Montessori in the Home Environment: Television

From The Read Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease

I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television—of that I am quite sure. --E.B. White from "Removal from Town," Harper's Magazine (October 1938)

In its short lifetime, television has become the major stumbling block to literacy in America. For all its technological achievement, television's negative impact on children's reading habits-and therefore their thinking-is enormous. In this chapter I suggest a method of dealing with television. As this approach is used in my own home and as I have seen it used in countless other homes, it is a reasonable and workable solution to the problem. However, in order to make it work, parents must believe in it, must understand fully why they are using it and what the consequences are to family and child if it is not used.

This understanding is just as important for teachers as it is for parents. True, the classroom teacher, principal, and guidance counselor have no immediate control over the television sets in pupils' homes. But they are in the education business, and television is the prime educator in the world today. It is the school's primary competitor for children's minds.

Educators spend millions of dollars and thousands of classroom hours teaching children how to cope with the hard-core drugs that come into their lives. But they spend no time or money, relatively, in teaching children how to cope with the soft-core drug in their living room: television.

TV has been described by author Marie Winn as the "plug-in drug," and not without reason. Its control of children is demanding and extensive. It will largely determine how they talk, what they wear and what they won't wear, what they eat and what they won't eat, what they play and what they won't play, what they read and what they will not read. Our children must be taught in the classroom how to cope with television. They must be taught to control it instead of letting it control them.

I do not think of television as a totally negative influence. As a tool for educating, informing, and entertaining it has unlimited potential. Unfortunately, the current programming devotes itself almost exclusively to entertaining, thereby falling far short of its natural potential. As entertainment it should be treated as dessert and not be allowed to become the principle meal in our children's lives.

A small cluster of educators sounded the first serious alarm in 1964 when the scores were computed for that year's college admission tests. That year's high school seniors,

born in the late 1940's, were the first generation to be raised on a steady television diet. Their Scholastic Aptitude Test scores showed a decline from the previous years, a decline that has continued for seventeen of the past nineteen years.

Naturally there are those in the television industry that claim that lowered standards have nothing to do with their medium. Social scientists, educators, and psychologists respond loudly that there is every connection between the two. Television, they declare, interrupts the largest and most instructive class in childhood: life experience.

Paul Copperman, president of the Institute of Reading Development and author of TheLiteracy Hoax, sees the interruption in these terms: "Consider what a child misses during the 15,000 hours [from birth to age seventeen] he spends in front of the TV screen. He is not working in the garage with his father, or in the garden with his mother. He is not doing homework, or reading, or collecting stamps. He is not cleaning his room, washing the supper dishes, or cutting the lawn. He is not listening to a discussion about the community politics among his parents and their friends. He is not playing baseball or going fishing, or painting pictures. Exactly what does television offer that it can replace all of these activities?"

The most recent alarm was sounded by the State of California's Department of Education with the announcement of its findings from a scholastic achievement test in reading, writing, and arithmetic that was administered to sixth- and twelfth-grade students in 1980. (One of the factors which lends great significance and credibility to this test is the number of students involved: half a million children.) Buried in the test was a question that appeared to have nothing to do with the students' classroom work but in actuality had very much to do with it. The question was: How much time do you spend watching TV each day? It was the one question that more students (99 percent) chose to answer more than any other in the exam.

When educators finished compiling the scores on the 500,000 exams, they began to correlate each child's grade with the number of hours the student spent watching television. Their findings showed conclusively that the more time the student spent watching TV, the lower the achievement score; the less time, the higher the score. Interestingly, these statistics proved true regardless of the child's IQ, social background, or study practices (all of which were queried in the exam process).

Today's television programming is a serious impediment to the children's personal growth because of both what it offers and what it does not offer:

1. Television is the direct opposite of reading. In breaking into eight-minute commercial segments (shorter for shows like Sesame Street), it requires and fosters a short attention span. Reading, on the other hand, requires and encourages longer attention spans in children. Good children's books are written to hold children's attention, not interrupt it. Because of the need to hold viewers until the next commercial message, the content of television shows is almost constant action. Reading also offers action but not nearly as much, and reading fills the considerable space

between action scenes with the subtle character development. Television is relentless; no time is allowed to ponder characters' thoughts or to recall their words because the dialogue and film move too quickly. The need to scrutinize is a critical need among young children and it is constantly ignored by television. Books, however, encourage a critical reaction; the reader moves at his own pace as opposed to that of the director or sponsor. The reader can stop to ponder the character's next move, the feathers in his hat, or the meaning of a sentence. Having done so, he can resume where he left off without having missed any part of the story.

