

Winning the Battle for our Children's Minds

by David Gushee

Imagine that you are trying to get into the mind of someone. Your goal is to communicate some kind of message to that person so that he or she will not forget it. What will your strategy be?

The answer is repetition. You will put your message in front of your target as many times as possible, in as many venues as possible, in as attractive and unforgettable a manner as possible. You will “flood the zone” so your target will encounter your message everywhere.

Now imagine that you are someone attempting to block the transmission of this message. You have more limited resources but do exert some control over the activities of the target. What will your strategy be?

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Take an average day. When my oldest daughter gets up in the morning, she is awakened by a clock radio tuned to her favorite radio station. There are two main stations that are popular with most teenagers we know. They offer two primary messages. One says, “I am a hormone-crazed young person who wants to party and have sex.” The other says, “I am a depressed young person who wants to jump off a bridge.” About 20 minutes an hour, both say, “Come to this or that club and party with other hormone-crazed and depressed young people.”

Let's say I employ my message-blocking role to demand that these two radio stations be turned off, as at times I have. This might reduce the message-sender's target penetration by some small percentage.

But my daughter can always go down the hall and listen to the same music on the Internet or through file-swapping programs. Or, if we tell her that there are certain songs or “artists” she cannot listen to, she can turn on the T.V. and see them featured on various programs and commercials there—even if she isn't looking for them.

If we tell her that she cannot watch T.V., or at least certain shows on T.V., she can then go out with her friends and listen to the same music in the car or over at a friend's house. For that matter, if she goes to the mall she will hear some of the same music in various stores. If she goes to a restaurant, she will often receive the message piped in through the sound system. If she goes to a movie, she will receive similar messages, often accompanied by the same music and the same artists.

Our nation's children have been, and will continue to be, masterfully inundated by the messages being sent by the mass media. One could hardly imagine a more comprehensive strategy for teaching someone something.

There are only so many strategies available to parents seeking to be message-blockers in this culture.

Some parents opt for an attempt at total prevention. They remove all radios, television, VCRs, CD players and Internet providers from the home. Even this radical strategy cannot prevent out-of-home transmission of unwanted messages.

While such a total home media blackout has its benefits, it is not the path we have chosen in our household. We have believed that there are valuable resources available through the mass media if it is used selectively and supervised carefully.

There are television stations we do not watch, types of movies we ban, songs we refuse to hear, Internet sites we block and so on.

It is a war, and sometimes it feels like we are on the losing side. The struggle itself is just plain wearisome. But it is one we cannot abandon.

There is one final dimension to this struggle. Parents must be more than message-blockers—they must be message-senders as well. A merely defensive strategy will never be adequate. We must have our own message to send, and we must send it with just as much energy as we can. For our family it is a message about the good, the true, the beautiful and the God who is the author of all three. It is a message we send with our involvement in church, with our moral teaching, with the books we read and—we pray—with our lives. It is a message we hope our children will make their own as they leave us and make their way in the world.

What are you doing to win the battle for your child's mind? □

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David Gushee is the Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee.