

The Death of Childhood

“I found [this book] impressively researched and documented... [It is] a powerful, well-documented argument for rethinking childhood and our approach to it from the parenting to the educational perspectives.”

—David Elkind, PhD, Professor of Child Development Emeritus, Tufts University

“It is a much different world for children today. The Death of Childhood helps us navigate this complex terrain. [It is a] must-read for educators, parents, researchers, and policy makers.”

—Ed Donnerstein, PhD, Dean Emeritus, University of Arizona

“Raising children is probably the most important job parents have, but it is a tough job (to say the least). Parents want to get it right, but often don't know where to turn for valid and reliable information about how to raise their children. I suggest that they turn to Dr. Victor Strasburger's book, *The Death of Childhood*. This is a well-documented book that provides parents useful and accurate answers to their most important questions (such as, how much media is too much?).”

—Brad Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communications, Ohio State University

“Pediatrician Dr. Vic Strasburger's new book, *The Death of Childhood*, boldly explains the myriad challenges and threats facing kids and teens today. From our gun culture to the obesity epidemic (and so much more!), Dr. Strasburger's insights are seen through his unique lens as an expert on media. This book will inform the knowledge, attitudes, and response of parents, educators, mental health experts, pediatricians and other health care providers, as well as policy makers.”

—Marjorie Hogan, Former Chair, AAP Committee on Communications and now Professor of Pediatrics, Univ. of Minnesota

“This book is timely, easy to read, [and] is well-researched. It will greatly benefit parents and grandparents who read it and children in the care of such people. Anyone who cares about children or the future of our society also should pay close attention to the key public policy issues raised in this book. How do we teach and socialize children into adolescence and into a physically and emotionally healthy young adulthood? How do we regulate digital space in ways that foster positive growth and an accurate understanding of the world and our place in it? How can we reclaim a positive historical role for childhood, one that keeps the fun and enjoyment of learning and growing with others and that simultaneously uses modern technologies to enhance childhood rather than destroying it? Vic Strasburger hits on these issues in an engaging, often humorous, way.”

—Craig A. Anderson, Editor-in-Chief, *Aggressive Behavior*; Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Iowa State University

The Death of Childhood:

*Reinventing the Joy
of Growing Up*

By

Victor Strasburger

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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**For Max & Katya
& for Alya –
With love**

**(Special thanks to Jim Glickman, Jessica Alvarez,
& Dr. Greg Wilson)**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Summer will end soon enough, and childhood as well.

—George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*

Because children grow up, we think a child's purpose is to grow up. But a child's purpose is to be a child.

—Tom Stoppard, *The Coast of Utopia*

At all costs the true world of childhood must prevail, must be restored; that world whose momentous, heroic, mysterious quality is fed on airy nothings, whose substance is so ill-fitted to withstand the brutal touch of adult inquisition.

—Jean Cocteau, *The Holy Terrors*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the older generation thinks younger generations are going to hell in a handbasket. Take it from Socrates nearly 2500 years ago:

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.

Yes, there is some sad irony in the fact that older generations typically bemoan the loss of their youthfulness by dumping on younger generations. But perhaps the generation that cries wolf now speaks some truth as well – childhood *is* dead, or at least mortally wounded.

Officially, childhood died in 1995 when the Internet came online for the majority of the population. But the body was still warm, and no one really noticed. Most people were too busy getting online and

learning to email to notice that their children and teenagers were now online too. And what a world they were connecting to – not just a Library of Congress-worth of information but also pornography, violent videos, glamorized drug use – all of the secrets of the adult world exposed and laid bare for all to see. When the average American child or teen spends more than 7 hours a day with a variety of different media (more than 11 hours if they have a TV or Internet connection in their bedroom), it's easy to see how this might have happened.

Yet parents now seem curiously indifferent to the impact that media have on young people. Schools and the Federal government are clueless as well. Kids aren't downloading episodes of *Sesame Street* on their iPads and computers these days. They're viewing an unprecedented amount of sex, violence, advertisements, and unhealthy social networked messages that can range from substance use to cyberbullying to sexting to fake news. (In a recent study of 7,804 students from middle school through college, 82% of middle-schoolers couldn't distinguish between an ad labeled "sponsored content" and a real news story on a website according to a Stanford University study.¹) If you were concerned about the 2016 Presidential election, be very concerned about future elections when your kids can actually vote.

