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PARENT TRAP

When Mom and Dad work in entertainment, "Do as I say" can mean "Don't watch what I do"

By *Gina Piccolo*

Los Angeles magazine, November 2009

Nine-year-old Charlie was on a nature walk through the Vermont woods last summer when he paused to point out a plant to fellow campers. It was neither poison oak nor a raspberry bush. It was, he said, a clump of wild marijuana. He was positive—he'd seen it at his mom's job.

The truth, of course, was slightly more nuanced, as his mother explained to the concerned camp counselor. Charlie's mom, Jenji Kohan, is the creator of the Showtime comedy *Weeds*. Though Kohan still isn't sure whether her son discovered genuine cannabis, she does know where Charlie's ganja knowledge comes from: Mommy's office decor, her hemp moisturizer, even the show's logo. "We have a lot of fake pot around," Kohan says. He wouldn't have known it from seeing the show about a pot-dealing suburban mom, Kohan adds, because Charlie has never been allowed to watch an entire episode of *Weeds*. In fact, he and his two younger siblings have never watched any TV show that wasn't carefully monitored by their parents and sheared of commercials by their DVR.

Imagine that you own an ice cream shop but your kids can't eat there. Such is the predicament many Industry moms and dads face when it comes to their creative output. "It scares me when I see the little faces staring at the glowing rectangle for too long," says Kohan, though much of her imagination and energy has gone into filling the confines of that box. "I don't want them experiencing passive entertainment. They're too young. They should be out in the world experiencing things and not just watching someone else's experiences." Kohan then catches herself. "On the other hand," she says, "all things in moderation."

Hollywood doesn't do moderation well, and parenting is no exception. Here child rearing is often overwrought and self-conscious, as if everyone owes a debt to mankind for being in the dirty business of entertainment in the first place. There's so much hand-wringing over media that some are reluctant to own up to their kids' TV viewing. To hear many Industry parents talk, you'd think Hollywood was teeming with pint-size bookworms.

Some do send their children to progressive schools—like Ocean Charter School, near Mar Vista, and Highland Hall Waldorf School, in Northridge—that strongly urge (sometimes in writing) parents to at least limit TV and computer use. Other parents have Emmys and Golden Globes that share shelf space with books such as San Francisco ad executive-turned-activist Jerry Mander's exhaustive 1978 report, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, or the late media critic Neil Postman's 1982 diatribe against the medium, *The Disappearance of Childhood*.

The most extreme example of Industry parents inoculating their children against the contagion they spread are those who ban the tube altogether. Madonna has called TV "trash" and vetoed it from her militant daily regimen and that of her children. The daughters of actor William H. Macy and *Desperate Housewives* star Felicity Huffman, now 9 and 7, announced on the 2006 set of *Georgia Rule* that they don't watch TV because it ruins their imaginations. Philip Seymour Hoffman, the father of three, doesn't even own a set and seems happy that his son Cooper, now 6, is more familiar with his father's stage work than his performances onscreen. "He understands me more as a person in the theater than in films," the actor told *Los Angeles* during a 2008 interview, "because he comes with me to the theater when I direct." *Sex and the City* star Cynthia Nixon has reported that her children are barred from watching TV; in college she stuck a Post-it on her set that read "Shun me, I am the Devil."



Illustration by Joshua Gorchov

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PARENT TRAP

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"In a media-based, postliterate culture, there aren't any filters," says four-time Oscar-nominated filmmaker Gary Ross, the father of 14-year-old fraternal twins. "That's a very unnatural way for kids to assimilate the world. They need more time or patience. It is very hard for a kid to understand three-frame cuts, eight-frame cuts." Ross recalls watching *The Matrix* in a theater near a 4-year-old boy who was begging his parents to take him home. At the time Ross's children were around the same age. "It really stuck with me," he says. So in 1999, when he found himself on the Directors Guild of America's task force on violence and social responsibility alongside Rob Reiner and Steven Soderbergh, he became an outspoken proponent of rewriting the ratings system to keep children under 8 from seeing R-rated movies. Ross, whose work includes some wholesome fare like *Big*, *Pleasantville*, and *The Tale of Despereaux*, felt the task force helped dispel some stereotypes about filmmakers. "Directors may feel differently about this issue than people think we do."

