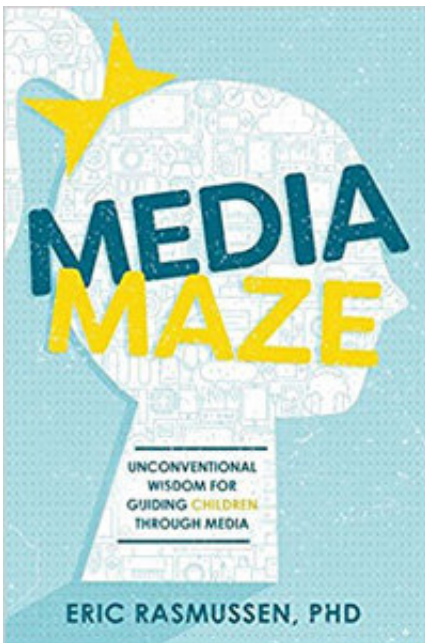


Researcher's new book empowers parents to deal with media messaging

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When it comes to children, a parent's natural instinct when spotting something harmful to the child is to eliminate access to that danger. That could range from something like a dangerous animal coming too close to the child to potentially harmful content on television.

The gut reaction for the parent is to either remove the child from the harmful situation or eliminate the cause of potential harm. When it comes to something like a mean dog, that instinct is instant and correct.

But when it comes to harmful or confusing [media](#) images or messages, elimination may not always be the safest or most effective form of protection. More and more, conventional thinking of protection through elimination is being replaced by protection through empowerment.

"Kids are going to be exposed to media no matter what a parent does," said Eric Rasmussen, an assistant professor of public relations in the Texas Tech University College of Media & Communication. "We can set as many rules as we want, but they're still going to be exposed to this stuff. That's just the way the media environment is today."

Just as dangerous as the messages kids receive from the media is the flood of media in the world today. The public is so deep in media in all forms, from television and movies to social media, that it can be difficult for adults to navigate their way through the onslaught of messages, much less know how to help their kids deal with those same messages.

Recognizing this, Rasmussen has penned a book he hopes will not only train [parents](#) on how to deal with the crush of media but also give them the tools necessary to protect their children by empowering them with the ability to discern messages that bombard them on a daily basis.

"Media Maze: Unconventional Wisdom for Guiding Children through Media" provides parents with useful strategies designed to help parents give kids knowledge and tools to make sense of media messages and determine which are helpful and which are harmful. The book has earned praise from several scholars and media entrepreneurs, including Angela Santomero, creator of the popular children's television shows "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" and "Blue's Clues."

Rasmussen said his is the only research-based book he is aware of that gives parents advice on how to protect their children from the harmful effects of media messaging but does so in a way that is empowering

instead of restrictive. It also presents these findings and strategies in a way that parents can easily access, strategies that have, until now, been hidden in academic papers.

"This is my way of taking this research and putting it into words that are meant for parents, so they can then use what the research says to help their children," said Rasmussen, an expert on children and media whose blog, ChildrenAndMediaMan.com, deals with these issues on a daily basis. "Parents are just guessing right now about what to do about kids and Instagram and Snapchat and all this other [social media](#). We don't need to keep guessing. Research shows that the way to prevent media effects is to empower kids to deal with media themselves."

Before the children can be empowered, however, the mindset of the parent has to change.

Strong parental instinct

Rasmussen said the focus of the academic community has been on what can be done to protect children from the media. Further research shows parents are the biggest influence on changing how children are affected by media, but little attention has been paid to targeting parents on how they can influence their children's reaction to media exposure.

He also said there is a dangerous wave of unsubstantiated theories being published on the internet regarding how to deal with children and the media, none of it research-based and some of it carrying the weight of well-known celebrities. And because it comes from a popular source or person, parents tend to gravitate toward those methods, especially when those methods reinforce what parents are already doing and don't call for them to change.

"Protecting kids is instinctual," Rasmussen said. "You want to circle the wagons and protect kids from anything they might encounter. That is

conventional wisdom. But it's not enough anymore. Empowering your kids is the way to protect them. Protecting them from having a device or seeing media, it works to a certain extent. But if you want to really protect your kids, you have to empower them."

