

What Are We Doing to Our Kids?

A Hollywood, Health & Society Writers Briefing in Partnership
with the Writers Guild of America, west

October 2, 2002
Writers Guild of America, west



HOLLYWOOD, HEALTH & SOCIETY
PARTNERING ENTERTAINMENT, EDUCATION AND THE CDC

What Are We Doing to Our Kids?

This writers briefing, convened by the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society project and the Writers Guild of America, west, brought together writers and producers of successful television shows and films, an expert on the effect of media on kids and a trend forecaster to explore the interaction between kids and the entertainment they consume—how does it change them, how do they change it, and what are the consequences?

Hollywood, Health & Society

Hollywood, Health & Society is a program at the Norman Lear Center that provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for health storylines. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the project recognizes the profound impact that entertainment media have on individual behavior. The Lear Center helps the CDC supply writers and producers of all types of entertainment content with accurate health information through individual briefings, special seminars and expert consultation. Visit the Web site at www.entertainment.usc/hhs.

The Writers Guild of America, west

The WGAw, led by Victoria Riskin, represents writers in the motion picture, broadcast, cable and new technologies industries. The Writers Guild of America is the sole collective bargaining representative for writers in the motion picture, broadcast, cable, interactive and new media industries. It has numerous affiliation agreements with other U.S. and international writing organizations and is in the forefront of the debates concerning economic and creative rights for writers. Visit the Web site at www.wga.org.

The Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research center that explores the implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. From its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between faculty who study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; fellows, conferences, events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. For more information, please visit www.learcenter.org.



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Participants

Michael Borkow, writer/co-executive producer, *Malcolm in the Middle*

Rebecca Collins, senior behavioral research scientist, RAND

Al Jean, executive producer, *The Simpsons*

Marty Kaplan, director, The Norman Lear Center

Sharon Lee, co-founder/co-president, Look-Look

Michael Perry, executive producer, *The Guardian*

Victoria Riskin, president, Writers Guild of America, west

Douglas Steinberg, consulting producer, *Boston Public*

Lizzy Weiss, co-writer, *Blue Crush*

Victoria Riskin: This evening is a cooperative effort between the Writers Guild and a project called Hollywood, Health & Society, which is a joint venture by the Centers for Disease Control and the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. Hollywood, Health & Society has become a significant resource for writers and producers who need accurate information about everything in health—from bioterrorism, to drug addiction, AIDS, violence against women and the epidemic we're facing in the United States of obesity and diabetes. If you go to their Web site, they have dozens and dozens of tip sheets for writers. They've been spending a great deal of time with various shows around town and they have had significant success making sure that writers and producers have access to experts and that the information that they convey is accurate. It's up to the storytellers to pick what stories they want to tell, but if they're going to tell stories, it's helpful if the information embedded in the story is accurate. They are available for all of you to answer any critical questions that you might have. What you do with that information is your domain.

I want to say thank-you to the people who helped put this together. Vicki Beck, who is with Hollywood, Health & Society, and my own assistant Jennifer Burt, without whom I couldn't survive. She's been wonderful. Marty Kaplan is the head of the Norman Lear Center, and has been doing some wonderful other projects with the Writers Guild, but this is one that we're particularly proud of. I think you have some people you want to recognize as well Marty.

Martin Kaplan: Yes, thank you. I just also want to thank Kira Poplowski who, with Jennifer, has put on this event. I also thank all of you for being here, and Vicki Riskin for co-chairing the board of this project. I'll also make a shameless pitch for you to complete the red sheet in your folders, which is

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an evaluation of this program. At the end of the program, if you could take a minute and fill it out. It helps us plan future programs. If you fill it out now, before the program, please give us excellent marks.

Riskin:

I think there's no question that media have a very significant impact on all of us, but also on kids. What kind of messages are we sending out, and what is our responsibility as storytellers? Do we have any responsibility at all? This is something we can discuss tonight.

I know as a teenager I had role models that I saw on television. I was talking to some of the writers tonight about how I learned about what families were supposed to be like—from *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. I felt incredibly defective because my family didn't look anything like that and never would. I think we've come a long way from those days, and the kinds of shows that some of the folks are doing on this panel are much more realistic, much more cutting edge, and present a perhaps fairer portrait of life.

At the same time, we're also conveying messages to young girls. I'm particularly sensitive to this and maybe the other women in the room are. It's important to be incredibly thin, and we've seen an epidemic of anorexia. How is media contributing to that? We also see how certain companies can push fast food products on kids, or these high-sugar content drinks that we all thought were benign when we were young. And now we are seeing yet another epidemic, of obesity and diabetes, in the society.

Are we dream makers? Are we cool makers? Do we have responsibilities? What are the boundaries? Are there boundaries? Should there be boundaries in terms of the kinds of stories we try to tell? That's for us to discuss tonight.

