

## **Our Town: Blow up your TV**

by [Don Kazak](#)

Singer-songwriter John Prine once wrote a song that included the lyrics, "Blow up your TV." He was joking. Maybe.

But Peter DeBenedittis isn't joking when he takes aim at the influence television and commercials have on young minds.

DeBenedittis is author of the book, "Stranger in Your Living Room: How Media Hurts Children" and was in Palo Alto last week to talk about the topic.

The New Mexico author speaks from experience. He ran his own advertising agency for 10 years, mostly working for politicians, and knows the advertising business from the inside.

"Now I teach people how seduction works," he said.

DeBenedittis spoke in assemblies to more than 800 eighth graders at Jordan, JLS and Terman middle schools then spoke the same night to a group of about 50 parents, sponsored by the Palo Alto Drug and Alcohol Collaborative.

His message was powerful, aimed at both parents and kids.

Since both Time and Newsweek published cover stories 12 years ago, it's been widely accepted science that the brains of children develop in stages and don't fully mature until age 25.

This is crucial for parents of young children to understand.

The ages 0-6 and 10-13 are periods of massive brain development, he said. "It's important to be stimulated through experience during those periods."

Watching TV and later playing video games are passive activities that don't provide the same neurological development that real experience does.

Even worse, "TV stunts the growth of connectors between neurons," he said.

"The reasons we have ADD (attention deficit disorder) in our culture is because of TV," DeBenedittis said, quoting a University of North Carolina professor.

He then threw out some startling facts.

"Fifth graders watch three and a half hours of media a day and talk to their parents 17 to 36 minutes a week," he said.

"Average college students had vocabularies of 40,000 words in the 1970s, now it's 10,000 words," he said.

"Americans watch more TV than the French, Russians, Japanese and Chinese — combined," he said.

The scariest facts DeBenedittas related were about alcohol use among young people and the efforts that beer companies make to attract future customers.

"Alcohol companies have different images for adults and kids," he said. It's called two-tiered advertising — except it's hard to tell them apart.

Any TV ad about beer that has animals, is funny and has music isn't aimed at adults but at kids, he said. Those ads cost between \$2 million and \$4 million to produce "and are run through batteries of psychologists."

Teens get in trouble because their alcohol use is often binge-

drinking, in large part because they have been conditioned to an expectation of, "Now I'm at the age I'm supposed to drink," he explained.

"Four in 10 students who drink alcohol by age 15 become alcoholics later in life," he said.

But Benedittis had some good news for Palo Alto parents, too.

"You have a social-norming program second to none, which is why alcohol and tobacco use is so low" among Palo Alto students, he said.

The social-norming program began about five years ago, sparked by concerns about drug use at both high schools back in 2000, Palo Alto Unified School District Assistant Superintendent Scott Laurence recalled.

The program does annual surveys of all middle and high school students about drug, alcohol and tobacco use. At the middle schools, the focus of the survey has expanded to include bullying.

In terms of alcohol use, one perception is that "everyone at the dance is drinking," which is what high school students who are caught drinking alcohol say, Laurence said. But most aren't drinking.

"It's about perceptions," Laurence said. "Kids now understand what the reality is."

It may help to tell kids how they are being manipulated by TV commercials.

"Kids don't like to be told what to do, they rebel," DeBenedittis said. "So teach them how they are being manipulated into an unhealthy lifestyle, so they will reject that."

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