2. For young children television is an antisocial experience, while reading is a social experience. The three-year-old sits passively in front of the screen, oblivious to what is going on around him. Conversation during the program is seldom if ever encouraged by the child or by the parents. On the other hand, the 3-year-old with a book must be read to by another person, parent, sibling, or grandparent. The child is a participant as well as a receiver when he engages in discussion during and after the story. This process continues to even greater degree when the child attends school and compares his own reactions to a story with those of his classmates. The poet T.S. Eliot pointed to the antisocial nature of television when he described it as "a medium of entertainment that permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time and yet remain lonely."

3. Television deprives the child of his most important learning tool: his questions. Children can learn the most by questioning. For the thirty-three hours a week that the average five-year-old spends in front of the set, he can neither ask a question nor receive an answer.

4. Television interrupts the most important language lesson in a child's life: family conversation. Studies show that the average kindergarten graduate has already seen 5,000 hours of television in his young lifetime. Those are 5,000 hours during which he engaged in little or no conversation.

5. Television provides a language tool that is the direct opposite of what children find in the classroom. The child who writes and speaks the language of Vinnie Barbarino from Welcome Back, Kotter or Robert Blake on Baretta is verbally crippling himself for the classroom, where the books are written in standard English, not street language.

6. Television presents material in a manner that is the direct opposite of the classroom's. Television's messages are based almost entirely on pictures and our emotions in response to those pictures. Conversely, the classroom relies heavily on reading, the spoken word, and a critical response to those words, not just raw emotion. School also required large amounts of time to be spent on a task. These minutes spent doing things like multiplication tables and spelling can often be boring and repetitious when compared with watching The Dukes of Hazzard, but they are critical for learning.

7. Television is unable to portray the most intelligent act known to man: thinking. In 1980 Squire Rushnell, vice-president in charge of ABC's children's programming, said

that certain fine children's books couldn't be adapted for television. Much of the character development in these books, Rushnell noted, takes place inside the character's head. He says, "You simply can't put thinking on the screen." As a result, a child almost never sees a TV performer thinking through a problem.

8. Television encourages deceptive thinking, educator Neil Postman points out that it is implicit in every one of television's commercials that there is no problem which cannot be solved by simple artificial means. Whether the problem is anxiety or common diarrhea, nervous tension or the common cold, a simple tablet or spray solves the problem. Seldom is mention ever made of headaches being a sign of a more serious illness, nor is the suggestion ever made that elbow grease and hard work are viable alternatives to stains and boredom. Instead of thinking through our problems, television promotes the "easy way." The cumulative effect of such thinking is enormous when you consider that between the ages 1 and 17 the average child is exposed to 350,000 commercials.

9. Television, by vying for the child's time and attention with a constant diet of unchallenging simplistic entertainment, stimulates antisocial and anti-reading feeling among children. A 1977 study showed that the majority of the pre-school and primary-school students examined felt that school and books were a waste of time. Offered the same story on television and in book form, 69 percent of the second-grade students chose television. That figure increased to 86 percent among third-grade pupils-the grade where national reading skills begin to decline.

10. Television has a negative effect on children's vital knowledge after age 10, according to the Schramm study of 6,000 school children. It does help, the report goes on to say, in building vocabulary for younger children, but this tops by age 10. This finding is supported by the fact that today's kindergartners have the highest reading-readiness scores ever achieved at that level and yet these same students tail off dismally by the fourth and fifth grades.

11. Television stifles the imagination. Consider for a moment this single paragraph from Eric Knoght's classic, Lassie Come Home: Yet, if it were almost a miracle, in his heart Joe Carraclough tried to believe in that miracle-that somehow, wonderfully, inexplicably, his dog would be there some day; there waiting by the school gate. Each day as he came out of school, his eyes would turn to the spot where Lassie had always waited. And each day there was nothing there, and Joe Carraclough would walk home slowly, silently, and stolidly, as did the people of his country. If a dozen people were to read or hear those words, they would have a dozen different images of the scene, what the boy looked like, the school, the gate, and the lonely road home. As soon as the story is placed on film there is no longer any room for imagination. The director does all your imagining for you.