We have a wonderful panel. I would like to start with introducing Al Jean, who I've known for awhile. He is the writer and executive producer of *The Simpsons*, which I happen to love. It's a fantastic show. He's here tonight even though it's his wife's birthday—so he's willing to sacrifice for the Guild. Michael Borkow is writer and co-executive producer of *Malcolm in the Middle*. It's wonderful to have you here. We also have Lizzy Weiss whose picture was a big summer smash called *Blue Crush*. She also did another movie called *Crazy/Beautiful* that I hope she'll talk about tonight. Michael Perry is writer and co-executive producer of *The Guardian*. This is a show that I never miss. It's a wonderful show. Doug Steinberg is the consulting producer for *Boston Public*. Thank you for coming. Then we have Rebecca Collins who is a senior behavioral research scientist at the Rand Corporation. She spends time studying the impact of media on kids, so we'll hear from her about what we're actually doing and whether it's good or bad. And finally, at the end, we have Sharon Lee who is the co-president and co-founder of Look-Look Agency. She does market studies and works with young people to find out what's cool and how to reach them on behalf of her clients. We'll talk about that, too.

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Why don't we start off tonight with Rebecca Collins, our expert on what we're doing to our kids. Can you tell us a little bit about what your research findings are? Are we corrupting the minds of young people? Are we influencing them in positive directions? What can you tell us?

Rebecca Collins:

The answer is yes. First, I should say, this is the beginning of research. There are other topics that people have studied for a long time in regard to whether violence on television has an affect on kids. With sex, we know a lot less, so everything I'm telling you is pretty preliminary, but there are a lot of studies going on around the country right now on the topic of youth sexuality and I'm just one of the group of researchers looking at it.

Like I said, the answer to the question is yes. You're influencing kids, and from what we can tell, you're influencing them in both positive and negative ways. The study that I'm doing, as Vicki said, is looking particularly at sexual behavior of teens across the U.S. That's an easy topic to study because kids are all over the map concerning sex and are easily influenced by almost anything that's in their environment. But they're especially influenced by their parents, by their peers and by you guys who create these pseudo-parents and pseudo-peers for them. So what we're finding is, generally, if you look at kids, the ones who are watching more TV are having more sex. But, if you look at the kids who are watching more TV that doesn't have sex in it, they're having less sex. So the parents' idea of putting kids in front of the TV set as a babysitter is that at least they won't be out having sex, and getting into trouble and doing drugs. And they may be right—unless the kids are sitting in front of the TV set watching people having sex. Then they're at risk.

Riskin:

I'm not sure what to glean from that.

Collins:

It depends on the content. It's not just "TV is bad," which I think is sometimes the rap you guys get. That's wrong. TV can be good or bad, depending on what you put on the programs. The other thing that we're finding is that even kids who are seeing sex on TV, provided they're seeing sex portrayed in a realistic way—that is, showing the realistic consequences of sex where characters may either get pregnant, or at least say, "Gee, should we use a condom?"—those kids seem to be less likely to have sex. The kids who see realistic shows seem to be less likely to have sex. When you include positive elements, you're having a different impact than if you just show characters having sex and not showing what happens afterwards. I think a good example of this is the *Friends* episode last year, which is something that I'm looking at, where Rachel told Ross that she's pregnant. She tells him this, and he's completely flabbergasted and he says, "But we used a condom." And she says, "Condoms are only 97% effective." He doesn't believe her. He pulls out the box. Then he goes and tells Joey. Show kids stuff like that, people who I like and admire like the characters on *Friends*, instead of having the message that people just have sex a lot. Kids will also get

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the message that even if they use a condom, sex can actually result in something I'm not really interested in at this stage of my life, which is pregnancy, for example.

Riskin:

I think writers are always afraid of advocacy groups that come before them with statistics, and as writers, we may think "That's not what I'm really looking for—I'm looking for a good story." But this is a perfect example of how you can get a statistic in a very effective way into a show. That may not have been the advocacy group's intention, but that was the result.

I thought it might be interesting for all of us to take a moment and look at some clips that we pulled from a piece called "The Merchants of Cool." It's a *Frontline* piece that talks about cool hunting and the drives that major corporations have to try to get at teenagers, influence them, sell them goods and so on.

[CLIP PLAYS]

Riskin:

I want to turn to Sharon Lee of Look-Look because your company does marketing research with kids. You're part of the process here. I'm going to be a little provocative with you because I think it's only fair for the audience. The professor in the clip uses the analogy of media companies trying to "colonize" teenagers, and then using their weaponry to make money off of them. That's pretty strong language. You're out there doing market research with these kids. What's your thought about that?

Sharon Lee:

First, I want to address the complete bias of that piece.

Riskin:

Fair enough.

Lee:

And the language that is coming from a 45-plus white male who probably isn't really out talking to young kids on a regular basis. That language is coming from what I call an adult-centric view of the world. With that adult-centric view of the world, we can't help but accompany its adult judgment with that adult view of the world. So you're clearly not young anymore when you start saying, "Those kids. Why are they doing this?" and attach some judgment on the observation of what is happening, instead of just trying to learn and understand what it is that young people are going through—what their experience is like now, how it may be different from what it was in previous generations or how it may be the same.

