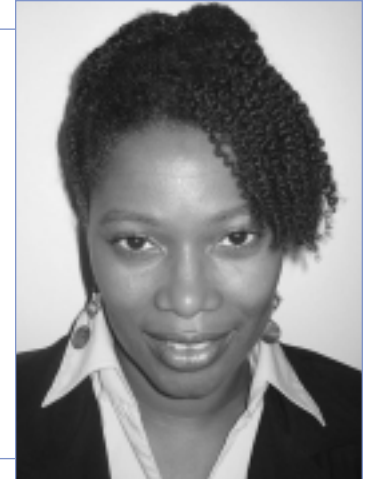


# Empowered Parents: Role Models for Taking Charge of TV Viewing

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by Folami Prescott-Adams, Ph.D.

Television is an amazingly powerful communication tool. Its images of culture, family, relationships, and events give us opportunities to socialize, teach, and inspire both children and adults. Empowered parents and communities are responsible for guiding the placement of television in the process of human development. My awareness of television's power and potential began when I was a child and is confirmed when I view it from two current perspectives – parent and scholar.

I enjoyed television as a child, but I had a healthy skepticism about the messages I was receiving. Still, I was very enthusiastic, even way back then, about the potential of all this “stuff” we watch on television as a vehicle for learning. But it wasn't until I started traveling across the country conducting teacher training that my intrigue with the pervasiveness of the media led me to a driving passion to take full advantage of its awesome potential to build community, educate, and inspire.

In city after city, diverse groups of people whose shared experiences were often limited to their job settings became one big happy family when we engaged in media-based activities. During their recollections of catchy tunes and TV characters, they would smile and exude a powerful energy of familiarity and warmth. When I used video clips from a TV show to stimulate discussion, it was hard to keep the group on task. Participants were much more interested in their

Archie Bunker memories, whom they fell in love with on the *Brady Bunch*, or singing the lyrics from their favorite commercials. These shared memories helped the groups bond instantaneously. Upon realizing the power of this shared knowledge, I went on to complete a self-designed course of study in film and television production so that I could expand my collection of video content from which to choose in educating, illustrating a point, or representing a point of view.

In my workshops and speeches, I began telling my own stories. Like the night I challenged Yakini, my seven-year-old daughter to question the lyrics she sang while drying off after a bath. “Are you really still dirty because you did not use Zest? Are you *really* only fully clean if you're Zestfully clean?” “Is there really a bee inside our box of Honey Nut Cheerios?” Friends said I was fanatical and needed to just relax and enjoy the entertaining value of television. Some workshop participants argued that we could never expect anything of real value out of television because of its profit motive. Others said that anything of value that came out of television was merely a coincidence. While TV viewing will always provide sheer entertainment, that is merely one gratifying effect. There are many more that we have only begun to explore as a community.

I quietly fumed about the number of parents around me who chose to just “let TV be” in their homes, but my fury was awakened after an incident in Yakini's sixth-grade class. As a parent volunteer, I made weekly

visits to the classroom to read aloud. That morning, I had chosen a story about an interracial friendship. Just a few minutes into the story, excited students began blurting out “*Jungle Fever, Jungle Fever!*” To my shock, all but two of the students had seen this graphic R-rated film. In my eyes, something had gone terribly wrong. I could not stop thinking of the film’s content – explicit sex scenes, infidelity, intense images of drugs on the streets, addiction in the family, and a father compelled to kill his own son.

But then I started trying to identify what was really making me angry. As my own ideas about parenting and media have evolved, I’ve come to realize that the issue is not so much about what you let your children see. They “see” images such as those in *Jungle Fever* daily on local news and city streets and in the best of dramatic television. The real issue is a parent’s answer to this question: How much are you willing to help them understand what they see and what it means? As I continue to question my own children’s understanding of what’s real, what’s not, what teaches, and what inspires, I have never seen media as my enemy. I am not enraged with the media. Instead, I am amazed by the volume of content, the collective creativity used to produce programming, and the feelings media images and sounds have stirred in me. I am an advocate for harnessing the full value of the media. My doctoral studies gave me the opportunity to delve into these issues.

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### Formal Research Observations

In 1996, I conducted several semiformal interviews with a diverse group of parents including, a single mom whose son watched three to four hours of unsupervised TV a day, a couple with two children under six who watched less than five hours of TV a week, and a couple with three children who had limited viewing during the week but could watch as much of whatever they wanted to on the weekend. The range of behaviors across households was a clear indication that parent mediation habits around their children’s TV viewing are as varied as

the parents themselves. Parent mediation is the act of interpreting, discussing, and recognizing ideas, images, and information with children about television programs.