12. Television overpowers and desensitizes a child's sense of sympathy for suffering, while books heighten the reader's sense of sympathy. Extensive research in the past ten years clearly shows that the television's bombardment of the child with continual acts of

violence (18,000 acts viewed between the ages of 3 and 17) makes the child insensitive to violence and its victims most of whom he is conditioned to believe die cleanly or crawl inconsequentially offstage. Though literature could never be labeled a nonviolent medium, it cannot begin to approach television's extreme. Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow noted in Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life that you would have to see all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays in order to see the same number of acts of human violence (fifty-four) that you would see in just three evenings of prime-time television.

13. Television is a passive activity and discourages creative play. The virtual disappearance of neighborhood games like I spy, kick the can, spud, hopscotch, Johnny-jump the-pony, stickball, red light, Simon says, flies up, giant steps, and statue attests to that. Compared to reading, television is still the more passive of the two activities. In reading, educators point out, a child must actively use a variety of skills involving sounds, spelling rules, blendings, as well as constructing mental images of the scene described in the book. Television requires no such mental activity. When children do leave the set in order to play, it is often to imitate performers they have seen. In many cases, the imitations are of violent shows. During a week of camping at a lake in Maine, I found the campground's 5- and 6-year-olds gathering each morning in the tent-roofed assembly area to pedal their Big Wheels. They were not interested in the lakefront, the sand, the fish, or the chipmunks on the forest trails. Instead they gathered, rain or shine, to stage their daily imitation of The Dukes of Hazzard, complete with yodeling the show's theme song as they careened into one another.

14. Television is psychologically addictive. In schools and homes where students voluntarily have removed themselves from TV viewing, their subsequent class discussions and journals report the addictive nature of their attachment to television: it draws upon their idol time and there is an urgency to watch it in order to fulfill peer and family pressure.

15. Television has been described by former First Lady Betty Ford as "the greatest babysitter of all time," but it also is repeated to be the nation's second largest obstacle in family harmony. In a 1980 survey by the Roper Organization, 4,000 men and women listed money as the most frequent subjects of fights between husband and wife. Television and children tied for second, and produced three times as many arguments as did sex.

16. Television's conception of childhood, rather than being progressive, is regressive-a throwback, in fact of the Middle Ages. In Teaching as a Conserving Activity, Postman points to Philippe Aries's research, which shows that until the 1600's children over the age of five were treated and governed as though they were adults. After the seventeenth century, society enveloped a concept of childhood, which insulated children from the shock of instant adulthood until they were mature enough to meet it. "Television," Postman declares, "all by itself, may bring an end to childhood." Present day TV programming offers its nightly messages on incest, murder, abortion, rape, moral and political corruption, and general physical mayhem to 85 million people-including 5.6

million children between the ages of 2 and 11 who are still watching at 10:30 p.m. The afternoon soap operas offer a similar message to still another young audience. Of the twenty-one children (ages 7 to 9) in my wife's second-grade class one year, all but four of them were daily soap opera viewers.

Bob Keeshan, most often heard in the role of his TV character Captain Kangaroo, places the prime time responsibility for television's negative influence upon the parent. In a 1979 interview with John Merrow on National Public Radio's Options in Education, Keeshan said, "Television is the great national babysitter. It's not the disease in itself, but a symptom of a greater disease that exists between parent and child and the parent-child relationship. A parent today simply doesn't have time for the child, and the child is a very low priority item, and there's a magic box that flickers pictures all day long, and it's a convenient babysitter. I'm busy, go watch television...The most direct answer to all our problems with television and children is the parent, because if the parent is an effective parent, we're not going to have it.

Keeshan represents one of the few bright spots in television's thirty-year association with children. He's been actively engaged over the past twenty-five years in stretching children's imaginations and attention spans with shows that always include the reading of at least one complete children's book each morning. Next to the book's author, Virginia Lee Burton, Captain Kangaroo is probably the most responsible for making Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel the most widely loved book among American children today. I have found in my lecture travels that no book and no person so universally evokes such warm and affectionate recognition from both teachers and parents as do Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel and Captain Kangaroo.