You know what? I have a totally opposite view point from the *Frontline* piece because I have 13,000 plus global youth from 14 to 30 to whom we speak practically every day. If you don't have access to young people, it's a little arrogant to start making those kinds of judgments based on your individual focus group of two people. In fact, since we do work with kids and companies both—we have a research department and we have research services—our

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judgments are the opposite. I feel like the companies are just scrambling and sweating and freaking out to try to find out what it is what these kids are going to like. The kids are in charge. And, they're fickle and they are informed and empowered and they have more information than the adults ever had at their fingertips. Kids also are doing very sophisticated word-of-mouth communication, via email and viral communication—way more sophisticated or accelerated than previous generations. So it is kind of a dance, and sometimes it feels like those big bad media corporation giants are pulling the marionette strings. *Frontline* really took elements of youth marketing research out of context. It is that kind of "Oh, the demise of Western civilization is happening before us" mentality. It's just way too one-sided even asking the question, "Do they have anything of their own?" My god, how arrogant is that? Of course kids do. Their experience is very different, but of course they have things of their own. We find this generation so much more connected.

To give you an example of how they can protest a giant company, when kids found out about child labor that Nike was using—it's a very popular brand—they protested in stores and sent out their own email campaigns and really affected change in that company. Some kids tried to hack into the Nike Web site to post these messages because they understand production and what happens overseas. They are informed, they're connected and they're using that power to their advantage. They're very powerful and so I find companies are more wary of saying, "You are a captive audience and I control the channels and you are a receptive audience and so I'm going to control the message." You all know what's happened to fragmented media and the decline of television viewing, and because there are so many more choices for youth now they are simply a much more sophisticated media consumer base than youth in the past. In fact, I think that in the 1970's, when there were only three major channels and you didn't have the choices and all the messages came through those big pipes, marketers had more captive influence. Kids now have so many choices, they don't even have to watch television in the way you intend them to watch.

Riskin:

I suppose they spend time on the Internet as well. There are other places for them to go. So what you're saying is that these kids are more empowered than we give them credit for. They are less victims than this *Frontline* piece might suggest. I think we're all actually to some extent concerned about the degree to which media and advertising influences all of our lives, not just young people. Whether it's for the betterment of our lives or not, I think that's probably a concern. But you give a good example of how these kids could challenge Nike when they found out they were doing bad stuff.

I want to turn to Al Jean because *The Simpsons* is a hugely popular show among teenagers and the great thing about Al Jean and his staff is that they're willing to go anywhere or do anything. There's a kind of irreverence that's particularly delightful in your work. Can you give me an example of what might be something that's so daring that it takes you to the edge, that you think that maybe this isn't appropriate? Are there boundaries for you?

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Al Jean: I think the ironic thing is that we're always number one or two with teens and we have no teenage characters on the show, really. It's either children ten or under, or adults. Or people that act like children like Homer. The other thing about it is, I would say, we never try to write "down" or condescend to our audience and say, "Well this is a joke that wouldn't be understood by people under 20. We'll cut it." We also just write what we think is funny. There are very few boundaries because it's animation. Homer regularly strangles his son, choking his windpipe and forcing the air out. It would be a crime in live-action, but it's just silly in a cartoon. The only real taboo that we have is that we don't want to show imitable behavior for young children. You wouldn't show Maggie drinking drain cleaner or something.

Riskin: So the drain cleaner is the boundary for you?

Jean: That's it.

Riskin: I'm glad to hear that. I know that the parents here are kind of goofy, right? Isn't that a thing kids like—to see goofy parents?

Jean: There's a trend as the shows goes on—we've been on nearly 15 years—where characters who started dumb get dumber. Characters who started slutty get sluttier. With Homer, I think his IQ has dropped 10% every season. We're trying to restore it to what it was maybe eight or nine years ago.

Riskin: Is that a reflection of the writing staff and their IQ going down?

Jean: I've noticed it on other shows like in *Married with Children*. Kelly Bundy was stupid and she got so stupid by the end, she couldn't remember her name—you wondered how she could get up in the morning and get dressed. I think in TV there's a time-honored trend to have the father be a buffoon. You've seen it on quite a few shows. *Married with Children* is another example where I think after women's liberation it wasn't politically correct to have a ditsy female character like Gracie Allen used to play, but for a man it was okay. So it's sort of been a big trend in comedy that it's all right for the man to be ditsy. Our mother—Marge—is not as foolish as Homer.

Riskin: No, not like Homer. I grew up on Gracie and I listened to the old radio shows. I don't know if any of you listened to the old radio shows. She is just awful. She is such an idiot. It's personally offensive to me because I always thought she was so wonderful. Michael, on your show, do you have any standards? How do you decide what's okay?

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Michael Borkow: The creator of the show has an eight-year-old son who was five or six when we were starting out. He doesn't like to do anything that he would not feel comfortable watching with his son sitting next to him on the couch. I joined the show in season three and we're now starting season four, so I can't swear that in the very beginning this never happened, but we do not show any kind of criminal activity. We don't show the boys or Hal or Lois ever stealing things, for example.

Riskin: And stealing is such a normal thing for teenagers.