How many teenagers need to commit suicide after being cyberbullied before parents and schools take some forceful, constructive steps to deal with the problem? How many kids need to be labeled as sex offenders for the rest of their lives because they stupidly sent a topless photo of themselves to their boyfriends? The adolescent brain is not fully mature until age 25 or later, so of course teenagers do dumb things (it's part of their job description). Only now they have an ever-expanding arsenal of technological tools to do some real damage.

This is not to say that media can't be good, or that government can't do wonderful things for children (think Head Start) – or that the situation is hopeless. It's not!

But how bad is it really? According to a new Save the Children report, the U.S. ranks 36th internationally as a good place to raise children.² The odds of a child dying in the U.S. before age 18 are far higher than in other high-income industrial nations according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).³ A University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital poll of nearly 2700 adults found that nearly two-thirds feel that today's children have less quality family time and are more stressed, more than half of the parents feel that kids' mental and emotional health are worse, and 42% feel that children have poorer physical health and weaker friendships.⁴ The 2016 National Survey of Children's Health found that nearly one-half of American children have experienced at least one major trauma (e.g., the death of a parent, witnessing violence, living with someone who was suicidal or had a drug or alcohol problem).⁵ Finally, a new study published in the journal *Translational Psychiatry* in 2017 and based on in-person interviews with more than 100,000 children from 2009 to 2014 found that 13.6% of boys and an alarming 36.1% of girls have been or are depressed.⁶

Lest you think that I am some old 1950s Baby Boomer, let me say at the beginning that I'm a pediatrician, I love kids, and I want only the best for them. And it's not just media that threaten childhood – schools, the government, even society shares some of the blame as we'll see later on. But let's start with media because media are *everywhere*, like the air we breathe.... Like most of you, I *love* media – good media, that is. Give me *The Wire* or *Game of Thrones* and a comfortable couch, and I'm a happy guy. But good media getting harder to find these days.

There is no question that there are plenty of examples of good media out there. *Sesame Street* is the gold standard for children's television programming. It was actually developed by educators and psychologists specifically to be prosocial and to increase school readiness for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (I highly recommend *Street Gang*, a biography of the show). And there are shows like PBS' *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* that researchers have shown can actually increase empathy among younger children.⁷ There are pro-social apps and pro-social video

games as well, but pro-social media are being out-gunned (literally at times).

For us older folks, nothing has ever surpassed *The Wire* in my estimation, although *Game of Thrones*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Good Wife* certainly have their legitimate claims. There are dozens of superb movies both for children (e.g., *The Black Stallion*, *Finding Nemo*, *Toy Story*, *Iron Giant*, *Spirited Away*, *Frozen*, *The Jungle Book*, *Up*) and adolescents (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Ferry Bueller's Day Off*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Breaking Away*, *Boyz in the Hood*, *Juno*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Real Women Have Curves*, *Boyhood*, *Lady Bird*). One of the problems, however, is that bad media drown out good media. Call it Strasburger's Law instead of Gresham's. And sadly, good media for children and teenagers are increasingly difficult to find.

It shouldn't be that way. Hollywood is perfectly capable of producing extraordinary media. But unfortunately, as viewers have become accustomed to gun battles, bloody fights, and car chases, writers and producers have felt compelled to ratchet up the levels of violence. My colleagues and I did a study of James Bond films from *Dr. No* to *Quantum of Solace*.⁸ We chose Bond films as a "marker" for mainstream media through the years and found that the amount of violence has doubled and the amount of *lethal* violence has tripled. (I wanted to actually count the number of bullets fired but was told that it was impossible because of the amount of semi-automatic gunfire in recent Bond movies. I'm sure we would have come up with an exponential curve from the 1960s to now.) A 2017 study of PG-13 movies from 1985 to 2015 also found that the amount of gun violence has doubled and that PG-13 films now contain more gun violence than R-rated films.⁹

Movie and TV violence have increased because viewers have become desensitized, so it takes more to get a rise out of them. In particular, parents have become desensitized to PG-13 gun violence that their children may see, especially if the violence is portrayed as being justified.¹⁰ Similarly, sex scenes have gone from the suggestive to the explicit. Think about it: *Playboy* looks positively

tame these days compared to *Gossip Girl*, *The Bachelorette*, *Pregnant at 16*, *Scandal*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Shameless*, or *Temptation Island*.

