

## Educating Teens in the Arts to Decrease the Allure of Television

By Alessandra Bouchard

Too much television has been proven to inhibit intellectual growth, physical activity, and often assumes moral authority over undiscerning audiences, yet it remains the most popular form of entertainment among teens. Television is attractive to teens seeking rest and relaxation, but the habit of watching too much can yield deleterious effects. TV programs aimed at teens tend to be strikingly unfulfilling forms of entertainment, appealing to audiences for instant gratification, and requiring no activity on the part of a viewer. As a teenager myself, I consider the most effective way to lessen the appeal of television among teens to be promoting appreciation for the fine arts, so that they learn to be more discerning in their choices of entertainment. Forms of fine art, such as theater, the visual arts, and music, are also valuable forms of entertainment, because they uplift the mind and foster the development and exchange of ideas. Increasing education in the arts among teenagers will encourage them to appreciate a variety of worthwhile forms of entertainment and lessen the allure of television.

Recent studies reveal the astonishing amount of time Americans spend watching TV. Polls indicate that ninety-nine percent of American families report owning at least one television set, and American children between the ages of 2 and 17 watch an average of three and a half hours of TV a day. A 1999 Gallup Poll reports that seven out of ten teens think that they watch too much TV. According to the Parents Television Council, the most popular television shows for teens are *American Idol*, *The O.C.*, *Will & Grace*, *One Tree Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *Malcom in the Middle*. These shows have little intellectual value for the teenage viewer. Although entertaining, they offer little insight relevant to teens in their own lives. For example, *American Idol* revolves around artificial competition and harsh criticism, hyperbolized for dramatic effect,

rather than focusing on the talent and drive of the participants; similarly, *The O.C.* gives teenage viewers a false sense of reality by glamorizing the main characters' extravagant lifestyles, often driven by materialism and manipulation. The quality of these programs does not justify the amount of time spent watching them. However, teens' desires attain the lifestyles portrayed by many of these shows create attachments that fuel the TV habit. Though many people recognize that watching so much television is not always a worthwhile use of time, their own complicity indicates that no easy solution exists.

Perhaps understanding why television has become the most popular form of entertainment will elucidate how to introduce more valuable forms of entertainment to teens. The lack of effort needed to enjoy television, parents' acceptance of television as a familiar fixture in the home, and television's enormous physical accessibility, breed the habit of excessive television watching among teens. Television is so alluring to teenage audiences because it is easy and because it gives them instant gratification. Leisure is an important part of teenagers' lives, but unfortunately, many consider leisure and mental activity to be mutually exclusive.

The Forum for Youth Investment is an organization dedicated to improving educational and service opportunities for young adults in order to better their communities. The Forum's 2002 study, "Rethinking Leisure Time," focused on the productive possibilities of leisure, reexamining the popular concern that teens are most likely to use their free time getting into trouble. Irby and Tolman suggest that, "leisure is when *learning and development* happen- not learning in the formal academic sense, but neither any less critical than the learning that goes on inside of schools. And leisure time is the context in which, young people flex their muscles as *contributors and change makers*, as participants in the development of their communities and

societies.” the potential for leisure time to help teens grow intellectually should be taken advantage of.

However, the idea that the leisure should be an experience of restoration and relaxation has too often resulted in the acceptance of idleness in the home. This attitude is reflected by many teens who consider school the place suitable for mental activity, and home the place for mental passivity. Allowing teens to watch excessive amount of television promotes intellectual passivity. An arts education has the ability to counteract teens’ tendency to indulge in passive forms of leisure.

An appreciation for the arts, and the emphasis on rational fulfillment, dated back to the Greeks. In his article, “Aristotle: Art and the Blessed Life,” published in the *Arts Education Policy Review*, James Sloan Allen, comments on Aristotle’s belief that gaining an appreciation for the arts influences the shaping of one’s character. Aristotle recognized the need for one to be discerning in one’s choice of entertainment, because the images we see, and the sounds we hear, cause changes in the soul. Accordingly, Aristotle would disdain the immoral content of many of the shows aimed toward teens, and would be in favor of leisure what would positively shape one’s soul.

