

The Sacramento Bee **Sunday Scene**

# What's Wrong With These Children?

(Hint: Do You See A TV Anywhere Nearby?)

*The four Davis kids live with their parents in a large farmhouse surrounded by woods and fields in northern New York state. They are aged 4, 7, 10 and 13. On a warm spring day two years ago, instead of romping outdoors, instead of picking flowers growing wild around the house or climbing the fruit trees nearby, instead of peering into the woodchuck hole or watching the fish swim in the clear stream behind their house, the four children sat in a row on the long sofa in the living room and stared ahead of them at a small table where a short time ago the television set had stood. It was gone.*

— Marie Winn  
"The Plug-In Drug"

By Sigrid Bathen  
Bee Staff Writer

**W**E'VE ALL SEEN THE slack-jawed, dull-eyed children sitting mesmerized in front of the tube. This is not about them, but rather about five Sacramento families who have taken drastic action to curtail — or eliminate — the time they spend in front of the tube.

Withdrawal wasn't easy, and some families who have done it suggest the need for "rap groups" of like-minded people going through the pangs of tube withdrawal. But, with research indicating that the average preschooler spends two-thirds of his or her waking time watching television — 22,000 hours by the time the child graduates from high school — more parents are taking action. As evidence mounts that television viewing — especially excessive television viewing, but

quite possibly any at all — damages the minds and educations of children, some parents demand complete withdrawal. Others allow minimal selective viewing.

The effects of their actions are evident, they say, in improved grades, sunnier dispositions, longer attention spans, more harmonious families.

None of them said it was easy.

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**W**HEN YOU ENTER THE yellow house with the white picket fence on a hill above Fair Oaks Boulevard, you are struck by the extraordinary quiet. There is no TV, no radio, no stereo.

There is, however, a harp, a piano, a violin, a lyre, a handmade drum. And beautiful stained-glass windows, large color photographs of the family — Mom, Dad, two children — a warm, sunlit house, a spinning wheel

and a window seat overlooking the garden.

In a corner of the sewing room, there is a small work bench, filled

with hand-hewn creations of wood and leather, a rough sign overhead which designates the corner as "Michael and Tina's Shop."

Outside, there are tree houses, tire swings, a horse to ride, and innumerable secret places for building childhood forts.

This is, in short, a place dedicated to the raising of children.

Donna Basich, mother of 12-year-old Tina and 8-year-old Michael, gave up the TV four years ago when the children entered the Sacramento Waldorf School in Fair Oaks. Waldorf schools around the world recommend that parents severely restrict — even eliminate — their children's television viewing.

"The hardest part was for my husband, because he likes the sports and the news, but he's adjusted," says Donna Basich. "We do have a TV, and he does watch it sometimes after they're in bed.

"They get more parental attention without the TV. It's harder, but it's more fun. They do more art work and learn music. They build forts. They depend a lot on each other. In school, they concentrate better."

Tina remembers watching TV, but she doesn't miss it. "There are," she says, "a lot more things to do."

**B**ETTY MOULDS, A professor of government at California State University, Sacramento, had some misgivings when her attorney husband, John, suggested putting the tube in a closet last spring.

Since she is home more often with the couple's two sons, Donald, 13, and Jerry, 12, she took some umbrage at the suggestion.

"It is quite a baby sitter," she says wryly.

"I also used it as a passive entertainment when I was tired," she recalls, "and I felt I should watch the TV news. As a political scientist, I felt I should see the news as most people see it."

Then, she and her husband visited the mountain cabin of an ac-

quaintance who is a state appellate court judge. The judge has four grown children, all attending or graduates of prestigious universities. Books lined the walls of the cabin, and there was no TV.

The Mouldses talked with the judge about his children, in whom he took obvious pride.

Gesturing at the book-lined walls of the cabin, he recommended no TV. And the best schooling available.