The simple fact is media today is so prevalent and inundating that not only is it impossible to avoid, it is unlike anything parents have had to deal with – ever. Sometimes, to prevent a crisis or disaster from happening, a smartphone or media device has to be taken away, and in some instances that is the best thing. But not always.

Rasmussen said parents can't rely on the strategies used when they were brought up because there was nothing like media messaging today. Not only do children have to navigate the ocean that is the media, but parents are having to learn how to paddle right along with them while at the same time keeping their kids' heads above the water.

He added that research today shows children in America spend more time immersed in media – eight hours a day – than they do any other activity, including sleeping, and that number goes up to almost 11 hours per day when multitasking is included.

The best way to keep kids' heads above water, metaphorically, is not to reduce the amount of water – because that's not possible anymore – but give them the power to stay afloat.

"We're trying to get this book out to all the parents so they can wake up and their eyes can be opened," Rasmussen said. "It is surprising to parents when they realize not only how much media their kids are exposed to but the content of that media. It's time, and it's content."

Retraining parents

Not only is the book research based, but it also comes from experience.

Rasmussen and his wife, Chasten, an instructor in the College of Media & Communication, are the parents of four daughters, ranging in age from elementary to high school. So he's not just an academic researcher when it comes to the subject of children and media. He lives it as well.

In the Rasmussen household, there is no internet filter to prevent potentially harmful media messages from reaching their kids. So, his research into the subject and practicing empowerment techniques in his own home gives Rasmussen a unique perspective to tackling the issue.

From that, he has developed four strategies for parents that will help empower their kids to most effectively deal with any form of media and the message it delivers.

The first strategy is that parents have to change their own habits. Research shows the biggest predictor of children's media use is parent's media use. If parents are on a smartphone all the time, then so will their children be. If parents are watching certain content all the time, then children will pick up that content is suitable for them to view as well.

Research also shows that the level of communication between a parent and a child decreases when they watch television as opposed to reading a book or playing with a toy. So, children really do pick up on what's right and wrong from their parents.

"If we want to change kids' media use patterns, the first thing is to change our own patterns, taking a look at ourselves," Rasmussen said. "The fact that media is in the home reduces the complexity and sophistication of the parent-child communication."

The second strategy is parents need to talk to their children appropriately. The fact that this book is written with language and style that is easily understandable by parents will allow them to then transfer

those strategies into practice with their children.

"As a parent, I can do that because I know what parents are looking for when it comes to the media," Rasmussen said. "That is critical so that they have access to that knowledge and can use it and apply it in their lives."

The third strategy involves establishing rules in the correct and most effective way. As stated before, parents can't simply take away the smartphone, because there are instances where the device is used, for example, to download and complete schoolwork through an app or other instances where having the device becomes necessary.

Rasmussen said rules aren't necessarily bad, but there are certain ways to set rules that make it more likely those rules won't be rejected by children.

The fourth and final method is to use parent-child media time in the most strategic way possible. That involves utilizing parent-child media time that delivers the most effective message to children, whether it's in the device used or what is viewed with that device.

"When kids see a parent using media with them, it's a realization this must be something that is important, so they will pay more attention to it," Rasmussen said.

The strategies apply not only to giving children the tools necessary for dealing with potentially harmful media, but also helping kids enjoy the good content that causes positive effects. While the focus of the book does deal more with helping parents avoid negative media messaging, since that is what parents have said they fear the most, the book tries to do so in a way that doesn't frighten parents.

Rasmussen's goal is to show parents they are not as powerless as they think they are when dealing with media messaging and parenting their [children](#).

"When looking for solutions, we look for filters and we look for ways to technologically monitor our kids," Rasmussen said. "But the solution lies with the parents themselves. The solution is modifications or changes in how we're doing our media parenting."

Rasmussen's book will be available beginning Tuesday (Oct. 10) and is available through Amazon. Those interested in ordering a copy of the book can find it [here](#).

Provided by Texas Tech University

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