Let's backtrack briefly: what exactly does it mean to be a child? What does childhood *mean*? All you have to do is look at some Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* covers to see what childhood ideally used to be: kids with fishing gear or playing basketball, kids at soda fountains cozying up to cops, kids playing quietly with their dog – images of free time, of little stress and few worries, of fun and companionship, and – most of all – of very little knowledge of or involvement in the adult world. (Yes, of course, there are also no Blacks, Latinos, Asians, girls, women – never mind gender-fluid or gay kids.) Are these images from the 1950s and 1960s still true today? Today's children and adolescents face a world of nearly constant stress and anxiety – succeeding in school, taking umpteen standardized tests, dealing with peers, drugs, and negotiating their place in the electronic world, and ultimately finding a job in the real world. A recent national survey of more than 1,330 adults found that more than two-thirds of them think that children today are less healthy than in previous generations, and more than 75% think kids' mental health is also worse.¹¹

Anxiety has become the #1 mental health problem for American adolescents, affecting nearly one-third of them, and resulting in a doubling in the number of hospitalizations of suicidal teens.¹² According to researchers who examined national rates of self-inflicted injuries (e.g., self-cutting, self-poisoning) between 2001 and 2015, the overall rate for Emergency Room visits increased 51%, but for girls ages 10-14, that figure was 166%. Most of the increase in self-cutting started in 2009, then continued to increase 18.8% each year.¹³ A 2018 study examining data from the 2015 YRBS involving nearly 65,000 high school students in 11 states found that just over 1 in 10 male adolescents and nearly 1 in 4 female adolescents had engaged in self-inflicted injury in the previous year.¹⁴

It's worth noting that this seems to have coincided with the advent of social media. Facebook for kids 13 and older became available in 2006, but MySpace was still the most popular site between 2005 and 2008. Instagram came online in 2010, Snapchat in 2011.¹⁵ Some critics have made the argument that social media over-emphasize the "self" and self-absorption.¹⁶ It turns out that social media may result in some users experiencing more social isolation than a feeling of connectedness: a study of 1,787 young adults found that heavy users of social media were twice as likely to feel social isolation as infrequent users.¹⁷

At the top of the problematic media list are cyberbullying and sexting. And high on the real-world problem list are unprecedented political disharmony, climate change and natural disasters, gun violence, AIDS, and obesity. It all adds up to a breakdown of the previously impervious walls between adulthood and childhood in combination with unparalleled threats to kids' health and welfare. Compared with the '50s and 60s, today's world moves faster, there is less "down time," there are greater expectations for young people to excel, and people generally perceive greater danger in the real world (mass shootings, terrorism, global warming). How often do you pick up a newspaper or turn on the 6 o'clock news and hear of a mass shooting somewhere in the U.S.?

The idealized childhood of the 1950s and 1960s is gone forever, replaced by an apprenticeship to adulthood that begins almost as soon as an infant can walk and talk. Sex behind closed doors? A thing of the past – nearly 70% of teenagers admit that they have seen pornography online.¹⁸ Twenty percent of youth have experienced unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, and one in nine has experienced online sexual solicitation.¹⁹ School as a stress-free environment? Government-imposed standardized tests, a depressed economy, stagnant wages for middle class workers, politics as a blood-sport, sexting, and cyberbullying have all put an end to that. School is now a hassle for the majority of kids.²⁰ By early 2018, 150,000 children and adolescents had been directly exposed to school shootings.²¹ And a majority of students surveyed (60%) now say that they live in fear of a shooting at their

school. An estimated forty percent of students at schools where shootings have taken place will develop PTSD.²² No wonder that in eight states and the District of Columbia more than 20% of all students were chronically absent during the 2015-16 academic year, and overall more than 8 million children – 15% of all K-12 students – were absent for 15 or more days.²³

The most recent statistics show that more than 20% of students in the U.S. reported being bullied – *reported*, mind you. How many instances go unreported? A separate study of 5,600 students ages 12-17 years actually found that as many as 73% reported being bullied at school at some point in their lifetime, with nearly half saying that it had happened in the last 30 days.²⁴ Interestingly, a survey of youth which sampled 50,000 teens between Dec. 19, 2016 and Jan. 10, 2017 found that more than 70% had witnessed bullying, hate messages, or harassment either during or since the 2016 Presidential election; and more than 70% said that race was the motive²⁵

Intact families? Nearly a million children and teens each year are now subjected to their parents divorcing.²⁶ Guidance from loving parents? Parents are far too busy and distracted these days keeping their own lives together, millions of kids live in single-parent homes or with blended families, and the average amount of time fathers spend in conversation with their kids is now 5 minutes per day.²⁷

As one author noted many years ago,²⁸ the media have broken down nearly all barriers between adults and children so that there are no longer any secrets, especially sex – it's there in all of its various glory on the Internet for anyone to see.

