

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 24, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- Here is the message Benedict XVI wrote on the occasion of World Communications Day 2007, which will be observed May 20 with the theme: "Children and the Media: a Challenge for Education."

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## Children and the Media: a Challenge for Education

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The theme of the Forty-first World Communications Day, "Children and the Media: A Challenge for Education", invites us to reflect on two related topics of immense importance. The formation of children is one. The other, perhaps less obvious but no less important, is the formation of the media.

The complex challenges facing education today are often linked to the pervasive influence of the media in our world. As an aspect of the phenomenon of globalization, and facilitated by the rapid development of technology, the media profoundly shape the cultural environment (cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, 3). Indeed, some claim that the formative influence of the media rivals that of the school, the Church, and maybe even the home. "Reality, for many, is what the media recognize as real" (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis novae*, 4).

2. The relationship of children, media, and education can be considered from two perspectives: the formation of children by the media; and the formation of children to respond appropriately to the media. A kind of reciprocity emerges which points to the responsibilities of the media as an industry and to the need for active and critical participation of readers, viewers and listeners. Within this framework, training in the proper use of the media is essential for the cultural, moral and spiritual development of children.

How is this common good to be protected and promoted? Educating children to be discriminating in their use of the media is a responsibility of parents, Church, and school. The role of parents is of primary importance. They have a right and duty to ensure the prudent use of the media by training the conscience of their children to express sound and objective judgments which will then guide them in choosing or rejecting programs available (cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 76). In doing so, parents should have the encouragement and assistance of schools and parishes in ensuring that this difficult, though satisfying, aspect of parenting is supported by the wider community.

Media education should be positive. Children exposed to what is aesthetically and morally excellent are helped to develop appreciation, prudence and the skills of discernment. Here it is important to recognize the fundamental value of parents' example and the benefits of introducing young people to children's classics in literature, to the fine arts and to uplifting music. While popular literature will always have its place in culture, the temptation to sensationalize should not be passively accepted in places of learning. Beauty, a kind of mirror of the divine, inspires and vivifies young hearts and minds, while ugliness and coarseness have a depressing impact on attitudes and behavior.

Like education in general, media education requires formation in the exercise of freedom. This is a demanding task. So often freedom is presented as a relentless search for pleasure or new experiences. Yet this is a condemnation not a liberation! True freedom could never condemn the individual -- especially a child -- to an insatiable quest for novelty. In the light of truth, authentic freedom is experienced as a definitive response to God's 'yes' to humanity, calling us to choose, not indiscriminately but deliberately, all

that is good, true and beautiful. Parents, then, as the guardians of that freedom, while gradually giving their children greater freedom, introduce them to the profound joy of life (cf. Address to the Fifth World Meeting of Families, Valencia, 8 July 2006).

3. This heartfelt wish of parents and teachers to educate children in the ways of beauty, truth and goodness can be supported by the media industry only to the extent that it promotes fundamental human dignity, the true value of marriage and family life, and the positive achievements and goals of humanity. Thus, the need for the media to be committed to effective formation and ethical standards is viewed with particular interest and even urgency not only by parents and teachers but by all who have a sense of civic responsibility.

While affirming the belief that many people involved in social communications want to do what is right (cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in communications*, 4), we must also recognize that those who work in this field confront "special psychological pressures and ethical dilemmas" (*Aetatis novae*, 19) which at times see commercial competitiveness compelling communicators to lower standards. Any trend to produce programs and products -- including animated films and video games -- which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behavior or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programs are directed at children and adolescents. How could one explain this 'entertainment' to the countless innocent young people who actually suffer violence, exploitation and abuse? In this regard, all would do well to reflect on the contrast between Christ who "put his arms around [the children] laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing" (Mk 10:16) and the one who "leads astray ... these little ones" for whom "it would be better ... if a millstone were hung round his neck" (Lk 17:2). Again I appeal to the leaders of the media industry to educate and encourage producers to safeguard the common good, to uphold the truth, to protect individual human dignity and promote respect for the needs of the family.

4. The Church herself, in the light of the message of salvation entrusted to her, is also a teacher of humanity and welcomes the opportunity to offer assistance to parents, educators, communicators, and young people. Her own parish and school programs should be in the forefront of media education today. Above all, the Church desires to share a vision of human dignity that is central to all worthy human communication. "Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave" (*Deus caritas est*, 18).

From the Vatican, 24 January 2007, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.