The Moulds TV set went into the closet. And this fall, both boys are enrolled in Sacramento's academically demanding Country Day School, which requires summer reading for the following year. Donald reads now instead of watching TV, and plays tennis. He is deeply immersed in "Gone With the Wind," one of his assigned books.

"It's 1,000 pages," says Donald, "with no spaces in between!"

As in other families who have

given up or severely curtailed television viewing, communication has improved in the Moulds household.

"We never, ever ate in front of the TV set," says Betty, "and it was never really a big thing in our lives. But we find that we do talk more, that family conversation increases.

"If something important comes up, it's in the closet, but it takes a cooperative effort to get it out, and it's not worth the back strain to get it out for anything that is less than

earth-shattering."

Jerry has been experimenting with a chemistry set his parents gave him three years ago. And, his mother notes dryly, he has become interested in electricity experiments as well. Once he short-circuited the electricity in his bedroom.

And, then, there are Donald's goats, two affectionate French Alpine creatures named Rachel and

Choklit Sweetie. Donald keeps the goats' pen clean. He feeds them, visits with them, and finds TV boring by comparison.

Why goats? "Because," says Donald, "rabbits are boring."

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**S**HIRLEY BIAGI IS A writer, CSUS journalism professor and a former member of the board of education of the San Juan Unified School District. She and her husband, Vic Biondi, a former network television newsman who is now press secretary to state schools superintendent Wilson Riles, have three sons — 16-year-old twins Paul and Tom and 8-year-old David.

"Until two years ago, we were very lethargic and didn't pay much attention to the boys' television viewing," their mother recalls. "We had limits, but we didn't make many choices.

"Now their choices have to be approved by management."

The family watches very little commercial network television. "My mom was getting fed up with network TV," says Paul. "My dad got fed up a long time ago." There is absolute parental veto power over program choices, which are largely limited to public television and some network films and athletic events.

In the past year, the twins' grades have improved significantly, and

they spend much more time outdoors or reading.

"At first they were really angry, and we had some big arguments," their mother says. "Now that they understand the decision cannot be appealed, they've accepted it."

The twins, seniors at Rio Americano High School in Carmichael, play basketball, run cross country, swim. Tom got a job working with small children as a recreation leader in the Mission Oaks Recreation and Parks District. "Working with kids," he has discovered, "is fantastic."

For little David, withdrawing from TV was harder. But he has learned to lobby. "David picks out his program and comes to me and lobbies," says his mother. "He tells me about how this particular program — 'Wild Kingdom' as I recall — is 'educational' because it has leopards in it.

"I let him watch it."

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**L**EIGH STEPHENS TOOK more drastic measures. She cut the cord.

A divorced single mother who works as a communications consultant, teacher and free-lance writer, she abruptly halted her teen-aged sons' television viewing last year. Then 12 and 14, the boys had TV sets in their bedrooms, and there was a family color set as well. They would come home from school, watch TV, and eat. Their grades were suffering, and the older boy was gaining weight. "I gave away their black and

white TV's," Stephens said. "Then I took the scissors and cut the cord of the color TV. I later spliced it, but we went two months without TV.

"I did some tutoring, and their grades were higher than they had ever been. My older son, who got a job after school, lost 15 pounds.

"They weren't very happy then, but they were very happy in the end. Now they watch much less, and they've found other things to do."

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**A** STANDARD TV warning is given to parents of prospective students at the Sacramento Waldorf School, a private school in Fair Oaks.

"We tell parents we can't run their lives," says Ann Matthews, who teaches third grade at Waldorf, "but that we find children learn better if they don't watch TV."

In the preschool and primary years, Waldorf schools around the world recommend absolutely no television.

Matthews, who has taught in public and Waldorf schools, says she can instantly spot children who watch too much TV: they have trouble listening, their attention spans are short, their perception of reality skewed.

In contrast, she says, children who do not watch television, or whose viewing is severely limited, "play more creatively, are less nervous, are better socially and listen better."

"If you can't listen, how can you learn?" asks Matthews.