Borkow: We're going to be shooting a show next week where we deal with sex. Malcolm and Reese are both in high school now and to keep the show honest, we're having them deal with girls. We're doing an episode where Lois is leaving to stay with her sister for a little while when she's pregnant. She knows that Malcolm has a girlfriend and so she wants to have "the sex talk" with him. We never approached it from the idea of what would be a responsible message. In the shows that I've done with *Friends* and *Roseanne*, where in various episodes we've dealt with topics related to this, that's never been the approach. But likewise, the approach is also never to do something in offense or to shock. Our goal has always just been "What would be funny? What would be interesting? What would we relate to?" It's interesting that the story we ended up telling is that she traps Malcolm in the car to go on a drive with her for hours, then decides to tell him literally everything she knows about sex.

Riskin: His mother. You never learn about sex from your mother, do you? That doesn't seem real.

Borkow: It starts with her showing him her diaphragm.

Riskin: That ought to turn him off of sex for a while.

Borkow: It's interesting, yet that's not the point we're going for. He's appalled, he's terrified, he reaches for the door, but she's locked him in. She ends up trying to give him literally every piece of information she's ever gained so it would be as if he experienced it himself and was 20 years down the road in terms of becoming a sexually responsible human being. After several scenes of him being horrified, him vomiting out the side of the car, he actually starts asking questions. They're talking about some of the emotional truths and realities involved in sex. I loved that story because there's something I read very recently about teenage sexuality—kids whose parents objected to them having sex had no idea their parents objected to them having sex. It was fascinating to me that there's a huge gap. We broke the taboo of parents not communicating with their kids about sex. We laugh when we talk about the idea of a mother actually discussing sex graphically with her son. But why do we laugh at that? Because it never happens.

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Riskin: Right. I suppose there were a few avant-garde mothers, but they were always kind of weird if they had those kind of graphic conversations. Usually mothers, at least in my generation, talked around it. Do you face any issues of censorship on any of these kinds of issues with the network?

Borkow: I'm going to have "the conversation" with them tomorrow, so I'll find out.

Riskin: Could you email all of us so we know how it turns out?

Borkow: You can find out when you watch the show. We keep in mind the eight-year-old on the couch, so we are rarely doing things that the network would really object to.

Riskin: Either that or the person who created the show has a very sophisticated eight-year-old child. Lizzy, you've done two movies that I know of, *Blue Crush* and *Crazy/Beautiful*, for teenagers. You had very different experiences. Maybe you want to talk about *Crazy/Beautiful* because in that situation Kirsten Dunst had a problem with drinking and you tackled that full on. Because we have a room full of writers here, would you describe for us how that process went for you?

Lizzy Weiss: Actually, I just did a re-write on it, so I didn't get credit on it.

Riskin: But you were part of the process.

Weiss: I was part of the process, yes.

Weiss: It was a big struggle. The one thing I was going to say before I start—what struck me from hearing everyone speak, is there's something really interesting about fantasy and reality. *Crazy/Beautiful* was a small movie and I don't know how many of you saw it, but it was very gritty, very realistic. Kirsten Dunst was an alcoholic, she had a very sad family situation, and girls didn't like it. It got really good reviews and adults are always saying, "I loved that movie." What was really interesting was, a lot of the girls said, "I thought she was a slut," or "I didn't like how she asked him to have sex." It was an interracial love story. We tested with a lot of minority audiences and a lot of the minority girls really responded badly to that. They didn't like her dressing provocatively, for example. While I was really proud of the reality of this character and how gritty we got—and yes, there were struggles with the studio about showing her drunk and so on. What I think is interesting is *Sweet Home Alabama* and *Princess Diaries* came out and did a lot better than we did. I have not seen either of those movies, and they're probably wonderful movies, but they're sanitized and glamorous in a way. In a way what's interesting is if you look at the box office, girls want fantasy. There's something sort of interesting about that.

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Riskin: What do you make of that?

Weiss: I guess they're like everyone.

Riskin: Well, that may be true.

Weiss: I don't know. There may be many reasons why *Crazy/Beautiful* did not do as well as we had hoped. It was very sad and emotional when we dealt with the story's very intense father-daughter relationship and maybe it was just too much for the youth audience. You have a different thing with independent cinema. To an extent I've only worked toward creating the big commercial movies, where the intention is always to get big audiences. Maybe in independent movies you can do more of what you really want to do as a creator.

Riskin: *Blue Crush* was a very different experience for you because that was clearly designed to...

Weiss: Be big.

Riskin: Yes, to be big and to also appeal to girl fantasies and heroism. In some ways you tackled the issue of whether girls can conquer obstacles.

Weiss: There is that general theme of empowerment in it.

Riskin: But you know your leading actress looked perfect.

Weiss: She did. But in defense—obviously I had nothing to do with casting as a writer—I am proud that I was associated with the movie. I know Kate's skinny-skinny, but she's athletic. The lead roles weren't played by women with Barbie-doll, ridiculous, fake boobs. They were really athletic. There was a big *New Times* article analyzing the poster—was it feminist or post-feminist? You can take anything and say yes, they're in bathing suits and yes, they're very thin and you could tear it down from that perspective. But it was a movie about girl surfers and they wear bikinis—whether or not you're going to cast girls who are bigger, and I would love it if they would cast girls who are bigger. You talked about the issue of girl audiences and how all the girls on TV are so thin. That's an upsetting trend and issue, but that's not a writer issue, although it's definitely a concern.

