



## **Keeping children healthy, safe in information age**

By Susan Hauck/guest columnist

Thursday, February 01, 2007

Things have changed since my childhood, when the most advanced technology tools included three-way phone calls and cassette players, when most kids spent their free time playing in neighborhood games of kickball, and television meant the Saturday morning cartoons.

Fast forward to 2007 when the average child begins watching television at the age of 2, and video games, computer use and online social-networking sites have irrevocably changed childhood play as we knew it.

With recent news stories of increased violence amongst youth, parents are struggling to slow the tide of violent and destructive images portrayed in the media and online activities. As parents, we struggle with how to dole out technology usage and which movies, music and television shows are appropriate for our children. Given these new challenges, most parents will end up in a moment when they are unsure of how to control technology's influence on their children and the media messages with which they are bombarded from an early age. Understanding that this issue was common amongst parents, TeamUp Inc., a Marblehead-based non-profit organization, knew it would be an important topic for the annual TeamUp Speaker Series.

TeamUp and the Children's Hospital Center on Media and Child Health (CMCH) have partnered to provide a series of presentations for students, parents and educators about the risks and benefits of media on children's health and well being. On Feb. 6 and 7, we will offer a multi-tiered program to help each group become aware of the issues and develop tools to become discerning media consumers in the Information Age.

During the school day, CMCH staff will speak to Marblehead seventh- and eighth-grade students about the influence of media messages on young people's body image. An afternoon program will provide information and lesson-plan ideas to public and independent-school faculty from Marblehead and several surrounding communities, encouraging them to incorporate discussion of media messages into their classrooms.

The program will culminate on the evening of Feb. 7 when pediatrician and CMCH Director Dr. Michael Rich will speak to parents with children of all ages about how to use media thoughtfully in their families. His presentation, "Keeping Children Healthy and Safe in the Information Age," is open to the general public and will be held from 7-9 p.m. at Tower School Performing Arts Center in Marblehead.

This comprehensive approach of simultaneously reaching students, parents and educators is the first of its kind to address the direct effects of entertainment media on the physical, mental and social health of young people.

"This innovative program targets caregivers, educators and the children themselves in a community," said Dr. Rich. "Our goal is to empower parents and teachers with information on what kids are being exposed to in various media and what health research has shown to be the outcomes. While the technology is convenient and fun, media are very powerful and should not be used without understanding the potentially harmful effects."

Nearly a half-century of research shows conclusive evidence of the negative effects from violent television, movies and video games, including increased violent behavior. And research just published from a five-year study by the

University of Minnesota of over 2,500 teens found that reading magazine articles about diet and weight loss led to unhealthy weight-control behaviors among girls, including extreme dieting measures such as induced vomiting. There are also two decades of research showing a direct relationship between the amount of television watched and obesity. No matter whether the concern is violence desensitization, body image or childhood obesity, it is clear that the influence of media and technology use will have cumulative and lasting impact on our children's physical, social and mental health.

In addition to making parents and educators aware of the scientific research, Dr. Rich will also discuss the universality and importance of media in young people's lives, and techniques that children and families can use to protect themselves against negative effects while also using media in a thoughtful way to improve their lives.

The student and parent programs have been made possible through a generous gift from the Marblehead Female Humane Society in support of Marblehead youth and families. Together with their support, TeamUp aims to create a community discussion on this issue, which will foster continued discussion at home, in school and amongst parents.

We invite you to join us for "Keeping Children Healthy and Safe in the Information Age." Event information and details about the TeamUp Speaker Series are available at [www.TeamUpMarblehead.com](http://www.TeamUpMarblehead.com) or by calling 781-631-3427.

Susan Hauck is the president of TeamUp Inc. of Marblehead.