

“Ten days to become brave!” – the TV-free challenge

Kate Aley, courtesy of the Pontiac Journal, April 12, 2006

QUYON, QC: “This is not a competition between schools,” warns Jacques Brodeur. “This is a goal we must work towards together.”

Energetic and passionate, M. Brodeur spoke to students and parents at Onslow Elementary on April 5th on the subject of violence in schools, engendered by television and video games. The meeting, one of three also held at St. Mary’s in Quyon and Notre Dame de la Joie in Luskville, was a means to alert parents to the upcoming “Ten Day Challenge “ (“Defi de la Dizaine”) that the students at the 3 elementary schools will undertake.

In opening, M. Brodeur shared some chilling facts about the way television affects young minds. The grades with the highest incidence of verbal and physical abuse in elementary schools are kindergarten and grade one. 5 out of 6 incidents involve boys, but the actions of girls are crueler, more insidious: spreading rumours, backstabbing and psychological attacks. Growing numbers of children are being prescribed anti-depressants and behavior controlling drugs. Behavioral problems at daycare can begin as early as 2 years. 50% of school age children have a Gameboy, a third have a TV in their room.

“Parents of these [violent] kids need help,” said M. Brodeur. “I’m just sorry that it took 30 years for us to understand and speak out about this.”

The problem has three main causes. 1. The changing structure of the family: Over 50% of children now live in a ‘non-traditional’ family. If the structure is weak, children begin to feel anxious and uncertain, the “first cause of stress in a young brain.” 2. A lack of parental authority and guidance: Children look to parents for guidance and authority. When they fail to carry out a promised consequence, they are telling their children: “When I tell you something, do whatever you like. I have no importance and I’m okay with that.” 3. Massive Exposure to Violent Entertainment (MEVE): By secondary school, a child will have seen 100, 000 acts of aggression of television, 8 000 of these murders. “How can they witness all this and there be no impact?” demanded M. Brodeur. “How many people here have a video games at their house?” Over half the room put up their hands.

He went on to explain how toy and television companies collaborate to manipulate children’s desires for action and violence. “Video games reward children for doing things which are criminal – the most popular game at school ? “Grand Theft Auto.” The industry knows how to keep your kid playing, even when he knows you don’t want him to.”

The “Ten Day Challenge” grew out of M. Brodeur’s own experience as a gym teacher in Trois Rivieres in 1986. Seeing increasing student violence, he studied reports from American schools where a television ban dropped psychological abuse by 50%, verbal attacks by 40%. “This had never been achieved before – ever!” exclaimed M.

Brodeur. “Not with cameras, not with guards, not with medication. The most aggressive children made the most progress.”

M. Brodeur started his own program in 2003. “I saw how television uses violence to abuse children and I decided to fight it all my life.”

This year, 16 schools are participating; Onslow Elementary will be the first English speaking school ever to take part.

M. Brodeur described the ways parents and older siblings could prepare and support participants during the 10 day TV and video game free period. “Kids are eager to help their parents,” he explained, noting that, on average in North America, children spend 38 minutes of conversation with their parents per week. “It gives them more responsibility and pleasure than any toy! Stop buying stuff! They don’t need things – they need people! When you have the extra money, rent a cottage with no electricity. Making a fire, playing cards by candle light: they will remember that forever.”

He suggests planning something special for that TV free time: hikes, picnics, family events.

“Listen to the hockey on the radio or go and see a real game,” he said. “This is not a punishment, it’s a reward. You are not being deprived, you are being empowered.”

Onslow principal Damien Hurley agrees that parental support during the challenge will be important. “A lot of parents and teachers can see how television affects our students,” he said. “Watching TV fills a space in their lives – but there shouldn’t really be that space.”

The Ten Day Challenge will run from April 24 to May 4. Support your students who are embarking upon what Jacques Brodeur has dubbed: “Ten Days to Become Brave!”

“No one wants to be a coward,” he reasons. “But hurting people isn’t fun. By being brave they won’t need to.”

For more information, go to www.edupax.org or write to JBrodeur@edupax.org