Leslie Morgenstein is the president of Alloy Entertainment, one of the production companies behind *Gossip Girl*. He is also the father of two boys. "Many of my kids' friends are watching whatever they want to, whenever they want to," he says. "That challenge is certainly intensified when you're executive producer of shows that are not appropriate for your kids. It probably is confusing to a kid when you need to separate your professional life from your personal life."

Morgenstein's parents worked, so he spent afternoons parked on a basement sofa watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island* and *Batman*. "There was no particularly sophisticated programming being sent into our house," he says, a tad ruefully. But as a parent, Morgenstein kept his oldest son, now 13, from TV until he was 3 years old and limited both boys to PBS Kids and Noggin, Nickelodeon's "preschool on TV" channel. Then came *Gossip Girl*, the CW's sexy teen drama that Morgenstein considers a personal career high. So he relaxed the house rule and allowed his sons to watch the debut episode on DVD. Morgenstein ended up hitting the pause button to lecture on every instance of sex, attempted date rape, and underage drinking (his finger must have been tired). His kids never watched *Gossip Girl* again.

His youngest did, however, get a gander at the show's provocative billboard on the way to school that screamed the profane text message OMFG. "My son goes, 'Dad, I know what the F is,'" says Morgenstein, who responded with a shrug of his shoulders. "I didn't know what else to say. The campaign was so brilliant and did such a good job. On the one hand, I was very proud of it. On the other hand, what do you say to your 8-year-old in that situation?"

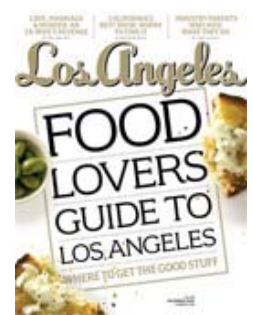
"At the end of the day, we're in the entertainment business, and we're in it to attract as large an audience as possible," Morgenstein says unapologetically, even if the target demographic is a teenager like his son. "We're not in the education business."

When a 2007 study from the University of Washington found that even Disney's relatively benign Baby Einstein videos were quietly making our babies dumber, Disney chief Bob Iger wasn't the only one picking apart the report.

"I hate to say this," says veteran film marketer Terry Press, "but when you have twins and you're looking for 30 minutes of peace, I used to pop those Baby Einstein things in just so I could take a shower." As her children, now 10, grew older, Press tried to keep track of their viewing habits but confronted an uncomfortable reality: The marketing machine of which she is a part was doing the hard sell on her own kids. At one point she noticed a series of trailers for films she deemed too mature—and they were airing during syndicated reruns of *The Simpsons*, her kids' favorite show. (Movie studios have agreed not to tack trailers for R-rated movies onto TV shows whose audience is at least 35 percent children younger than 17.) She still lets her kids watch *The Simpsons*, but now at least she knows why her fourth graders are begging to see *Fast & Furious*. Could she have been more vigilant? Sure, she says.

"I always admire those people who say they don't let their children watch television," says Press, who has run marketing campaigns for the Oscar-winning films *American Beauty*, *Shrek*, and *Dreamgirls*. "You've got to fill up all that time. I just didn't have it."

Then there are Hollywood parents like actress Holly Robinson Peete, best known for her role in the 1980s series *21 Jump Street*. The mother of four, ages 4 to 12, she has TVs in nearly every room of her house. "I come from an era of television as a tool of education, and I think we turned out OK," she says. Her father, the late


Illustration by Joshua Gorchov

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Matthew Robinson, was the first Gordon on *Sesame Street*. "I think it's a mixed message to tell them it's bad and just paint it with a broad brush," she adds.

But as Robinson Peete's children get older, the debate may become moot. With teenagers watching less TV and toting iPhones with 3G capabilities and easy access to heinous Web content, parental restrictions will almost certainly have less sway.

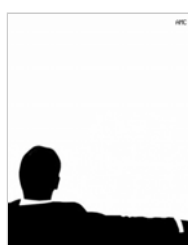
"They're not being programmed to by the networks," says *Gossip Girl*'s Morgenstein of his media-savvy sons and their peers. "They're creating their own micronetworks of what fits their tastes. They're programming for themselves."



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