In recent years Keeshan has incorporated in his shows suggestions for parents on learning activities in which they can and should engage their children. He represents what can be accomplished when television is used correctly both as a teacher and as an entertainer. The network's response to Keeshan's pioneering creative involvement with the nation's children since December 1955 was revealed in October 1981 when CBS cut in half the show's sixty minute format and rescheduled it for an hour earlier (7 a.m.), in a move that syndicated columnist-critic, Jerry Krupnick of the Newhouse News Service, portrayed as "mugging Captain Kangaroo and shoving him down the stairs." Three months later the network shoved him almost out of sight by dropping him to a 6:30 a.m. slot. Considering television's traditional disregard for children's education, the wonder is that they've allowed the Captain to last as long as they have. The Mickey Mouse Club, which debuted on a rival network the same week as Captain Kangaroo, lasted only two years.

Keeshan's call for parental control of the television set is more easily said than done, as any parent can tell you who has ever tried it. I know firsthand.

My family's restricted viewing began in 1974, at about the time I'd begun to notice a growing television addiction in my fourth-grade daughter and kindergarten son. There

had begun a deterioration of our long-standing read-aloud time each night because, in their words, it took too much time away from the TV."

One evening while visiting Marty and Joan Wood of Long Meadow, Massachusetts, I noticed that their four teenage children went right to their homework after excusing themselves from the dinner table.

I asked the parents, "Your television broken?"
"No," replied Marty. "Why?"
"Well, it's only six forty-five and the kids are already doing homework."
Joan explained, "Oh, we don't allow television on school nights."
"That's a noble philosophy-but how in the world do you enforce it?" I asked.
"It's the house law," stated Marty. And for the next hour and a half, husband and wife detailed for me some of the positive changes that had occurred in their family and home since they put that "law" into effect.

That evening was a turning point for our family. After hearing the details of the plan, my wife Susan agreed wholeheartedly to back it. "On one condition," she added.
"What's that?" I asked.
"You be the one to tell them," she said.

After supper the next night we brought the children into our bedroom, surrounded them with pillows and quilts, and I calmly began, "Jamie...Elizabeth...Mom and I have decided that there will be no more television on school nights in this house-forever."

Their reaction was predictable: they started to cry. What came as a shock to us was that they cried for four solid months. Every night, despite explanations on our part, they cried. We tried to impress upon them that the rule was not meant as a punishment; we listed all the positive reasons for such a rule. They cried louder.

The peer group pressure was enormous, particularly for Elizabeth. "There's nothing to talk about at school anymore," she sobbed. "All the kids were talking about Starsky and Hutch at lunch today and I didn't even see it." There was even peer pressure from other parents directed at Susan and me. "But, Jim," they would ask, "not even for an hour after supper?" in a tone that suggested our plan was a new form of child abuse. "And what about all the National Geographic specials? Aren't you going to let the kids watch those?" they'd ask.

It should be pointed out that a great many parents use National Geographic specials, Jacques Cousteau special, and Sesame Street as the salve on their consciences. I can count on one hand the number of children I know who actually like those specials. Given the choice, as the vast majority is, they'll choose Happy Days or Kojak every time.

As difficult as it was at first, we persevered and resisted both kinds of peer pressure. We lived with the tears, the pleadings, the conniving. "Dad, my teacher says there is a

special show on tonight that I have to watch. She said don't come to school tomorrow if you haven't seen the show," Elizabeth would say after supper.

After three months my wife and I began to see things happen that the Woods had predicted. Suddenly we had each night as a family to read aloud, to read to ourselves, to do homework at an unhurried pace, to learn how to play chess and checkers and Scrabble, to make the plastic models that had been collecting dust in the closet for two years, to bake cakes and cookies, to write thank-you notes to aunts and uncles, to do household chores and take baths and showers without World War III breaking out, to play on all the parish sports teams, to draw and paint and color, and-best of all-to talk to each other, ask questions and answer questions.

> Our children's imaginations were coming back to life again.
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> For the first year, the decision was a heavy one for all of us. With time it grew lighter. Jamie, being younger, had never developed the acute taste for television that Elizabeth had, and he lost the habit fairly easily. It took Elizabeth longer to adjust, largely because she had been allowed such a steady dose for so long.
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> Over the years the plan was modified until it worked like this:
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> 1. The television is turned off at suppertime and not turned on again until the children are in bed, Monday through Thursday.
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> 2. Each child is allowed to watch one school night show a week (subject to parents' approval). Homework, chores, et cetera must be finished beforehand.
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> 3. Weekend television is limited to any two of the three nights. The remaining night is reserved for homework and other activities. The children make their decisions separately.

