedules for the ten-day period.

Meetings with students should also take place during and after the challenge. At each of these meetings, teachers can lead discussions on the influence of TV and video games in students' lives. They can encourage students to describe behaviour, language and attitudes that they have noticed, particularly among younger siblings, neighbours, and their peers, and can ask which types of media students think affect people the most. As not all parents will participate with their children or support the challenge, the second meetings with students could feature a class brainstorming session on ways to help students who are still sitting at home watching TV with their families. The idea of students helping one another with the challenge is powerful, one that students enjoy tackling. However, both students and teachers will have to be sensitive not to apply pressure on those who have chosen not to participate.

At each of the first two meetings, students should be given research homework to explore some of the themes associated with the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge: for example, they could be asked to survey their relatives, neighbours and community leaders about why verbal and physical violence is increasing in our culture. Or they could show their parents

what they have learned in class about the links between violent entertainment and real violence. Teachers could also help students design a notice that can be posted at local stores and community gathering places to inform the public about the challenge — as the ultimate goal is to mobilize as much of the community as possible. In one Québec community, almost every local organization organized one of a series of activities for students each day, such as Irish dancing, baking, indoor hockey, picnics, campfires, music, sing-alongs and bingo. Those ten days became a community celebration of togetherness. Even the local priest joined in by holding a special Sunday Mass in which participating students told the congregation about obstacles they had faced and how pleased they were to succeed in watching less TV or playing fewer video games. On that day, the whole congregation prayed for their success in the remaining days of the challenge.

Keeping track of results on a chart posted at a central location can help the entire school monitor progress during the challenge. Every morning during the challenge, students should write — anonymously, to reduce competition and peer pressure — how many hours they saved by not watching TV or playing video games the previous day. During this daily process, remind students that every hour “stolen” from watching TV or playing video games contributes to the success of the challenge, and that they should be proud of their efforts, whether large or small. Students can add up and share the total with their classmates. Each class total from that day can be added to the chart.

After the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, teachers should meet again to record how many students in their classes managed to avoid TV and video games along a continuum from all ten days to no days. They can note which alternative activities were favoured by the students. Finally, they can discuss whether or how the challenge changed students’ behaviour, attitudes or language when they were with their peers in school, on buses or at recess. Teachers can also ask parents how they felt about their children’s performance. If they participated with their children, did the experience make them feel closer to their participating son(s) or daughter(s)? Did the challenge affect their youngsters’ behaviour, attitudes, language, or interests at home? Did it affect their relations with other family members? If more than one class or school participates in your 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, your community might consider awarding certificates to recognize the efforts of those who participated.

School is the ideal place for children to critique the cultural environment in which they live and to develop and articulate a vision of a more tolerant, peaceful and just society. Exercises such as the Youth Vote and the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge can help in this process by building young people’s capacity to express themselves and to resist the influence of corporate-controlled media on their attitudes and behaviour. Such exercises can also elicit support from parents and the community in helping children to discover their innate interests, to build relationships and to develop whole personalities. To paraphrase an African saying, “To raise a child, we need the whole village.”

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