Many people wonder why there seems to be nearly one mass shooting per week in the U.S. It's a very complicated question that we'll explore in detail in later chapters, but the media definitely make a contribution. The same could be said for sex on TV and in movies contributing to teen sex. Sex in the media has become far more graphic and realistic. Sometimes it almost seems amusing (and quite sad) that parents of school-aged children and teens

continue to argue about sex education programs in schools when kids are now getting most of their sex education from the media.²⁹

Drugs? The Baby Boom generation was the one that “turned on and tuned out,” yet now many states in the U.S. have legalized marijuana. What effect will that have on teenagers thinking about smoking weed? Cheech and Chong, you’re wanted back, all is forgiven! But it’s not only marijuana that’s a problem. An estimated 1 in 5 teenagers is now vaping, with one JUUL cartridge carrying the nicotine wallop of 20 cigarettes.³⁰ (Among high school seniors, the figure is actually 37% according to the 2018 Monitoring the Future survey.³¹) And last year, 227 million prescriptions for opioids were written – enough for 90% of the adult population. The cost has been 165,000 American lives and untold numbers of addicted teens and adults.³² Between 1999 and 2016, nearly 9,000 children and adolescents have died from prescription and illicit opioid poisonings.³³ According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 1 in 7 teenagers is now abusing opioids.³⁴ Yet only 27% of 21,000 patients ages 12-25 years have been appropriately treated for addiction in a recent study in *JAMA Pediatrics*.³⁵

So things are looking bleak if you’re a big fan of childhood. I apologize if I am overstating the case for effect. There are good things happening too (just can’t think of them at the moment – but I will point them out later on).

Does that mean that childhood is now dead and buried? Threatened – yes – but still shockable back into the living world with a little help. The Irish poet Yeats said, “things fall apart.” But they can be put back together again, too. Of course there is no going back, and things were not as rosy then as I’m making them out to be. So in the next chapters, we’ll discuss how childhood can be successfully rescued, how media can be made more supportive and less harmful, how schools can adapt to new technology, how the government can institute more child-friendly programs, and what parents have to do to reclaim their rightful place in raising their children.

Notes

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CHAPTER II

HOW MUCH MEDIA IS TOO MUCH?

The way adolescents of today learn, play, and interact has changed more in the past 15 years than in the previous 570 since Gutenberg's popularization of the printing press.

—Jay N. Giedd, M.D., (2012)

It's tempting to blame the media. Who could fault you? When everything that comes out of Donald Trump's mouth and Twitter account is instant 'breaking' news, when shootings and terrorism dominate the headlines, when primetime TV is filled with guns and sex and alcohol and Cialis, sure go ahead – make my day – the media are an easy target.

Yes, most media producers don't care a fig about public health.

Bottom line? Media have the power to affect virtually *every* concern that parents and pediatricians have about young people growing up – sex, drugs, aggressive behavior, sleep, school performance, obesity, eating disorders – you name it.

You would think by time criteria alone that people would be concerned about young people and media use. A 2010 study of more than 1,000 children and teens nationwide found that kids spend more than 7 hours with a variety of different media.¹ And that number increases to 11 hours if they have media in their bedroom. Obviously, some multitasking is involved (which, BTW, is not terribly efficient in terms of learning²).

A newer study puts the media figure at 6 hours for preteens and 9 hours for teenagers.³ But that still makes media use the leading leisure-time activity for children and adolescents, and they spend more time with media than doing anything else except for sleeping

(and in the case of teenagers, they often get less sleep than they spend with media).

Everyone loves babies and toddlers, especially parents, so you would think that parents would be particularly protective about their youngsters being exposed to media. Guess again. In one 2013 study of 1463 parents of young children, babies less than 23 months of age were averaging nearly an hour of TV per day, and more than one-third of them had used a mobile device.⁴ A study of 2300 parents of 0-8 year-olds nationwide found that 17% were likely to give their babies a mobile device to keep them quiet, and babies were averaging an hour or more of TV per day.⁵ A more recent but much smaller study of 350 6-month to 4 year-olds found that:⁶

- By 1 year of age more than half were watching TV.
- 14% of the babies were spending at least one hour per day using mobile media, and by 2 years of age that number increased to 26%.
- By age 4, half of the children had TVs, 75% had phones, and 30% had tablets. Nearly all (96%) of the children had used mobile devices by age 4, and most had started before age 1.

