WHEN TO TURN THE TELEVISION OFF

April Metz
Political Science
Calumet High School, Gary, IN

[Assignment: Respond to the essays we've read and the issues we've discussed by writing a short essay (3-4 pages) about gender and/or pop culture (fairy tales, movies, TV, popular music, comic books, etc.). This time, structure your paper as an exemplification, causal analysis, or classification.]

Popular culture has been under fire lately--literally. During the fall of 1994, two children in Ohio set fire to their homes after allegedly watching Beavis and Butthead do it on television. MTV has since moved its crude cartoon duo from its prime time slot to one airing at a later hour. Nevertheless, such incidents only feed the fire of popularity; a recent Rolling Stones poll revealed that viewers rated Beavis and Butthead their least AND most favorite MTV program. Still other programs reflect the humor of our youth and the chagrin of our mature audience. The Simpsons was attacked in the 1992 presidential campaign by George Bush. Married with Children has been criticized as the antithesis of the American family. Yet viewers remain amused, if not fascinated by extreme levels of crudity in contemporary programs. But when these programs negatively influence our impressionable youth, popular culture becomes a popular culprit. Instead of turning the television off, parents all too often point fingers at the programs their children watch. Today's culture has become a scapegoat, and the real cause remains unaddressed. The true cause of the problem lies within the home--parenting.

A child's upbringing is the heart of his or her emotional development, and this development cannot take place without some sort of parental guidance. Parenting involves providing the child an environment that is emotionally healthy and conducive to the child's personal growth. When parents fail to provide such an environment, the child is left without a set perception of right and wrong, and may additionally not distinguish reality from fantasy as he or she is subjected to popular images. Thus, a child might consider lighting a match and burning something as Beavis and Butthead do without knowing the consequences. If a child sees adults amused at the sight of cartoon characters doubling as arsonists, the child may rationalize that an arsonist child is equally funny. Of course, death is a human reality, and it is one not portrayed in the fantasy foundation of cartoons. In the absence of parental intervention, many children are apt to mimic their beloved cartoons, sometimes with disastrous results.

Parental monitoring, therefore, is a must. This crucial element of parenting was missing in the child arson cases of Ohio. Not only did the parents permit the children to watch the notoriously vulgar Beavis and Butthead series, but these parents, having raised their children, had some knowledge as to how impressionable their children were. The parents could have easily turned the television off, and forbid their children to watch the program. They also could have easily called the local cable company to have MTV blocked. Although Beavis and Butthead seemed
directly responsible for the tragedies, parental negligence proved equally disastrous.

The key for parents is to know their children. Some children are more impressionable than others, and an intuitive parent can tell if the programs that children watch influence the children's behavior in negative ways. If this is the case, parents should not let the child continue to watch these programs until the parents are confident that their children can differentiate between the fantasy of cartoons and common reality. Further, parents should be supportive of their children; if children feel that their parents trust the children's actions, children will develop a greater confidence in the parents' guidance.

Making popular culture the scapegoat for society's problems alleviates society of blame when society itself may be at fault. This is not to say that parents are directly and primarily responsible for every action of their child. But they can be a part of the solution by simply being accessible to their children. Listening to what their children say can make a difference to the children. Instead of blaming outside influences, the parents should try to understand their children's reasons for turning to popular culture, as well as wonder what impact their own influence, or lack thereof, has on their children's behavior.

Perhaps popular culture is the immediate cause of the deterioration of human values and our ensuing social dilemmas. I might believe this if Beavis and Butthead inspired fires had reached epidemic proportions across the United States. To think that culture wields absolute control over our youths has serious implications for our nation's parents. It is time to turn the T.V. off and address the real problems of our television society.