My dissertation research involved investigating television’s influence on ethnic identity development among African-American college students. My goal was to explore three areas:

1. the current media practices among college students and their parents’ mediation practices during childhood;
2. the associations between these practices and ethnic identity; and
3. beliefs about effects of television on identity and behavior.

Participants included 222 students from Atlanta-area colleges and universities (public, private, historically black, ethnically diverse, predominantly white, highly competitive, and open enrollment). Each student completed surveys on 1) childhood viewing and parental mediation practices, 2) current viewing practices, and 3) ethnic identity.

Our children’s potential to learn and grow from their TV diet is greatly enhanced when we teach them to think and talk about what they see and hear.

### Parent Mediation of Television Viewing: Beyond Rules and Stipulations

Students vividly described how they interfaced with television and how their parents interfered with their viewing preferences. Many households had little guidance and no restrictions. Where there was guidance, it leaned toward the restrictive side. Regulation was most common and included a variety of restrictive strategies, such as the following:

- Establishing rules related to TV viewing: when, with whom, where, and how much
- Restricting certain programs and networks
- Stipulating conditions related to TV viewing, for example, after chores, homework, extracurricular activities, and outdoor play

Survey respondents reported that their parents restricted programs that featured cursing, sexual references, poor family values, adult themes, and off-color humor. Limiting the amount of television and the times it could be viewed was also common. Many also reported that cable television was perceived as a plethora of child-centered television: Their younger siblings were allowed to watch as much Nickelodeon, PBS, Cartoon Network, and Disney as they liked. However, very few parents watched these shows with their children. In fact, the parents in the study employed very little *active* mediation either with the respondents themselves when they were children or their younger siblings.

Survey respondents spoke about TV programs as a source of role models. Theo of *The Cosby Show* motivated one Morehouse student to go to class each morning.

Active mediation is the intentional viewing and discussion of television content with a child. It includes the following strategies:

- Co-viewing – intentional viewing by parent and child together
- Instructive mediation – the use of TV viewing to reinforce values and critical thinking
- Construction – the selection of specific programs to teach specific lessons and history to children

Active mediation can be positive, when comments tend to reinforce content, or negative, when comments are disapproving of television content. Most of the co-viewing that occurred among the respondents' families was more coincidental than intentional. In the early '90s, for example, *The Cosby Show* was a co-viewing magnet because it attracted both adult and child viewers. When co-viewing did elicit discussion, it was often limited to comments from parents about objectionable content, such as these reported by a student from Emory University:

Any time there was a cuss word my father would say a grunt or groan, and if there were too many he would change the channel. If there were three [cuss words] he'd change it. Not an adult-themed program but any show that had cursing like "get the hell out."

In addition to sideline commentary, many parents resorted to ineffective mediation strategies such as covering children's eyes during violence and sex. But the children could still hear the dialogue, so their curiosity and fascination with this halfway-forbidden content increased while their understanding of its meaning remained unchanged. As long as parents are involved in discussions with their children while co-viewing – whether the viewing is planned or coincidental – they are actively mediating their children's viewing.

While these strategies are active in that they assert the parents' roles and opinions, they are reactive at best and noncognitive at worst. Noncognitive strategies only limit amount and content; they do not involve thinking about and processing what we and our children view. What we allow our children to watch in these instances goes unquestioned and its message goes unchallenged.

In today's milieu children have access to all kinds of programs that parents may object to but are unable to control absolutely. Many study participants talked about "sneaking," referring to viewing restricted programming when parents are not home, behind closed bedroom doors, while the rest of the family is sleeping, and at the homes of friends and family. Sideline commentary and involvement or alternative activities alone cannot equip children with critical consciousness skills or provide filters they can use to make appropriate viewing decisions or to understand the programming to which they are exposed.

### **Cognitive Strategies for Parents: Using TV to Foster Critical Thinking**

Tools are available that will help parents provide their children with viewing skills by using cognitive mediation strategies for selected blocks of family TV viewing. Cognitive strategies are at the high end of the active mediation continuum. Thoughtful mediation could enhance the positive and reduce the negative impact of media messages on children's sense of self and respect for others. Discriminating viewers will interpret distorted portrayals in ways that lead to fewer unhealthy effects, and they will use television as a tool to raise physically and emotionally healthy children. Cognitive strategies require viewers to think about what they are watching and discuss, interpret, and delve further into the topics or ideas. Cognitive strategies encourage children to think about the content and relate it to the emotions elicited, the information conveyed, and their own range of knowledge. Examples include discussing

the perceived reality of character portrayals, the consequences of actions, motives for behaviors, and parents' evaluations of those behaviors.

