Is Reality TV Making You Stupid?

Gossiping. Lying. Acting dumb. Reality TV turns bad behavior into a good time.

If you look at me, you think I’m, like, stuck-up. But yet, like, I save animals,” Snooki whines on the reality TV show Jersey Shore. Meanwhile, her “pal” Mike openly mocks her, saying: “She looks like a spray-painted Chihuahua.”

Now flip the channel to Real Housewives of New Jersey. “Don’t call me honey,” Danielle is telling Teresa. “You’re an old hag,” Teresa replies. “Don’t call me honey,” Danielle is telling Teresa.


Temper tantrums, selfishness, cruelty, and plain old stupidity. These are the main ingredients for some of today’s hit reality TV shows. And guess who’s watching them? Millions of young people just like you.

Toxic Television

In the past, channels like MTV and VH1 were a place for young people to watch music videos by their favorite artists. Those days are over. Music has been largely replaced by shows that turn people’s worst character flaws into sensational entertainment—flaws like meanness and materialism.

Take My Super Sweet 16. In each episode, a boy or girl plans a birthday party that costs more than a car or a year of college. Meanwhile, on Teen Mom, a 15-year-old mother whines about not having any money because she has to support her child—while admiring her expensively manicured nails. Or how about Big Brother, where everyone makes lists of all the things they hate about one another?

All About Abs?

And then there are the stereotypes. Are all girls obsessed with clothes and spray tans? Are all boys obsessed with getting toned abs? That’s what many of the most popular shows would have you think. Plus, some experts say these shows send a dangerous message: that being stupid and selfish is fun. It can make you rich and famous! After all, Snooki has bragged that even President Obama knows who she is.

Many studies say that watching too much trashy TV can cause young people to do poorly in school and even try some of the risky behaviors they see on-screen. According to Liz Perle, editor in chief of the media expert group Common Sense Media, one of the biggest problems with reality TV is that there is nothing real about it. Producers edit video footage to make things seem crazier than they really are. But many viewers don’t know that. Plus, watching something enough, and the behavior can start to seem completely realistic and normal. “On these shows, all kids drink before 21, and all kids use racial epithets or aggressive speech as an everyday occasion,” says Perle. “But in reality, it’s only those kids on that particular piece of entertainment.”

Smart and Savvy

Not everyone thinks kids are being damaged by reality TV. Some experts point out that young people today are smart and savvy when it comes to the shows they watch. Even Perle agrees that most kids should be able to look at reality shows with a critical eye. “I give today’s kids a lot of credit. They have a sense of right and wrong.”

Maybe watching some reality TV can actually be (gulp) educational. Many shows, after all, make it clear that acting recklessly and behaving badly have bad consequences. Teen Mom shows you how tough and lonely it is to be a teenage parent. The spoiled brats on My Super Sweet 16 may make you think twice about demanding a new iPhone for your birthday. And watching stars on The Hills backstab their friends may make you give your loyal best friend a huge hug.

Then again, hopefully you don’t need reality TV to teach you any of these lessons.

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**What Do You Think?**

Does reality TV make young people stupid? The answer isn’t so simple. Some say yes. Others say no. Go back into the article and find information to support each side, and put the information on the lines below. Write three points on each side. (We’ve done one for you.)

### YES

REALITY TV MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE STUPID.

1. Kids imitate what they see on TV.
   - Write three points to support this side.
   - [ ]
   - [ ]
   - [ ]

2. [ ]
   - [ ]
   - [ ]

3. [ ]
   - [ ]
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### NO

REALITY TV DOESN’T MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE STUPID.

1. [ ]
   - [ ]
   - [ ]

2. [ ]
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3. [ ]
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