The suggestion to modify the original diet and allow one school night show a week came from my wife during the third year of the plan and it met with my immediate resistance. Only reluctantly did I agree to give it a try.

As it turned out, it was an excellent addition. By limiting the choice to one show a week, we forced the child to be discriminating in his or her selections, to distinguish worth from trash. They began using a critical eye in evaluating shows.

The habit of watching, however, continued to decrease while other interests expanded. By the time Elizabeth was a ninth-grade student, she didn't bother to use her school-night option anymore than three or four times in the entire year. More than half the time Jamie forgot until the week was over. "Hey!" he'd say on Saturday. "I never watched my show this week. Why didn't somebody remind me?"

We structured the diet to allow the family to control the television and not the other way around. Perhaps this particular diet won't work for your family, but a similar one would-if you have the courage and determination to make it work.

If you are going to require your children to curtail their TV viewing, if you are going to create a three-hour void in their daily lives, then you must make a commitment to fill that void. You have to provide the crayons and paper, you have to teach them how to play checkers, and you have to help with the cookie mix. And most importantly, you must pick up those books-books to be read to the child, books to be read to yourself-even when you have a headache, even when you're tired, even when you're worried about your checkbook. You'll be surprised. Just as that book will take you children's mind off television, it will also take your mind off the headache or checkbook.

A short time after the release of the fifty-two American hostages by Iranian government in January 1981, I had the opportunity to address the children's libraries of the Massachusetts Library Association. As the fourth member of a panel on "Children's Television: Friend or Foe?" I was preceded by three speakers who went to great lengths to praise the medium and its efforts in stimulating children's minds, both in the classroom and at home.

In my opening remarks I reminded the audience of the recent events in Iran and the unprecedented worldwide coverage by the media throughout the 444 days.

> Isn't it interesting that with all the marvelous computerized and transistorized accomplishments of TV-including those you've heard espoused by the previous speakers today-we've yet to hear any of the hostages say, "Thank God we have TV! It got us through our darkest hours. We could never have survived without it."
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> We have, however, heard hostage after hostage pay tribute to the one element that appears to be the savior of the hostages' sanity: their imaginations. Upon their release they...detailed for the State Department doctors the intricate "daydreaming" which allowed them to escape their tormentors many times a day. One captive fantasized a train trip from India to England, including a mental script for seating arrangements, passenger descriptions-even a dining car menu.
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> Another remodeled his parents' home-inch by inch, making mental notes of what he would use for wallpaper, paneling and flooring.
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> And nearly all the hostages [I reminded the librarians] made daily fantasy trips home to their families-walking through their children's rooms, mowing lawns, hosting backyard barbecues. Psychologists have been studying such "daydreaming" since the Korean War and they have found that it serves two immediate purposes: it allows the prisoner momentary escape and it serves as a constant reminder of who they are and why they are there.

> My point of mentioning this is to remind you that a great many of our children face a future in which they will someday be hostages: hostages to bad marriages, hostages to unhappy jobs and careers, hostages to illnesses or neighborhoods. How well they survive their captivity-however long it may be-may well be determined by their imaginations, their ability to dream and hold fast to those dreams.

From this capacity to dream springs the very progress of the human race. Without the willingness to wonder, notes the great Russian children's poet Kornei Chukovsky, there would be no new hypotheses, inventions, or experiments. Science and technology would be at a standstill. Albert Einstein reaffirmed this when he stated: "The gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge."

Einstein was speaking not only for himself but for mankind. From the very beginning, man appears to have recognized the need to feed and preserve his imagination. Beginning with the caveman who stood before his brothers at the evening fire and detailed the drama of his journey across the mountains, through the bards and strolling minstrels, evangelists and itinerant players, to the writers of modern prose and poetry, mankind has been inspired, instructed, warned, soothed, and regaled by stories. A Greek poet sharing with his neighbors the travels of Homer, a Jewish mother detailing for her daughter the story of Ruth, a German forester spinning for his children the tale of Hansel and Gretel, a French school-teacher reading Perrault's Cinderella to the class, a black woman in Tennessee sharing a story of her African ancestor with her grandchild, Alex Haley.

It is sense of family, this sense of history, this sense of culture, that is being robbed by the flickering blue light of television. Its overwhelming presence encourages our society to speak less, feel less, and imagine less.