Riskin: Well, I just want you to know that I have several good friends who are part of the Feminist Majority who have seen your picture, and they thought it was cool.

Weiss: Oh, good. Thanks.

Riskin: That's the major test, because they're a tough crowd.

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Weiss: Do you want to talk about *Crazy/Beautiful*?

Riskin: Yes, just a little bit, would you?

Weiss: Right away, we were told, “This is PG-13, you’re going to have to make changes.” We definitely showed the consequences of the lead’s behavior. Certainly there is at least one sequence of her and her best friend drinking and driving and, in a way, it’s very fun. Maybe someone could say that it’s glamorizing recklessness. But the lead is ridiculous. She acts ridiculous. She comes on to the guy. He’s embarrassed. The next day she apologizes for her behavior. She looks horrible. We show her really hung-over. So I think we effectively showed consequences of alcoholism. The cuts they made were odd—there was a scene of her drinking out of a brown paper bag and they cut that because they didn’t want to show drinking and driving. It just felt so weird that, here they are acting ridiculous and I guess the audience would assume they’re drunk, but they wouldn’t know they’re drunk. So I felt we needed to at least make it real.

Riskin: Well, in a curious kind of way, it sounds like it was a very good movie in that adults related to it better, but that the teenagers were not comfortable with the extreme behavior and the unappealing behavior. In some ways maybe that’s a good sign.

Weiss: Do we have a responsibility to not deliver a fantasy to girls? I haven’t seen *Sweet Home Alabama* but I’ve read that she’s picking between two perfect guys—is that realistic?

Riskin: As a writer you have to struggle with those issues. Do you want to have a big hit movie, or do you want to tell life the way it really is? Doug, *Boston Public* strikes me as a show that really tries to show what life is like in school in a gritty sort of way. There’s a realistic feeling to it. Are there any issues you face that you felt you couldn’t write about on the show or were just going too far?

Doug Steinberg: No, actually what we’re discussing here is our meat and potatoes. We look for issues constantly. When teachers come upon a problem and begin looking at it, the more they investigate it, the more sides appear. And then, like King Solomon, they have to make a difficult decision whether to cut the baby in half or find the right mother. I use that example because I think it’s one of the great legal cases. But it’s a difficult decision to make. So what happens is we investigate different issues that present themselves to children today, use the teacher as kind of a therapist and then try to find out the best solutions. Sometimes the solutions are tragic. Sometimes there’s a positive outcome. Sometimes it’s just according to my personal prejudice and agenda—no, I’m just kidding.

Riskin: Can you give us an example of an episode you’re particularly proud of?

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Steinberg: I don't know if I'm particularly proud of it, because other people were involved in it.

Riskin: You can take credit for it anyway.

Steinberg: My son had a friend who has Attention Deficit Disorder, and this is an incredible kid. If you went camping, before you even got out of the car, his head would be bleeding. But this kid was an amazing composer. In fact, he won awards. So we used that as the genesis for a story where we dealt with a kid who has Attention Deficit Disorder and was disruptive in the class. But, they found out that he had used Ritalin before and it dulls him. When he uses Ritalin he can't compose, and yet when he doesn't use it, he's disruptive. So they make the difficult decision to use the Ritalin. Now, the thing that's interesting about that story is it's one of those difficult decisions to make. What are you going to do? The teacher is sad that they limited this kid's creative abilities. The thing is this is the exception to the rule. Ritalin is a fantastic drug and it's done wonders for tens, if not hundreds of thousands of kids. Now the buzz in the press was that Ritalin is bad for kids. That happens on many occasions. But in many more occasions, I think it's done wonderful things. That was the research we found. But look at the story we told—the story made it a difficult decision for the teacher. So that works for us dramatically and it was entertaining, as opposed to he took Ritalin and he's better off and everything's groovy.

Riskin: That's great to be able to deal with both sides of an issue. Michael, I know on *The Guardian* you don't like to tidy things up and have little nice happy endings to things. That's one of your trademarks.

Michael Perry: No, we don't. We set up a premise and say this is an intractable situation. Our show is based a lot on shelter hearings. When a child's parents go to jail or if there's an abuse situation, or something like that, the child gets a guardian. In Pennsylvania they have a shelter hearing to determine where they're going to go. A lot of times the situation is permanent and before ever writing an episode I went to Pittsburgh and hung with some of the people who do this. I interviewed judges and talked to child advocates. I sat in on court cases. What I learned was very interesting. On television what usually happens is you set up a situation. Say it's a very difficult situation and people are doing bad things. By the end of the episode everybody has learned the right thing to do and the adults behave. And the child doesn't have to grow and learn about a difficult situation. In real life, the parents are going to keep on doing crack cocaine, or they're going to keep on abusing them. A sort of heroic journey consists of the small decisions that a child has to make to accommodate himself in his new circumstances. So we'll chart that story. A lot of times people are surprised. They figure that we're going to have everything tied up neatly. We did one where a kid was in a wheelchair, his mom was going to jail, and the foster care possibilities were very limited. He was a bright kid, and he was going to have to go to a place where he would

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be largely surrounded by kids who were severely disabled. We played out all the possibilities. The plot of that one was him getting used to the fact that that was the best choice he had. It was very tough and it always strikes people at the end of that episode. They ask, "Well why didn't you put them in with the nice rich family?" or whatever other possibilities were allowed. When I was writing that one, we were discussing it. We called judges and we called child advocates and we asked, "Where would this kid really be put?" They said, "He'd have to be put in a place where they could accommodate his disability, even if that was not his ideal choice." That one is particularly moving to watch because you know it's true. The bad thing we could have done was to have a last-minute save, which a lot of times, when I was growing up watching television, was how stories would end—everything would be fixed. But in real life problems are chronic. The growth has to come within the character who is going to endure the problem.

