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Taking Back Our Homes

Rebecca Hagelin

Author, *Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture That's Gone Stark Raving Mad*



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The following is adapted from a luncheon speech delivered in the Dow Leadership Center at Hillsdale College on March 6, 2006.

The day I signed the contract to write *Home Invasion* just so happened to be the day that six teenagers and I set out in our 15-passenger van on a 2,000 mile vacation. We always take other kids along with our own three when we go on our legendary Hagelin road trips. This time we were heading south from Virginia to visit Disney World and the beautiful Florida Gulf Coast beaches. (I always wonder at such moments why my wonderful and wise husband, Andy, can't ever quite make it for the “road” part of the trip—he always has to fly and meet us at our destination. . . could it possibly be that he doesn't want to spend 24 driving hours stuck in a van with six teenagers? Hmm. As I said, he is wise. But I digress.)

It was easy to begin composing thoughts about America's toxic culture as I drove my precious cargo down the highway—painfully easy. Barreling down I-95, the roadside was filled with tacky billboards screaming, “Topless! We Dare, We Bare!” advertising the many topless bars that now dot the countryside. There was no escape from them, state after state. I wondered, “Ok, I've got six teenagers in the car—what messages are the billboards sending them about acceptable behavior? What are they learning about the value of women in our society?”

After a few hours we pulled into a gas station that had an ice cream counter. I left the teens to order and made a quick trip to the ladies room. When I returned to pay the bill, there were the two girls, standing at the register devouring their ice cream right beside a product called “Horniest Goat Weed: sex stimulate pills for men and women.” So a kid can't even get a scoop of ice cream without being assaulted by a sexual message? I waved the girls away while I paid the bill, only to turn



around and find them standing by a magazine rack filled with pornography.

Down the road we stopped at a Burger King for dinner—a safe place, at last. Or at least I *thought* it would be an opportunity to just relax with the kids while we munched on burgers and fries. We soon discovered that mounted in the corner was a television blaring the images and sounds of one of those made-for-TV movies, this particular scene featuring a naked man and woman bumping under the covers.

So a family can't drive down the highway, get a scoop of ice cream, or even eat hamburgers without being assaulted by garbage?

Home Invasion

Everywhere we go, from the grocery store check-out stands with their tacky women's magazines, to the mall with windows filled with mannequins and photos of young women in their underwear, to the video store with ultra-violent and pornographic movies, to the sexually graphic books many public schools are using to "teach" our kids, our sensibilities are under attack.

But tragically, the toxic culture that is poisoning the hearts and souls of our families and our children isn't just "out there." Often times the American home has become the sump for cultural sewage.

It used to be that the home was the nurturing oasis providing relief from outside dangers. It used to be that a parent's greatest worry was looking out for the guy in the trench coat lurking in the shadows at the edge of the school playground. Well, that guy in the trench coat is now in our homes.

Don't believe me? Log on to the Internet. According to the London School of Economics, nine out of ten children who go online, usually to do homework, will stumble across hardcore pornography. Let me repeat: 90 percent of children will fall victim to pornography in their own homes. And then there's intentional porn consumption by kids. Oh, children might pass around a pornographic Web address at school, but it's in the safety of their own homes—often in their own bedrooms—that they close the door and consume hours of pornography. Over 50 percent of kids who enter chat rooms—where conversation is often raunchy and racy—say they have given out personal information to complete strangers. Chat rooms and sites such as MySpace.com have become playgrounds for

sexual predators, often luring kids to situations of abuse and even death. Online pornography is more than a \$10 billion a year industry, working 24/7 to make porn addicts out of our kids—and too often succeeding.

Tired of Internet porn? Turn on the television and flip to MTV. Why? It's what your teenagers are watching. As a matter of fact, MTV is the number one viewing choice for teen girls. And if you haven't seen MTV in a while, well, let me just say that our kids are not just watching artsy music videos anymore. Today's MTV programming is filled with reality-based shows that feature kids dressed in teeny-weeny bikinis licking whipped cream off each other. Or "pooh diving"—a "sport" in which teen boys swim in open sewers filled with human waste. Or the infamous "pooh cams" where kids watch other kids go to the bathroom. Think the problem is just on cable? Why not switch to *Desperate Housewives*, the third most popular television show among today's teens. By the way, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation Report on media uses of teenagers reveals that 68 percent of children say they now have a TV in their bedroom, and the vast majority say their parents have no idea what they are watching.

Had enough Internet and television porn? Check out the video games our teen boys are playing. The second most popular of these games is Grand Theft Auto, in which the player actually becomes the character who steals cars, rapes women, has sex with a prostitute and then clubs her to death. And that's not to mention the decapitation of policemen.