And the most recent, 2017 study of 1454 parents of 0-8 year-olds found that 95% of families now own smartphones, 42% of children have their own tablet, and the amount of time kids spend on mobile devices has tripled just in the past few years. By contrast, babies and young children are being read to only half an hour per day versus the 2-3 hours per day they spend with screen media.⁷

Also worth mentioning is the socioeconomic divide that still exists when it comes to media ownership and use: Tablet ownership varies from 60% in low SES families to 85% in high SES families, high-speed Internet access is present in 96% of higher income homes versus 74% in low income homes, and far more screen time occurs with children in low SES families.⁸

Before we talk about the potential impact of media on a whole host of your child's growth and development, let's talk about how you can prevent the most harmful effects and maximize positive

effects. How many hours in a day do older children and teens actually have at their disposal? They wake up, have breakfast (let's hope), go to school, perhaps play sports or do club activities after school, come home, have dinner. That leaves – what? – 3-4 hours to do homework and spend with media? How can kids possibly spend 6-7 hours a day with media?

What about texting? What about Instant Messaging? What about Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat and God-knows-what-that-you're-not-even-aware-of? There are simply no studies, no data. Except to say that about one-third of kids send an average of 100 texts/day,⁹ and that can't be good! Are there reasons to be concerned that face-to-face interactions are decreasing, or that teenagers can no longer talk on the phone? Absolutely. We may be in the middle of a sea-change in the way human beings interact. There are even experts who think that texting and IM-ing are changing our kids' brains.¹⁰ Although there are no good data to suggest that it's time to grab the life-preservers and jump overboard, the new 10-year ABCD study of more than 11,000 children ages 9-10 years has already found lower scores on aptitude tests and "cortical thinning" in some of the heaviest media users.^{11†}

Of course, the alarmists overlook the real benefits of texting: perhaps there is actually more interpersonal communication going on. Perhaps conversations are being carried on that wouldn't happen telephonically, perhaps kids are actually learning to write more creatively via text messages rather than "Here's what you need to write a good paragraph: first your topic sentence, then a few sentences to support your topic sentence, then a conclusion that refers back to your topic sentence." My experience is that in general, they write much more effectively – naturally, fluently, confidently, and even accurately – in their text messages, but many

* I highly recommend Common Sense Media and their "Parents' Ultimate Guide to Snapchat" – <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-snapchat>

† The findings were preliminary but occurred in kids using screens for more than 7 hours a day. Go figure.

teachers would disagree with me (more on this in the Schools chapter).

Bottom line: 2 hours/day is probably accomplishable if you have a baby and start now. If you have a child or teenager and you suddenly want to establish time limits, *fuggedaboutit!* – they’re watching something on their Phone or tablet on the way to school, they’re texting at lunchtime, they’re Snapchatting after school, plus they’re watching YouTube videos on their computer while they’re doing their homework, not to mention the 2-3 hours of TV and movies they’re watching each night.

One excellent recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): keep all technology out of your child’s bedroom. That’s really a no-brainer. I can guarantee you that if you have a 13-year-old boy with an Internet connection in his bedroom, he is accessing some sort of pornography; and more than likely, it’s not some soft-core, romantic, lovey-dovey stuff. You have no idea of what’s out there, just a few keystrokes away. Controlling media from the get-go means keeping TVs, computers, iPads, and cell phones within parental sight-lines.

Teenagers are grumpy enough (think Grumpy Cat) without being sleep-deprived as well. It’s bad enough that schools start at 7:30 a.m. and that most teenagers don’t get the 8-10 hours of sleep/night that they desperately need.¹² Mixing a cell phone, a teenager, and a bedroom together is a recipe for disaster. Sleep patterns started getting disrupted with the introduction of smartphones – in 2015, a national survey found that 40% of teens were sleeping less than 7 hours a night, an increase of 58% since 1991.¹³ Social media use impairs sleep according to a study of more than 5,000 Canadian students, which showed that using social media for more than an hour/day results in less sleep in a dose-response fashion.¹⁴ Cell phones need their rest just like people – they need to recharge, in a basket, in the kitchen starting at 10 p.m. every night. Sounds impossible to do but try it (easier when you start upon initial delivery of cellphone to offspring).