Riskin: In a way, you're saying what Al Jean said earlier—you're not writing down to the kids. You're not writing down to the audience.

Perry: No.

Riskin: You're not saying that everything gets tied up into a nice little package at the end of the day because that isn't how life is. I think that's comforting, actually. I don't know what feedback you get from your viewers.

Perry: The show has taken a lot of risks. The network has been very accommodating. It makes it a satisfying show to write because it plays out at the end and you don't get that, "Oh it's bogus," like you so often fear. We're allowed to play out our hand. I actually get involved in casting. In our show, early on, our casting director was bringing us the usual, really good-looking, charming child actors who had poise and were well-spoken. We always say that will serve you well in life, but not on our show. All those really good looking kids are at the big agencies, but then there's a bunch of little acting agencies out in the Valley with kids who don't get that much work. We always tell our casting director, "Okay you're going to have to go to the Valley." We get every kind of unusual kid and it gives it a certain kind of realism. It's a matter of taste. We're not doing it to promote any social message. It's just that, when I was growing up, everybody on TV looked like little junior athletes out in California and not like any of my friends. We want to make our characters look like real kids.

Riskin: I think if I have any fear about television, it's that it's becoming homogenized so that every show looks alike and I have some examples of that, that don't pertain to anybody here tonight. Being able to find your own creative voice and do things in an unusual way is what we live for.

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Perry: We do strive for a realistic depiction of childhood. However, children are all watching *Smallville* at nine o'clock. You can present this material, and we take great pride in trying to present it realistically, but our audience skews a little old.

Riskin: I don't think that's a bad thing, necessarily. I want to open this up to the audience. This should be a dialogue. It's time for questions from you.

Audience Member #1: I just have a comment and this is my personal observation and personal opinion. I think people who work in television comedy and episodic dramatic television are very responsible in the job that they've been doing. I think when we have this kind of dialogue, we really need to look at soap operas. We need to look at commercials. We need to look at music videos. You need to look at porno sites on the Internet. All of these impact our children and inform their behavior in many instances. So I don't think we can isolate television in the context of looking at media and its impact.

Riskin: I think your point is well taken. You don't want to just look at one slice of media and how kids are being impacted. Actually, the billboards I see driving on the street are probably the scariest stuff. Any other questions?

Audience Member #2: In our family we had a big discussion—my kids were 15 and 17 last year—about watching *American Pie* and I said they can handle that. I'll watch it with them. After this prolonged debate, the kids said that's great. So we watched it and it actually provoked probably the best conversation I've had with my kids than any previous attempt with a more academic approach. However, the next night I was walking through the room where one of my kids was looking at MTV. To me, it's amazing what they see just as they are channel flipping on MTV in terms of pornography, in terms of objectification of women and a lot of other attitudes that we don't agree with. They're going to see that more in 30 seconds of commercials and on MTV than they are in two hours of a good, responsible film. My kids saw *Blue Crush* and they enjoyed that as well.

Audience Member #3: That says a lot about us as adults. What are we doing to our children? I don't have children of my own. I have 14 nieces and nephews and I try to stay on top of what they look at and what interests them. My sister told me that my nephew loved to look at *Oz*. He's 16. I made a point to look at *Oz*. I hate it. I hate it. I haven't got to the point where I can have the discussion with him to find out what it is about that show that appeals to him, but I think that's where it begins. You have to be concerned. You have to say that this kid is somebody that I love. He's being influenced by something on television, I need to know what that's about. You have to take a vested interest.

Riskin: Right. Parents have to be engaged.

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Audience Member #3: Parents, godparents, aunts, uncles. Be an adult.

Riskin: I don't mean to put you on the spot Marty, but I know you watch *South Park* with your kids, which makes you a very cool Dad, no doubt about it. You enjoy the show with them, but you're part of the process with them. You're part of the experience. You're not a parent who's outside.

Kaplan: That's right. It is later than you would want a nine-year-old to stay up, but I do let him watch it, and we do watch it together, which makes it different from his sneaking to the other room to watch it. For him, it's like an extension of *The Simpsons*, which he's also addicted to and has probably seen every single episode of. In some ways, between *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, he has absorbed the post-modern culture of knowingness and irreverence, so that if I want to know the state of the art in the "whatever" attitude, I can learn it from him, which comes from those shows. On the other hand, I find in those shows, and we find together, some of the most searing and trenchant and appropriate political criticism currently going on. Within weeks of the terrible disasters of 9/11 and Afghanistan, there was an animated episode on the air of *South Park*, which is a miracle just in terms of production, that dealt with a lot of the taboo issues politically in a way that communicated to him far better than anything else. One other point in terms of what kids watch: My kids, who are now 12 and nine, made me answer a question based on watching the news, which I was not expecting to have to answer. Before they asked me the question, "What is sex?" they asked me, "What is oral sex?" They got that simply by watching the news along with me.