Television encourages children to "tune out," she says. "It kills their imagination and replaces it with another sort of reality. If we think of all the things children have to learn to do in their lives, how can they learn all those things if they're always sitting in front of a box?"

Research linking poor student achievement to television viewing is fairly new. In her landmark book, "The Plug-In Drug," Marie Winn points to declining college board scores which mirror the increase in

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television viewing among the first "TV generation" of students who graduated from high school in the 1960's.

"The hypothesis that television viewing has affected a generation's verbal decline is strengthened by the mysterious decline in the verbal aptitude scores of high school students taking the college board exams, a decline that began in 1964 and has yet to level off," Winn wrote. "The year 1964, of course, is precisely the year that those first children exposed to large doses of television during their language-learning years sat down to take their college boards."

For the first time last year, the California achievement tests given public school children included questions about television viewing. The results overwhelmingly confirmed what smaller research samples have indicated for years — that student achievement drops significantly as TV watching increases.

The students with the best scores were those who watched no TV at all.

Of the 16 Waldorf graduates in the class of 1981, 14 went on to college. Their average score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test was 524 on the verbal portion, compared to a national average of 424, and 527 in math, compared to a national average of 466.

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**I**F EVER THERE WERE a reason for quieting children with the tube, Nancy Poer had five. Five children, including a set of twins, in five years, back when TV was new.

"We have the data now," she says. "It wasn't in then. I just instinctively knew television was not good for small children."

Poer and her pharmacist husband Gordon and their five children moved to Fair Oaks from Southern California 11 years ago to be near the Waldorf School. Eight-year-old Colin was born here, and all six children attended or are currently enrolled at Waldorf.

The family lives in a huge old house on a Fair Oaks hill, an 1895-vintage home with big rooms, high ceilings, wide doorways and a special sunlit room where the family cares for Nancy Poer's 90-year-old father, who has been paralyzed by a stroke. In some other families he would probably be dying in a nursing home.

This is not your usual family, nor does it have the usual habits. There is a TV, but it is watched rarely, and

never by young Colin, who instead builds forts and stages puppet shows with his friends on the huge grounds where horses graze.

The 17-year-old twins, Mary and Vivian, all lithe and blonde, could be on the cover of Seventeen Magazine. This day they worked in the rose garden and then painted the big upstairs bathroom. They run cross country, ski, sail, are interested in drama and art. Mary wants to be a marine biologist or a doctor; Vivian is set on being a doctor. Both are straight-A students.

Twenty-two-year-old Lauren is at the University of California, Davis, studying international relations, with plans to enter the diplomatic corps. Two brothers are away for the summer, traveling and working. One plans an architectural career, the other is an expert mechanic.

Colin plays. "How they relate to play as children affects how they do their work as adults," says Nancy Poer, who has a science degree from the University of Arizona and helps train Waldorf teachers. The adored baby of the family, Colin has wooden houses built by his brothers, a huge Noah's Ark in his room, hand-made knights in armor, and forts in the yard.

"We've had the rise and fall of civilization this summer," his mother muses. "There are forts all over."

The day before, Colin and his friends staged a puppet show. There are also dramatic productions, a lot of family reading, music, chess and backgammon.

"I find when I do watch TV, that I don't want to," says Vivian Poer. "Real life is so much more exciting."

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Bee Photo by Owen Brewer  
Tina and Michael Basich work with a spinning wheel and loom, and with pet rabbit crouched in left foreground.



Bee Photo by Susie Gow  
Jerry, left, and Donald Moulds tend their goats, Rachel in foreground and Choklit Sweetie.



Animals — not television — keep the Nancy and Gordon Poer family busy.

Bee Photo by Susfe Gow

*'At first they  
were really angry . . .  
Now that they  
understand the decision  
cannot be appealed,  
they've accepted it.*

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Bee Photo by Susie Gow  
**The family of Nancy and Gordon Poer assembles for a puppet show put on by son Colin and friends.**