Several years ago Sylvia Ashton-Warner, an internationally recognized authority in teaching and learning, spent about a year teaching and observing in an American community. Afterwards, in Searpoint: "Teacher" in America, she wrote of her concern about what television was doing to the human condition here. In stripping them of a third dimension, she noted, television leaves us with children who are daily less capable of dreaming. "You don't get far without a dream to lure. A dream keeps you looking forward...Man does not live by bread alone but by dreams also...Man does not die from breadlessness but from dreamlessness also.

The substitute from dreams is boredom—bored children, bored parents, an entire culture held hostage by boredom. If such a condition seems farfetched or inconceivable, consider the fact that in 1978 there were 200,000 teenagers and adults in Atlanta, Georgia who couldn't read books, newspapers, phone books, or menus. As their imaginations die a little each day from undernourishment, think of the hopelessness and boredom that must develop in their lives. Now multiply that boredom by as many other major American cities you can name.

You don't have to throw out the television. All you have to do is control it. When it is used correctly, it can inform, entertain and, occasionally, even inspire. Used incorrectly, television will control your family. It will limit its language, its dreams, and its achievements. The choice is yours.

Many of today's educators have become increasingly concerned over the condition of children's listening skills. "It is the most important communication skill and very little is done with it at any educational level," states educator Rhoderick J. Elen in Elementary English. Since reading comprehension feeds directly from listening comprehension, it stands to reason that many of our current reading programs can be attributed to a breakdown in children's listening skills.

There is little argument that reading aloud is one of the best stimulants for listening skills, but there are several others which deserve the attention of parents, teachers, and librarians: records, radio drama, and tape recorders. While these devices lack the immediacy of a live person (who can answer a child's questions), they do fill the gap when an adult is unavailable.

Records of children's songs, rhymes, and stories should be among the family's first purchases after books. They offer rhythms and distinct vocalizing, both of which fill important needs in young children. Neighborhood libraries and record shops have extensive children's record collection from which to choose.

Included among the library's recordings you will find old radio dramas like Superman, The Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger, Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, Fibber McGee and Molly, and Inner Sanctum. These are excellent stimulants to listening and imagining for older children.

In Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life, Mankiewicz and Swerdlow describe how much more mental exercise is demanded by the reader or the radio listener than by the television viewer: "[The reader or listener] must give all the characters faces and features, they must be tall or short, pretty or plain. He must provide clothes, mannerisms and modes of expression....He must be an architect and an interior decorator."

Though television all but eliminated radio drama during the 1950's, its sole survivor, CBS Radio Mystery Theater, is alive and well five nights a week and is heard on more than 200 stations. Its "mystery" label covers a variety of offerings, occult, macabre, detective, suspense, and humor. Recognizing the large number of young people in his nightly audience of 3.6 million, director Himan Brown (who handled the same chores for Inner Sanctum during radio's golden era) has incorporated numerous literary classics into the series and has earned commendations from the National Education Association and the American Library Association. Among the adaptations were: Hamlet, Macbeth, The Phantom of the Opera, Jane Eyre, and Tom Sawyer, Detective.

“Radio drama-storytelling-is as close an activity to reading as you can find,’ Brown declares. “ In fact, listening leads to reading.” He turns to a letter from a grateful listener. “Thank you for giving my child back the world of fantasy,” he quotes. “Today’s children have lost the world of fantasy, they’ve lost the beauty of the spoken word. If you were a camp counselor you remember those ghost stories around the campfire each night. Children love to listen-if you give them a chance. The best stories are right up here in your head.”

Since Mystery Theater was broadcast in our area at an hour that was too late for my children when they were younger (9 or 10 is about the right age to start on Mystery Theater), I attached a timer to the radio and tape recorder. In this way we were able to hear the shows at a more convenient hour and built up an extensive tape library for use on long car trips.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of youngsters are unaware of radio drama. Introduce them to it through recordings of Mystery Theater; then watch the curtain lift on their imaginations and listening skills. After you have explained how the various sound effects were achieved for the shows, their ambition will grow. They’ll be asking, “Can we try one? Could we put on a radio show with the tape recorder?”

That is when the learning swings into high gear-with script writers, directors, performers, sound technicians, and musicians. You’ll see first-hand how listening skills lead to better speaking, writing, and reading.

