

## **Family Matters 29, 2007-08**

### **Screen-Free Week: Live a More Balanced Lifestyle by Controlling Electronic Media**

Mesmerizing, magical, captivating, seductive. These are words that could describe our relationship with the myriad electronic media in our lives. When most of us were school-aged, screen media emanated almost exclusively from TVs and movie theaters. But our children are growing up in a world dominated by screens. They're not only in our homes, offices, and schools, but even in our pockets. And the screen is no longer limited to an entertainment function, but is a critical link to information and each other. Many of us could not do our jobs without access to a screen. And just as our relationship with the screen has changed, so too must our concept of TV Turn-Off Week.

We've changed the name of this project to *Screen-Free Week* to better reflect the integral nature of screened media in our lives. But what is our goal, and how do we achieve it? TV Turn-Off Week was started as a grassroots project in 1994 with a mission of promoting more literate, productive lives and engaged citizenship. Since then, substantial research has shown that too much screen time is also hazardous to our health. So our goal in participating in this nation-wide project is to reassess the role of screened media in our lives and experiment with ways "unplug and substitute," opening the door to healthier, more active, and more balanced lifestyles. Screen-Free Week nudges us to take that first, most difficult step away from our comfortable routines. I encourage you to use the time to ask and answer some important questions about your own family values and the forces that will shape your child's world view.

Some compelling statistics for your consideration: The average child spends 1,680 minutes each week watching TV, which includes an average of 192 minutes of commercials. The same child spends only 38.5 minutes engaged in meaningful conversation with a parent. Physical activity statistics are abysmal. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of overweight children has more than tripled in the past 30 years. More than 50% of American adults do not get enough physical activity to derive health benefits, and a full 25% of American adults engage in no physical activity of any kind in their leisure time.

Electronic media is both a remarkable tool and a curse. It can draw us into light or darkness. We need to take control of it. We need to balance the power of media with the other essentials of a healthy lifestyle. We must insist upon real experiences with real people as an integral part of every single day. We need to use our bodies for physical work and activity every day. The radically altered routines of Screen-Free Week are a golden opportunity to re-discover family dinners, game nights, projects, and outdoor activities. There's power in community. We can and should control the electronic media in our lives. Let's support each other in this worthwhile project.

Let the games begin!