Audience Member #4: This is a question not necessarily for the shows that you're on now, but many of you have a legacy of working on other shows. How much of your stories are based upon feedback that you're getting from the viewer, and also how much is really curtailed by what the network deems acceptable? Today, we're finding that there's been a lot of felonious activity in the private sector because they can still get away with it.

Perry: I've worked on a lot of shows that would be considered racy, including the one I'm on now, Neal's show *Law & Order: SVU*, and a handful of others. If we were grappling with difficult material that was honest and taken from life, usually the network wouldn't get in our way. If we were sensationalizing it or trivializing it just for its own sake, I would expect them to come down on us, but we never tried that. We usually try to do things honestly. I've never really run into much interference, and I've been on some out-there stories.

Riskin: There used to be something called Standards and Practices—it was like the network cop, and I think those cops have disappeared pretty much.

Weiss: Not on MTV.

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Riskin: MTV has Standards and Practices?

Weiss: Oh yes. I worked on a show there.

Riskin: I'll be darned. What are the standards?

Weiss: They're very strict, actually. I worked on a show called *Undressed*, which is a sex show for teenagers at 11 o'clock at night. They're very strict and there's an obsession with condoms. There is all the wet tee-shirt spring break stuff on MTV, but this show always wins awards for presenting things responsibly and having engaged parents.

Riskin: Al, what about you? Have you ever been censored?

Jean: Yes, we have to deal with Fox Standards, which I know is an oxymoron. What's weird is that the show's been on so long. I can remember at the beginning we wanted to have Bart and Lisa singing the theme from *Shaft* and they really didn't want to let them say, "Bad mother," and they had to show footage of Isaac Hayes singing it on the Academy Awards on ABC in order to let them clear it for us. It was a really big fight the first time they said the word "ass" on the show. Now it's some years later, and we actually get notes sometimes saying to "Fox" it up—put some more "ass" in the show. Last year we did a show where Homer was addicted to medicinal marijuana, which he took because he'd been attacked by crows. They didn't want to show him actually smoking a joint. It wound up that we didn't actually show what you do to get high. He had it in his hands, but he didn't put it to his lips.

Riskin: "I never inhaled." A little bit like our former President.

Steinberg: We also are a Fox show and I think we're protected by David Kelley, because he's sort of the grand poobah and if he thinks something's fine, then the network people think it's fine. We've never been interfered with at all. I've never seen such a lack of interest. I mean we've had blow jobs on the show. We've had somebody calling somebody a dick. We did a whole show on the "N" word. It's just astounding because other networks would get right in there. It's because he's such a success.

Riskin: They don't want to mess with him. They don't want to get that phone call from an unhappy David Kelley.

Perry: When I was at Fox on *Millennium* for two years, we had this guy Maurie Goodman in Standards and Practices who loved playing poker. You could show him a cut and he'd say, "Take that out, take that out, take that out." And then you'd call him back a week later and show him the same thing after getting get him going on a poker story, and he'd say, "Oh, that's much better." That's my experience with the Fox people.

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Audience Member #5: I have a question for Sharon. What is viral communication?

Lee: It's a new term and there's kind of a pejorative way, and kind of a frank way, that you can explain it. The way that I think of viral communication is: There is formal communication and informal communication. Formal communication is the media that you know. It's television, it's magazines, it's books. Then there's a whole category of informal communication that used to be just called word-of-mouth and talking to your friends and things that spread socially. Informal, or viral communication, has increased in players and velocity because of the Internet and communication resources that we now have that we haven't had before. So the act of virally spreading—viral meaning it's like a virus so that the way that it spreads is socially and through contact and connectivity with social peers versus a broadcast network. 20 years ago, if I thought a movie was great, I'd have to make 20 phone calls to tell 20 of my friends about how great it was, or how terrible it was. Now with a flip of a switch I can tell 200 of my best friends. Viral communication has increased in volume because it takes passive players and makes them into active players—meaning, before it would take only a certain type of person to pick up the phone and make 20 calls to your friends. Now it's so much easier that you get a lot more people from your Grandma to the nine-year-old kid who has five of his own email accounts to spread that information. It's also enhanced by the speed of the connectivity. So if you add those two things, you get a lot more viral and word-of-mouth communication going on. If you look at it from a marketing perspective, there is an emerging marketing category called viral marketing. It is a marketer's desire to capture the natural progress of word-of-mouth communication and to spread goodwill about their product or information about their product. It's not necessarily a peer sell and companies do it in different ways. Some companies have been doing it forever, it's just a much more sexy topic because of the Internet now. For example, Proctor and Gamble has connections to housewives who are obsessed about fabric softener across the country. Everybody knows that woman who is going to be proselytizing the latest about that particular product. They've had connectivity to those viral connectors for a long time. Now it's sexier because people think I'll go into chat rooms and pretend I'm just a kid, but then I'll be from a company and talk about how great Sony Play Station is.