Most public libraries now boast a large collection of long-playing records and cassettes featuring great literature read aloud. The readers include not only featured names of the theater like Alexander Scourby, Orson Welles, and James Earl Jones but a host of literary figures reading their own work: Eudora Welty, Jon Cheever, John Updike, Shirley Jackson, William Saroyan, and Howard Fast. As one listens to James Earl Jones read Richard Wright’s description of fear from Native Son, one cannot help but want to read or reread the book. Since most library collections of the spoken word are strong in the field of adult literature, these records can be especially pertinent to the curriculum of the junior and senior high school teachers.

The cassette tape recorder could be the handiest listening device known to man, barring, of course, the human ear. It’s low cost and simple operation make it a must item for every classroom and home, as a source of both instruction and entertainment. One of its obvious but often overlooked uses is for “Talking books,” similar to those used by the blind. In recent years, classroom teachers have begun to incorporate the recorder into their learning centers, but parents still haven’t realized its enormous potential. Dr. Marie Carbo, a learning-disabilities specialist and resource teacher, has been taping stories and books for her students and has achieved “phenomenal” results. Her students all have severe learning handicaps, they are disabled, educable retarded, emotionally disturbed, and severely speech impaired children.

By listening to the tape and following the story in his book, each child is free to move at his or her own pace and has a constant language model as a companion-the tape. There is also the additional reinforcement from repeated playing of the tape. Dr. Carbo keeps the pace of her taped story slow enough for the child to follow and indicates when the page should be turned. As the individual child's reading ability improves, she increases the pace of the story and the size of the word groupings.

Describing a particular case, Dr. Carbo says, "The greatest gain in word recognition (fifteen months) was made by Tommy, a sixth grade boy on a 2.2 level. Prior to working with tapes he had faltered and stumbled over second grade words while his body actually shook with fear and discomfort. Understandably, he hated to read. Because a beloved teacher had once read Charlotte's Web to him, he asked me to record his favorite chapter from this book. I recorded one paragraph on each cassette side so that Tommy could choose to read either one or two paragraphs daily. The first time he listened to a recording (five times) and then read the passage silently to himself (twice), he was able to read the passage to me perfectly with excellent expression and without fear. After this momentous event, Tommy worked hard. At last he knew he was capable of learning to read and was willing to give it all he could. The result was a fifteen-month gain in word recognition at the end of only three months. Every learning-disabled child in this program experienced immediate success with her or his individually recorded books, explains Dr. Carbo.

If such phenomenal results are possible with learning-disabled children, think of what can be done with children who have fewer hurdles to hold them back.

Although many commercial recordings are available, the sound of a parent's or teacher's voice reading at an unhurried pace (some recordings move too quickly) will carry far more meaning than will a stranger's. Tape-record those Mother Goose rhymes and have them playing during the day when you are busy. When lectures take me away from home in the evening, I usually tape that night's chapter from the book I am reading to the children. With the lights out and the tape whispering beside them, an extra air of mystery is added to story time. (One of the advantages of old-time radio theater was that it could be listened to in bed with the lights out, thus providing the imagination with a blank piece of paper on which to draw.)

It is important to remember, however, that the cassette recorder is not an unqualified replacement for the personal touch of a live parent or teacher. Nothing is as good as the living, responsive voice and the person behind it.

Although all read-alouds foster listening skills, some books deal specifically with this subject. Peter Spier's Crash! Bang! Boom! and Ann McGovern's Too Much Noise both treat sounds in a picture book format. Don't Forget the Bacon by Pat Hutchins, Nobody Listens to Andrew by Elizabeth Guiloile, That Noodle-Headed Epaminondas by Eve Merriam, and The Cat Who Wore a Pot on Her Head by Jan Slepian and Ann Seidler are picture books which deal with the problems of not listening.

For older children, the gift of language is demonstrated dramatically in these stories of mute children: Burnish Me Bright and its sequel Far in the Day and The Silent Voice by Julia Cunnigham; Child of the Silent Night, the nonfiction story of Laura Bridgmann, by Edith Fisher Hunter; The Half-a-Moon Inn by Paul Fleischman; Our John Willie by Catherine Cookson; and A Certain Small Shepherd by Rebecca Caudill. Children in sixth grade and up are quick to catch the irony of The Shrinking of Treehorn and Treehorn's Treasure, both by Florence Parry Heide, which wittily portrays adult's penchants for holding one-way conversations with children.