My research revealed three types of cognitive strategies:

- General cognitive – reviewing the plot or significance of the program, discussing characters and their qualities, choosing programs together, and engaging in in-depth discussions of programs.
- Construction – careful selection of programs that reflect beliefs and desired behaviors upheld by parents, historical markers, cultural references, and insight.
- Critical consciousness – a tool for understanding social forces and conditions, including media literacy, which is the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from media's symbols and sounds.

Many effects of TV viewing can be enhanced by cognitive mediation strategies. Just the other night, my 15-year-old son suggested that his sixth-grade brother could not be learning anything in class if all he was doing was watching various films. He went on to describe conditions for learning, which included taking notes, engaging in discussion, and being tested on the content. Even though he ended his rant with a “just kidding,” there is some truth to his tirade. Our children's potential to learn and grow from their TV diet is greatly enhanced when we teach them to think and talk about what they see and hear.

Survey respondents spoke about TV programs as a source of role models. Theo of *The Cosby Show* motivated one Morehouse student to go to class each morning. George Jefferson was and still is an entrepreneurial example for some, as well as “the king of slamming doors”. Once Steve Urkel became cool, one student aspired to emulate him. Many admitted to mimicking Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and other characters, while a few spoke of out-of-control consumerism and obesity as effects of nonmediated TV viewing. The bottom line appears to come back to the parents' perception of their role and how they respond to the big box in the corner of the living room. Developing cognitive strategies gives parents a tool for doing their job as their children's ultimate teachers of values, identity, and community.

So, how do you actually *do* cognitive mediation? It's actually quite simple. The following questions provide a solid foundation for critical analysis of any program.

1. What did you see/hear?

2. Tell me about the main characters (personality, lifestyle, motives, and relationships). Which characters do you connect with and why?
3. What values are represented by the content?
4. How do you feel about the content?
5. Who created this message and why are they sending it?
6. What production decisions were made long before the program was available to us?
7. How would you have told the story differently?
8. How might different people understand this message differently from you?

When watching the news, consider the stories that were not selected and the criteria that went into choosing top stories. Discuss the perspective of those interviewed and how the reporter may have chosen them and missed others. When watching music videos, talk about the relationship between the words and images and what the images reflect. Challenge your children to note behaviors and styles that are mimicked in the community.

Co-viewing magnets are ideal programs to use in building cognitive skills from TV viewing. My family watches *The Bernie Mac Show* and *Malcolm in the Middle*, and their ratings and reviews suggest they are co-viewing magnets in many other homes as well. Both shows use unusual production styles to deliver their messages, such as Bernie Mac's direct conversations with his audience and the pop-up bubbles that provide characters' inner feelings, cultural references, or the journey of a germ from cold-giver to cold-getter. Malcolm also talks directly to his audience to add teenage perspective and humorous insight into a given situation. Both programs are great catalysts for discussions of household rules, parent and child responsibilities, and the ups and downs of family living. Combined use of co-viewing, construction, and critical thinking can turn an hour of viewing into much more than fun and laughter. However, it is up to the parents to shape the outcome of those rare moments when the family views together. The most difficult part of being a cognitive mediator may be feeling empowered to make it happen.

### **Empowered Parents: Role Models for Taking Charge**

“Media is like a weapon. In the right hands, it can help a community thrive and prosper and in the

wrong hands, you're gonna die from it." "N", 27, Georgia State University

One of my most interesting research findings centered on practices of politically active parents. Those who had been or still were involved in civil rights or African-American political movements stood out as active mediators of their children's TV viewing. I was particularly interested in the potential value of constructing a media diet in the home, and this group of parents have been doing so for some time. While some students resented the force-fed TV programs at the time, in retrospect they were extremely appreciative of their parents' take-charge approach. Several students mentioned that their parents insisted that they watch *Roots*, the ground-breaking mini-series that tells the story of enslaved Africans in the United States. They said the program had a lasting effect on their sense of identity, historical perspective, sense of honor for their ancestors, and appreciation of current conditions. In addition to these positive effects of construction, cognitive mediation builds critical thinking skills, independent thinking, and interests in a variety of activities outside of electronic media.

My findings echo those reported in *Kids @ the New Millennium*, a 1999 study funded by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which assessed the media consumption of a sample of 61 percent whites and 29 percent from other ethnic groups. Sixty-five percent of participating youth (ages 8–18) had a TV in their bedroom, 69 percent had three or more TVs in their home, 30 percent had cable or satellite in their bedroom, and 15 percent had HBO or other premium channels. Prime time had the highest percentage of co-viewing, with 62 percent watching with someone else. Yet, for 63 percent of that group, the "someone else" was a sibling. These statistics suggest that similar media practices are found across diverse groups, making the proactive strategies offered here promising for the community at large. Certainly, parents whose activism plays out in political, spiritual, educational, and/or cultural settings have established a sense of empowerment that affects the choices they make for family viewing and mediation of that viewing.