Audience Member #6: Something I was going to ask the writers on the panel was: How do you do your research, and how has the Internet affected the way you do your research? I'm trying to get at the idea of how our concepts of youth have changed. None of you look like you're under 20. I was wondering, how do you have access to the youth culture?

Perry: I have 14 nieces and nephews. I talk to kids a lot. I talk to people who work with kids. We have a child advocate in Pittsburgh who is our consultant. I can talk to him about every situation. We say, "Did you get a case like this?" and he usually says, "Yes, I've got 25." I don't think that teens in particular are that radically different from adults in a crisis situation.

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We never depict people going out and goofing off and going to a concert because I don't want to watch that. We have them when they're in a terrible, terrible situation where there aren't good options. So you just create characters who are smart or creative in their response.

Audience Member #7: I feel like we're all on the same team in here. I think there are parents out there who would be shocked to hear that someone watches *South Park* with a nine-year-old, who think that *South Park* should be unavailable to anyone under 35.

Riskin: Probably the middle of the country, you're suggesting?

Audience Member #7: But those are your markets. They are the markets for television to a great degree. They are not here to voice these objections and to become angry and froth at the mouth. I sort of wonder what people's response to them would be. I have a couple of friends that I've been trying to get to watch *Malcolm in the Middle* for years. They finally did. They hate it. It depicts such a vicious family life. To me, it's a hilarious and real family life. For them, they felt that it was just so unfair that the mother was a monster. Yes, she is, but she's supposed to be. I'd like to hear people respond. You know that you have critics out there and you know there are people who think that those little kids on *The Guardian* are too little to be voicing the lines—as if the dialogue is too sophisticated for children to understand and speak. I'd like to hear what you all would say to the more rabid critics.

Riskin: I'm sure some of you have gotten letters, I would think.

Borkow: I don't know what we've got in terms of mail. We wouldn't be interested from a creative point of view because that's not how we do it. It always interests me when people react to our work. I think their criticisms are valid. I think there are moments when I thought, "I don't like Lois in that moment." Those moments are few and far between, but they do happen. I love *The Osbournes*. I watch that show and I know people think it's the most screwed up family in the world. I watch and think, "If only my family was like that," because there is something attractive about all those families where there's a degree of communication. The parents are present and not just physically present, but emotionally present in their children's lives. In every one of those families, those kids would know exactly what their parents object to, right? I'm guessing that a lot of the parents who object to what they see in those families, have kids who wouldn't know what their parents object to. Could parents who don't hesitate to express any thought or feeling to their kids behave in a better way at times? Absolutely. But to watch *The Osbournes* and think that's a bad example of what a family should be is an opinion I personally disagree with.

Riskin: Let's take one more question and then I think we'll wrap it up. Yes?

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Audience Member #8: I had a comment, not a question. The comment was simply there are always a lot of voices saying there's nothing appropriate to watch. The question I have is: We're talking about influencing teens, but at what age are you finding that these attitudes are created? It seems to me that people are watching a lot of these shows by the time they're 14, 15, 16-year-old kids and they can understand and grapple with some of the issues. But are these issues being formed in the tweens or even younger? You're watching with your nine-year-old, but are there nine-year-olds also sitting around and watching *Boston Public* or watching *Malcolm in the Middle* and not sharing their parents' participation?

Collins: Kids are getting influenced, I think, throughout their lives. From the very beginning they're seeing stuff on TV like *The Simpsons*. Some really young kids watch that show. Some of these other shows always have some small segment of little kids who are watching, even if it's not the majority of their audience. I think they're getting influenced throughout. The study we're doing starts with kids at age 12. I'm also doing another study where the kids are 10. So they're already thinking about these things, but they're thinking about it more and more as they age and as they start to feel a lot of pressure to decide what they are going to do. Are they going to become sexually active or not? Half of high school students have had sex at least once. So, half of them aren't doing it and half of them are. Kids have to figure out where they're going to fit in. I think they do that transitioning over the years. But it really seems to start around middle school where kids are starting to try to figure out who they are. How do they fit into the world? Then I think that's when TV and all these other influences, like parents, that you're bringing up really start to become important.

Riskin: Okay, I lied. We'll take one more question and then that's it.

Audience Member #9: I just would like to make a comment about that. Kids are changing. There's been so much study on this. Between fourth and fifth grade is where kids change the greatest. Attitudes, everything changes. Third grade, they're still innocent. But between fourth and fifth grade, it's like night and day. All these shows that are on are great shows and I really think *The Guardian* is doing a great job for showing what inner city troubles of kids are because I'm more familiar with *The Guardian*. And *Boston Public* is very good.

Riskin: I have a personal bias and I think some of the best writing today is in television and in episodic. I am in awe of the quality of work and think we're just doing a terrific job. I congratulate all of you and I want to thank you for being an outstanding panel tonight and for coming. Thank you very much. I feel I should apologize to Sharon because I was right out there trying to put you on the spot, but that's what we're here for.

Lee: That's okay. I've had worse.