

Prime Time for Communication

Fred T. Wilhelms



Mohammed Ali and Kris
Kristofferson in *Freedom Road*.

Television can be the tool to start parents and kids talking to each other about the things that really matter.

This is a consumer report. For several years I have been loosely associated—in a watching role, mostly—with a small outfit called *Teachers Guides to Television*. When you come right down to it, TGTV is really two people: Ed Stanley, retired from NBC after longtime responsibility for educational and public service programming; and Gloria Kirshner, a gifted, creative teacher with experience across the spectrum of education. Combining their expertise, they set out to enrich the schools' use of TV, and at the same time to stimulate programming compatible with school needs.

As the name of their organization suggests, their basic tool has been a series of *guides* for teachers.

Well before each semester they search out the most valuable offerings that are going to be available, study scripts, preview films, and select their list. But their service goes far beyond mere listing: using expert consultants, they provide background on each program and demonstrate how it might be used. The questions they raise are singularly evocative and ought to stimulate the imagination of any good teacher.*

About three years ago, an explosive new idea entered the scene: the "Parent Participation TV Workshop." Just to read the phrase is enough to set your professional imagination racing; it's a "natural." Here we are, in these quicksand times, with our youth groping and our parents worrying, the gap between them tragically wide. Two

*For more information write: *Teachers Guides to Television*, 699 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021. The annual subscription rate is \$4, with discounts for quantity orders.

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Fred T. Wilhelms, Lincoln, Nebraska, is a former Executive Secretary, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

out of three parents, studies show, feel impotent in getting through to their children on serious, sensitive matters that range from death to drugs to money to sex and family problems. Underneath all their veneers, young people yearn desperately to be in close communication with their parents—yet they drift off into a half-secret world of their own. And the walls get higher and higher.

Suppose we had an attractive, neutral device to gather both groups around, with some trained leaders to help them through the awkwardness and old silence. A television program might be just

the thing—especially if it dealt naturally and sensitively with the subjects they've both wanted to talk about, but couldn't. They wouldn't have to talk right away about themselves—which is too hard. They could talk about the show, the characters, their motivations, and whatever else came naturally out of the shared experience. Little by little, they could bring the whole thing closer to home. The chances are, they eventually could talk straight to each other about the things that really matter.

That, in a nutshell, is the purpose of the Parent Participation TV Workshop: to open up communication. All you need is a warm, concerned leader (in a school, church, social agency, or wherever), who is good at group process, to invite a small group of parents and their children of a reasonably common age group, get them acquainted in a congenial place and set things going. It will help if the leader has previewed the program, but the hints the *Teachers Guides* supply will do nicely. The leader can set

the tone with a few introductory remarks about the "show" they are about to see. But it will be in the moments just after the showing that his or her warm, relaxing skills will really come into play. Expect that at first the conversation will be a hesitant trickle, before it starts flowing naturally.

That is the heart of the thing. Simplicity itself! And yet, like many action plans, it needs some muscle and some organization behind it. Above all it needs *commitment*, understanding commitment, from people in position to act. If your school feels that it might be interested, the first thing to do is to write Gloria Kirshner at the TGTV address given in the first footnote. She will send you much more explicit descriptions, accounts of what has been going on elsewhere, notices of conferences that may be held near you, and statements by educators already experienced in the movement. Then you will be in better position to judge whether you wish to be involved, perhaps in a small way at first.

Despite the newness of the notion, the "accounts of what has been going on elsewhere" are impressive already, and snowballing rapidly. Some 25 or 30 associations, including ASCD, are listed as cooperating groups; they range from the Campfire Girls to the National PTA to the Council of Chief State School Officers. In May, the Parent Participation TV Workshops were selected as one of 11 "programs that work," for the USOE Commissioner's Conference on "Building Confidence in the Public

The cast of Hot Hero Sandwich, a 12-week series based on interviews with the heroes of today's teenagers.



A scene from The Miracle Worker, starring Melissa Gilbert and Patty Duke Astin as Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan.

Schools." Within USOE, officials are contemplating incorporation into the field of career education. Others are talking about possibilities with reference to citizenship education, moral education, values clarification, self-image, and problem solving. One could go on and on.

The producers of "Sooner or Later," the program about a young girl's first love used most intensively last spring, are putting together a Saturday morning series built around typical problems of pre-adolescents and teenagers: peer pressures, family relationships, and so on. The series will use interviews with the heroes of today's teenagers, speaking from their own home towns. Much of this whole parent participation development has been made possible by the interest of the media, with NBC underwriting a six-figure grant that makes the necessary materials free of cost to the schools.

Within the schools themselves, the level of interest varies from the original centers with a couple of years of experience behind them to schools that are just testing the water with their toes. For example, in May the San Francisco Board of Education heard a presentation on the Parent Participation TV Workshops and voiced enthusiastic support of the project; it is not yet clear what action will result. Baltimore, on the other hand, had 12 schools involved last year on a volunteer basis, and was shooting for 50 as an immediate goal. The patterns of organization and support are already too numerous to describe.

The most extensive effort so



far has been the statewide drive launched last spring in Georgia by Lucille Jordan, Associate State Superintendent for Instructional Services. Building around the TV film "Sooner or Later," Jordan organized advance workshops to which principals, parent leaders, and guidance counselors could come to preview the film and design their local efforts. She also secured the cooperation of the state's welfare and health departments so that notices went to hundreds of thousands of lay people. In cooperation with the Human Resources Department, a hot line was maintained for a week after the show so that families that had uncovered problems would have a place to turn.

Jordan now plans to work with the Saturday morning series mentioned earlier. This fall she has a special, particularly Georgian, resource to work with: the new films of Eliot Wigginton's famous

activities with three generations of citizenry in the mountains of North Georgia—the work that led to the publication of the *Foxfire* series. When these films are aired she plans to go beyond "parent participation" to Grandparent/Parent/Student Workshops.

As I look back over the accumulating record, it almost seems to me that the greater danger is not lack of acceptance but *over* acceptance for too wide a variety of goals—all of them good in their own ways. The basic idea is so attractive that ardent professionals seize upon it to promote whatever is closest to their hearts: reading, writing, career education, and so on. I hope that the original sponsors can concentrate on their first purpose, to open communication within families. For here, surely, is a paramount need of our times, and the Parent Participation TV Workshop looks like an amazingly good answer to that need.

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