We can learn a great deal from empowered parents about taking charge of our TV consumption and viewing patterns. Empowerment starts with a realization that we as parents *can* take charge of our children's consumption of TV. Parents can have a sense of control and be consistent because the entire family discusses and agrees on viewing expectations. From this perspective, media

can help a community thrive. We die when we give in and believe our efforts are useless. If we take in all the images we consume with no thought, acknowledged reaction, or discussion, we might as well be dead.

My 6- and 11-year-old sons just finished watching *The Famous Jett Jackson*, followed by *Boy Meets World*. Since they each get to select 2.5 hours of programming during the school week, they are careful to choose programs they truly enjoy. This practice probably puts me on the high end of restrictive mediation. And I'm not alone. Shifts in priorities among parents, the availability of hours of guilt-free, "innocuous" children's programming (Nickelodeon, Disney, PBS, etc.), and extraordinary access to all types of media can clog the filters parents use to mediate their children's viewing. But these noncognitive strategies focus only on when and how much they watch. If we fail to consider the use of cognitive strategies that allow us to take full advantage of the educational, developmental, and inspirational benefits of viewing, we will miss valuable opportunities to learn with our children. If we work to optimize the positives, we will find televised sources of values and identity. The process of mediation has the amazingly powerful side effect of building a sense of community.

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### Call to Action: Parents Take the Lead

"[The study] made me remember a time where evaluating TV shows was a responsibility my mom took on and now that I'm older and need to do it more myself. It made me think I need to get back into that and look deeper and not just take what I see at face value. If you don't practice it, you lose it. It made me want to get back into that more." "N", 27, Georgia State University

This call to action is targeted to parents, not teachers. That makes sense, since the television set is central in most living rooms and a sidebar in the classroom.

The following are feasible actions for any concerned parent to implement at home:

- **Assess your mediation practices.**

Using the questions below, get a better sense of what your children watch and your own level of interaction with their viewing.

1. Do I select programming for family viewing that instructs and inspires?
2. Are there established household rules around when and how much can be viewed?
3. Am I familiar with the programs my children watch regularly? Have I watched them enough to discuss characters and ongoing story lines with my children?
4. Do I watch TV with my children on a regular basis?
5. Do I engage my children in discussion about programs viewed?
6. Do we discuss the believability of characters portrayed and the consequences of their actions, motives for behaviors, and our evaluation of those behaviors?
7. Do I engage in sideline commentary? Negative or positive?
8. Do we talk about the making of TV programs (production aspects, business, casting, etc.)?

- **Provide a weekly menu of shows from which to choose.**

The Web allows for searches for specific specials, movies and episodes. Post family programming options in a central location and allow the children to help select from those programs. Establish a set of questions that will serve as a foundation for discussion that builds critical thinking and media literacy skills.

- **Commit to one hour a week of cognitive TV.**

Cognitive TV incorporates guided discussion and identification of the values, ideas, and information conveyed. What you choose to watch in that hour is less important than committing to using cognitive mediation strategies during or after viewing.

- **Network with other families.**

When small groups of families share their practices, their patterns are reinforced and tested. I have an informal network of friends that I can call on to review a film or TV program, particularly for its educational value or its appropriateness for children. We also call each other to share noteworthy programs

when we discover them, often calling just as the show begins. Friends do not always agree, so my children have also been exposed to a healthy range of parent regulations around TV viewing. One of the most meaningful ways we have supported each other is by taking the time to preview or co-view. Here are some ideas to direct these support groups:

- Use each other to check on appropriateness of TV programs.
- Meet periodically to talk about newly discovered programs that can lead to interesting family conversation or that relate to household challenges.
- Recognize those who take the time to seek out programs that stimulate learning and discussion.

- **Organize viewing parties.**

Put together multifamily gatherings at which viewing is a coordinated activity. For me, most viewing parties began spontaneously when a child decided to turn on the TV at a social event. However, the discussion that ensued was so engaging to both parents and children that I knew we were on to something. Recently, the 25th anniversary of *Roots* prompted me to organize a series of viewing parties. Many teens have informed me that they've never seen the program. Each viewing was followed with questions and answers, discussion, an expert guest where possible, and reading assignments. Special events and holidays are also excellent jump-off points for thematic viewing. We watched the HBO film *Boycott* as a family on Martin Luther King Day and then discussed it with other families a few days later.

## In Conclusion

I challenge you to use the tools presented here, share the ideas, and, if nothing else, talk about the issues with others. Television is an amazingly powerful communication tool. By staying tuned and staying aware and active, we can take advantage of that power.