The AAP also recommends co-viewing with your kids. That doesn't mean just sitting there passively in the same room while they watch *Django* or *Justice League* at age 6. It means engaging them in meaningful conversation about what you and they are viewing (or playing or listening to). This should be good news to most parents, many of whom fear having The Big Talk (TBT) with their kids about sex. There's no longer any reason to have TBT when you can have dozens of small talks – “Why is she jumping into bed with him?” “Why aren't they talking about birth control?” “Why are there so many ads for Cialis during PGA Golf broadcasts?” (Do golfers have a difficult time getting it up?*) Every set of parents has their own unique set of family values that they want to impart to their kids over the course of their kids' childhood. Think of the media as an almost-random set of alternative, potentially competing values, some good, some not-so-good, some absolutely atrocious. If you don't speak up, Media Values win out. Now in some cases that may be good. For example, many people have marveled at how quickly gay marriage has been accepted by most states and seemingly by the general population in the U.S. Most of the time, you can't get Americans to agree on whether it's sunny, partly cloudy, or looks like rain. Yet gay marriage took off like a rocket. I give full credit to Hollywood for making that happen, for depicting gay, lesbian, and now transgendered people like any other people and deserving of equal rights. Critics of the media sometimes forget how prosocial the media can be and how influential in a good way.

Bottom line: Kids spend more time with media than with you and often more time with media than they spend in school or sleeping. It is possible to limit total media time, but only if you start early – very early. Otherwise, your best bet is to try to influence and control what they're watching and playing and using – their media diet. If you're as concerned and aware of their media diet as you are about their food diet, you (and they) will be in good shape.

* Ha, ha – I'm a golfer....

Notes

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CHAPTER III

YOU CAN'T BLAME THE MEDIA – OR CAN YOU?

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

—Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (1970)

We put our kids through fifteen years of quick-cut advertising, passive television watching, and sadistic video games, and we expect to see emerge a new generation of calm, compassionate, and engaged human beings?

—Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man* (2007)

I doubt I would be here [in the White House] if it weren't for social media, to be honest with you....When somebody says something about me, I am able to go bing, bing, bing and I take care of it.

—President Donald Trump, quoted by Reuters, October 22, 2017

So, how *do* media affect children and adolescents?

First and foremost, the media give kids “scripts” for how to act in certain situations. We – as parents – can’t prepare them for all eventualities. So the media fill in the gaps. How should you act when your best friend embarrasses you? What should you do when a kid threatens you at school in front of all of your friends? How should you act when your best friend sparks up a doobie and passes it to you? What should you do if you think you might be gay, or transgender? How about when your best friend comes on to you?

Think of the media as a super sex educator, a super drug educator, a super educator about human behavior. We do such a poor job of sex education, for example, that the media have become

the leading sex educator in America today.¹ Difficult to believe, but we're still arguing over whether giving kids access to contraception makes them sexually active (it doesn't). We still think that teaching kids about sex will encourage them to have sex at a young age (it doesn't). We still think that sex education is the proper domain of parents, who obviously will take the time to talk to their kids about this incredibly important topic (they don't). Funny, we don't think that teaching kids Geography is going to make them drop out of school and join the Iditarod Dogsled race – yet somehow we think that teaching them about sex is going to make them have sex.

The media also give kids attractive adult role models to emulate. In many cases, these role models may not be “real” (think plastic surgery, publicists, air-brushing, etc.), but you can't deny their attractiveness. Celebrity has become the coin of the realm, and kids are hardly any less immune to its appeal than adults are.

Finally, it is widely acknowledged that the peer group holds incredible sway over teenagers. Think of the media as a “super-peer,” making it seem like (a) everyone is having sex (b) there's no need for birth control when you're having sex because sex isn't that risky (c) everyone drinks, and most people smoke, especially on-screen (d) when someone threatens you, punch those suckers out (and you don't have to worry about sustaining a boxer's fracture of the 4th or 5th metacarpal – just shake it off like they do in the movies).

New Media v. Old Media

[My doctor's] only gone to one medical school, but if you go online, you can get advice from all over the world.

—Teenager quoted in *TECHsex USA*, 2011.²

Since everyone seems concerned about new media – e.g., Internet, social networking sites, smartphones – let's start with those because it won't take very long. We know virtually nothing about their effects! Yes, that's right. First, they're new, and it takes several years to do the average research study. Second, there is virtually no money from the government or from private