Aristotle’s understanding of the importance of man fulfilling his rational nature correlates with another important concept, which is the inherent superiority of activity verses passivity. Aristotle described happiness in terms of the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Many perceive intellectually demanding activities to be contrary to pleasure. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that since exercising one’s mental capacity suits his rational capabilities, it is ultimately more rewarding to an individual than passivity. This is why the arts, a form of entertainment that engages one’s intellect, holds greater value than television, which requires

little rational activity. Although, as Aristotle recognized, passivity is inherently easier than activity, activity becomes easier with practice.

In other words, developing the habit for a certain activity, whether mental or physical, increases the ease with which it is performed. Therefore, an intellectually demanding activity, facilitated by habit, will yield greater enjoyment and satisfaction than a passive pursuit that is less in accord with human nature. The same concept applies to teens' entertainment. An increased education in the arts would make the fine arts seem more approachable to teens. Additionally, education allows teens to begin building the habit of choosing art, an intellectually engaging form of entertainment. Once the habit is in place, the entertainment and pleasure teens experience from art, which fulfills human capabilities, will be dramatically more enjoyable to teens than television.

The modern culture of teenagers also fosters their TV habit. Most teens develop a sense of belonging by following the trends of their peers. During the teenage years individuals learn how to make judgments for themselves. The propaganda-like nature of television, and the immoral content of many shows, poses a serious threat to the teenagers' capacity to make judgments. As documented by the PBS television documentary, *Merchants of Cool*, the majority of producers and advertisers have no qualms about trying to sell immoral, materialistic and hedonistic outlooks to susceptible teens, their target audience. Mark Miller, author of *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*, expresses this point candidly in an interview for the documentary, saying, "They're gonna go directly for the 'please center.' They're gonna try to get you watching and buying right away. And what this means is that they are gonna do as much trash as they can because that will grab people." Television's constant promotion of commercial brands and the importance of wealth, beauty, and sex, appeal to teens seeking to fit in with their peers. The

undiscerning receptiveness of teens who buy into the culture promoted by television allows every advertiser and every negative aspect of the media to influence not only their consumer choices, but their images of themselves and of reality.

Attempting to solve the problem of excessive television viewing by suggesting that teens cease watching television entirely is impractical. Teenagers most often form opinions based on personal experience, and most strongly resist any advice given by an authority that they perceive to undermine their own capacity for judgment. Ironically, teens who are so careful to defend their own freedom of thought and expression, indiscriminately accept the messages carefully constructed by television producers and advertisers, thus surrendering their own freedom of thought. Nonetheless, efforts of adults to forcefully undermine teen cultural norms, such as excessive television watching will most likely fail.

In his book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Jerry Mander discusses the problems he considers inherent in TV. During the fifteen years that he worked as a public relations and advertising executive, Mander learned how easy it is to manipulate society through the media. Mander suggests that television presents an arbitrary reality that impedes one's capability to process information and make judgments for oneself. In fact, he goes so far as to liken television to autocracy, because both share the ability to adversely affect others by eliminating personal knowledge. Both also separate people from each other by eliminating diversity of personal experience. In other words, television's narrow portrayal of life dominates viewers' expectations of their own lives.

Increasing teens' understanding of the arts, by educating them at home and at school, would give them an appreciation for the arts and encourage them to choose meaningful and

active forms of entertainment. The arts are an appropriate solution because they satisfy each inadequacy television presents.

One of the dangers of passive entertainment, such as television, is its tendency to isolate, rather than engage, viewers. Television's often superficial portrayal of reality doesn't foster viewers' active participation because it leaves little room for analysis or discussion. For example, it is rare for teens to discuss the moral choices made by characters on a show. Furthermore, as Mander explains, the very act of watching television tends to dim the human experience; viewers often turn off the lights and eliminate background noise before watching TV. Television separates people from one another because viewers seek to be left undisturbed.

Because true art captures beauty and universal truth, the arts allow individuals to make informed value-based judgments of life, rather than presenting an arbitrary reality. Unlike TV, the arts invite each viewer to contribute his or her own personal experience to an understanding of the work. Additionally, the fine arts differ from television in that they bring large numbers of people into immediate contact with one another. Symphony halls, art museums, and theaters encourage community in a way sitting on the couch cannot. Sharing art with others forces one to increase his or her awareness of the environment, rather than suppressing it. Enjoying art with others enhances the viewers' experience by bringing friends and families together and by facilitating valuable discussion and reflection. Therefore, the arts, while entertaining on the sensory level, do not sacrifice mental activity. True art is an active form of entertainment, and it is this activity that is naturally the most enjoyable to humans.

