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One woman's crusade: How TV affects families

SECTION B

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Staff Writer

"Television," says Annamarie Pluhar, "is causing children to abandon their parents."

That may sound extreme, but Ms. Pluhar, an Episcopal Divinity School and Vassar College graduate who earns a living conducting quality control seminars for business, is among those who believe children are affected by television's portrayals of violence.

The Ellicott City resident also believes that television watching is having a much broader and deeper effect on children and family life.

Among the consequences: truncating childrens' spiritual, emotional and social development; robbing parents of valuable time and the resulting intimacy that comes from building relationships with their children; and interfering with the development of a child's thinking, reading and physical skills.

Those concerns prompted Ms. Pluhar to launch The Television Project, an effort aimed at getting parents and children talking and thinking about not only what they watch but how their television viewing habits affect their family life.

For now, Ms. Pluhar is focusing her effort on setting up half-day workshops on the subject for children and parents. Tomorrow, she'll lead The Television Project's second such workshop at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Ellicott City. Her first workshop was conducted earlier this month for St. Peter's parishioners; tomorrow's free workshop is open to the public.

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ANNAMARIE PLUHAR

Ms. Pluhar's effort may be unique, says Dr. Robert Gould, a psychiatrist at New York Medical College and president of the National Coalition on Television Violence, an educational and research organization.

"There are a lot of people who have written on the subject, but it's one thing to write about and a whole other to get down to doing something about it, showing people how TV is affecting their children and how to change the habit."

In her workshops, Ms. Pluhar first has participants leaf through copies of the most recent week's *TV Guides* and mark which programs they or any other family member watched.

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TV

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"This shows people just how much time they spend with the TV. My theory is people greatly underestimate how much time they use TV," says Ms. Pluhar.

Numerous studies have been done on television viewing habits. They generally estimate the average American child spends between 14 and 28 hours each week — that's two to four hours a day — in front of a TV.

Next workshop participants are launched into a discussion of what their families' general viewing habits seem to be, such as who watches what shows, who turns the tube on and off, and if there is anyone policing what shows can be watched and by whom.

Ms. Pluhar says it is this part of her workshop that can be the most interesting and enlightening for participants.

"Right now in our society there is a lot of discussion about what is shown on television. But our culture hasn't been discussing how we use TV. I don't think the TV industry wants this to be talked about because we might decide to watch TV a lot less if we start thinking about our habits."

Next in the workshop, Ms. Pluhar talks about what she thinks television viewing is doing to children and parents.

Her main thrust: while television may act as a short-term solution for occupying a child and relieving parents of the stress of attending to a child's needs, the long-term consequences of turning to TV often for this duty are damaging.

"Time spent viewing television competes with time spent with parents. It robs family members of time they would otherwise spend either interacting with each other or involved in activities that are oriented toward learning and creating," argues Mrs. Pluhar. "This makes parenting harder in the long term."

It's when parents turn often to TV as a parental substitute that children are noticed "abandoning the parents," as Ms. Pluhar puts it. "They do exactly to the parents what the parents have done to them."

In her workshop she attempts to educate parents about how crucial it is for children to spend time with other family members in play and other activities.

"This is the only way a child develops social skills. They can't do it in front of a TV screen," she says.

She also argues that children who spend a lot of time viewing TV are impaired in their ability to play and be self-entertaining.

"The child's ability to be self-entertaining is essential for a peaceful family life," Ms. Pluhar argues. "Before TV, children moved through life thinking up things on their own to stay busy and entertained."

Dr. Gould says Ms. Pluhar's points are on firm ground.

"Kids need time playing and being with others to learn how to cooperate, collaborate and compromise. These are very important skills to be learned, and they are difficult to master. What happens today is kids escape the world when confronted with these tasks by turning to TV. What she's saying is TV interrupts this natural stage of life. I couldn't agree more."

Ms. Pluhar says the goal of her effort is to educate parents that they don't need to turn to the TV as an "electronic baby-sitter."

Among the suggestions she has for controlling television viewing:

☐ Have rules for TV viewing and stick to them.

☐ Remove the TV from the mo comfortable room in the house. Put somewhere not particularly attra tive to spend time in.

☐ Cover the tube so it's not "sta ing at you and the children."

☐ Keep a weekly time log on T viewing showing who watched wh shows and when.

☐ Parents should control wh children can watch and spend tir watching TV with children.

☐ Parents should limit their ov TV viewing. Remember that childr model their behavior on that adults.

"And never," says Ms. Pluhar em phatically, "allow a TV in a child room."

The workshop is schedule from 9 a.m. to noon at St. Peter Episcopal Church, 4642 Roundh Road, Ellicott City. For inform tion, call 410-461-7646.

KIM HAIRSTON/STAFF PHO

Annamarie Pluhar will lead her workshop tomorrow at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Ellicott City.

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