

PARENTING

What's proper word for week without TV?

Why can't TV-Turnoff Week be this week instead of next week? Next week there's what looks like a reasonably interesting movie (which fortunately will air on the 22nd, and TV-Turnoff starts on Monday, the 23rd). This week, well ...

The frustrating thing is that GSN has been making a big deal since last October about the National Vocabulary Championship, which finally airs tonight at 8 p.m. But were screeners available? I didn't get one. So I can't say whether it's going to be something fun to watch.

I think it will be. I certainly think it's a worthy cause. Kids who have a good vocabulary have an easier time reading, and kids who have an easier time reading have an easier time learning.

The finals feature 50 kids, ages 15 to 19, from all over the country competing in comprehension events. They don't have to spell the words, but they have to know what they mean.

The fun thing about the English language, though, is the subtleties. For example, the word "pragmatic" (which I just got off my National Vocabulary Championship Word a Day calendar). It's defined as practical - which is what the word means, except that you would almost never use it to describe an application, such as it's the pragmatic thing to do. No, we say it's the practical thing to do. A person is pragmatic.

That might be something to discuss with your children if you watch the show - the subtle art of the "right" word, an art that is near and dear to my heart as a writer.

Beyond that, you could start TV-Turnoff Week early. Or go to the Web site, www.tvturnoff.org, scroll down and register there.

It may seem a little disingenu-



**ANNE LOUISE
BANNON
FAMILY
VIEWING**

ous for someone who writes about television to encourage turning the darned thing off. But I do not see any conflict here, mostly because there are two parts to what I try to do here.

One is to let you know what's on and what's in given programs so that you can make decisions that are appropriate for your family. The other is to help you deal with the almost overwhelming media universe. And one tool you have at your disposal is that on/off button.

It is utterly impossible to shelter our kids from every potential negative influence out there. But we do have control over what comes into our homes. If we are going to be good parents, we have to take control of the remote and say no at times.

I do not think television is the enemy. It's just another part of our lives. How we use it is what's important. If television is one of many different activities you enjoy together as a family, then it can be a very good thing. But if it's all you do together, then it's time to turn it off and try talking to each other.

If you need a place to start, try eating together without the television on in the background. Obviously, asking your pre-teen straight out what happened at school today will get the mumbled, "nothing." But try starting a conversation about something else, say, something silly you heard on the radio. You'd be surprised how fast that will suddenly remind said surly pre-teen of something someone said at school and you're off and

rolling.

Another way to start conversation is to have the kids help you make dinner. They'll be learning valuable skills at the same time, too. It will take time, but they will also get to the point where they are a real help.

The point is to spend time with your children, whether it's over a board game or on a hike or just eating dinner together. It's impossible to quantify the impact, even though some have tried - you may have heard the statistic that teens who eat dinner with their families are 10 times less likely to get into trouble. That statistic has been called into question.

But even if the numbers don't pan out perfectly, it's only obvious that kids who are eating dinner with their folks are kids who aren't elsewhere getting into trouble. Not to mention the fact that if you've got a kid coming to the family table night after night, chances are it's because you've got a decent relationship with that kid. Kids who have decent relationships with their parents are not usually acting out and getting into trouble.

Television can be a great conversation starter, but if it's on all the time, when will you have those conversations? And without those conversations, how are you going to build the strong relationship with your kid that he/she needs?

I will write more next week on TV-Turnoff Week and how you can participate. In the meantime, the American Association of Pediatricians recommends no screen time at all before age 2, and only two hours a day (and that includes computers and video games) for kids older than 2, and no TVs in kids' bedrooms.

Anne Louise Bannon is a freelance journalist and parent. E-mail her at: anne@annelouisebannon.com