As with many difficult undertakings teenagers face, the challenge of acquiring proficiency in the arts necessarily requires a collaboration of educators, parents, and teens themselves. The challenge is that many teens truly consider fine art to be boring or irrelevant to

their lives, and gaining an appreciation for the arts seems too daunting and difficult a task to undertake on their own. Increased education in the arts will aid understanding, which in turn, will increase appreciation.

Teenagers' motivation to pursue valuable entertainment begins at home. In this setting, parents can help teenagers' increase their appreciation for the arts by making available valuable literature and music. Family trips to performances and museums serve the dual purpose of uniting parents and their children, and providing pleasurable entertainment from which all can benefit. Initially, these activities may not be enjoyable for teens accustomed to spending weekends alone in front of the TV, but they serve as part of an important foundation for teens seeking entertainment that is uplifting, rather than detrimental. The repetition of such activities leads to increased knowledge, and thus, increased enjoyment.

Therefore, high schools should also become involved, by reinforcing the measures taken by parents at home to help teens. Like parents, educators possess the ability to influence teens during their formative years, and the assistance of teachers is especially important since teenagers spend so much time at school. I believe that each high school needs to establish a fine art requirement necessary for students to graduate. Ideally, high schools would even host a variety of courses so students could pursue what interests them most. High schools across the country offer courses in the arts, but not all schools require them. By familiarizing teens with art, and by helping them to comprehend various forms of fine art, they become far more approachable.

Schools may not require students to take classes in the fine arts for a variety of reasons, including budget constraints, efforts to simplify students' schedules to that they only include the most important academic subjects, and concerns that students do not truly enjoy or benefit from

art classes. I believe that art classes are as beneficial to teenagers as are classes in the sciences or humanities, though in a different sense. Integrating arts education in high school curricula ensures that teens gain exposure to the fine arts. Additionally, teens are more likely benefit from arts education in school, because they consider school the appropriate place for intellectual activity.

Having students take classes in the arts enhances an academic environment. In his essay, *Arts and the Transfer of Learning*, James Catterall reveals the development of cognitive capacities and the motivation to learn in relation to arts learning. For example, he notes that visualization training and learning to think about the visual arts build critical reading and analyses skills. Additionally, he observes that listening to music contributes to spatial reasoning and spatial-temporal reasoning skills, and increases the quality and prolixity of one's writing. Therefore, high school art education holds immediate value for both teachers and students by helping teens develop various intellectual skills

Yet more importantly, an arts education prepares teens for life outside of and after high school. In his essay, Catterall also discusses how exposure to fine arts fosters the growth of life-skills in teens. Schools with integrated arts and academics advance students' ability for creative thinking, achievement motivation, community engagement, and self-awareness, and arts-rich school environments lead to increased self-confidence, risk-taking, attention-spans, perseverance, empathy for others, self-motivation, leadership qualities, highly developed thinking skills, and educational aspirations. In the word of Catterall: **“Social development and academic advantage – these are healthy dividends from the pursuit of lives rich in the arts.”** Arts education in high school helps form many of the intellectual capabilities important for teens to build good character as they mature.

These skills are also essential for teens concerned with how they spend their leisure time. For example, self-confidence lessens teenagers' attachment to the glamorized lives of characters on shows aimed at teens, and the ability to take risks allows teens to act independently of the teen culture many programs portray. Furthermore, utilizing advanced thinking skills outside the academic realm challenges the idea that the home supports idleness. The intellectual habit art education breeds in teens is strong enough to counteract the habit of television. Familiarity with the arts gives teens the option of an available form of entertainment, that's understandable and enjoyable. Additionally, the judgment skills taught by an education in the arts helps teens consciously choose which television shows they do watch, instead of unwillingly yielding to habit.

It's vital that teenagers' choices in entertainment promote positive attitudes and values because entertainment strongly influences how teens interact with each other and perceive reality. Because teens are our future parents and leaders, teen entertainment is an issue about which everyone, teens and adults alike, should be concerned.