If that's not enough, check out the books. *Gossip Girls* is one of the most popular romance series for girls ages 12-16. Published by Simon and Schuster, recurring themes are incest and graphic sex among children. What about some of the books our kids are reading for school-assigned reports? When I was researching *Home Invasion*, I decided to thumb through a few books from a list of those recommended by the American Library Association for ages 12-14. Good teachers, well-meaning teachers, hand out such lists at the end of every school year—I'm sure you're familiar with the "summer reading list" concept. After that, good moms everywhere drive their kids to the library and say, "Honey, go pick out a few books to read this summer and get started right away on that report. Go up to your bedroom and read if you're bored, because I don't want to hear you complaining that you have nothing to do." Well, I pulled a few novels off the shelves and what

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I found disgusted me. One described a sexual encounter between fourth graders. Another was written from the perspective of a 14-year-old boy who describes, in detail, watching his first homosexual encounter. In one book, you only need to get to page four for the first of many uses of the term “motherf---in.” So moms and dads should know that sometimes when Susie is upstairs being a good little girl reading her book, her mind is being filled with rot. Of course you should also check out the sex-ed class materials that may include contests where kids race to put condoms on dildos and cucumbers.

And then there’s the music. The number one music genre of choice for today’s youth of all races and socioeconomic groups is the often verbally pornographic and violent rap and hip-hop. According to the media study I mentioned earlier, our kids are consuming six-and-one-half hours of media every single day. And as I’ve described, the vast majority of it is sexual, violent, uncivil, and often plain stupid.

But what’s the harm? Isn’t this just entertainment? Well, let’s see. Corporations spend billions of dollars every year on advertising. Why? Because they know that media affects behavior. Today’s youth are the most marketed-to generation in the history of the world. Our kids are spending an estimated \$200 billion a year on trinkets and toys and clothes and media. Marketing executives at MTV and other youth-oriented media do not brag about how they know what kids want, but about how they have learned to manipulate the teenage mind. They are selling a “lifestyle” to our children that robs them of their innocence and their best futures, and capitalizes on the natural raging hormones that mark the teen years. Instead of helping channel that energy into worthwhile activities, the media fuels the flames in an effort to keep them tuned into the programming.

These marketers are teaching our young girls that their lives are all about their sexual power and our young boys that life is all about who can be more crudely funny or irresponsible. Sexual activity is expected and has no consequences. Civility does not exist. And the only brand of respect that’s taught is a twisted brand of “self-respect.”

The harm, then, is that in addition to the obvious degradation of our humanity; to the destruction of common decency and morality; and to the virtual death of civility; our children are paying a terrible price with their bodies, their emotions and their futures.

A September 2004 report in the medical journal *Pediatrics* reveals that children who watch

a lot of sexualized television have twice the rate of sexual activity as teens who don’t. One out of three teenage girls will become pregnant at least one time before she is 19 years old, giving the U.S. the highest teen pregnancy rate of any industrialized western nation. Twenty-five percent of sexually active teenagers will contract a sexually transmitted disease that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Half of the new STD cases in this country every year are in young people ages 15-24. The suicide rate among children 14 years old and under has increased 75 percent in the last ten years. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, freshmen are entering colleges in record numbers with clinically diagnosed depression. The college suicide rate is the highest it has ever been.

And have you ever heard of “cutting”? It’s a heart-breaking phenomenon of self-mutilation now common in middle schools across the country. Our teenage daughters are using razor blades and knives to make slashes in their arms, just so they can feel alive.

Are we crazy? Has our culture gone stark-raving mad?

Taking Responsibility

Before we point the finger at Hollywood, the government, or the business community for what is happening to America’s youth, we must look at ourselves. I’ve worked on family public policy issues for 20 years, and I know the solutions to these problems do not rest in Washington, D.C. Most of the solutions can be found in active, loving parenting. It doesn’t take an act of Congress to take back your home.

The last time I checked, a 13-year-old boy didn’t have 60 bucks to buy a video game unless his daddy gave it to him. Eleven-year-old girls can’t drive themselves to the mall, nor do they have the cash to buy trashy clothes that make them look like street walkers. And who pays for the cable television, orders the Internet connection and buys CDs for Christmas presents? Well-meaning moms and dads who are too busy or too absorbed with their own lives to see that their kids need them to push back against the toxic culture, not invite and pay for it to invade their homes.

Many parents are more concerned about being their children’s friend than they are about parenting. But kids don’t need more drifting friends; they need their moms and dads. Our

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children are feeling around for boundaries, for a firm foundation on which they can build their lives, for love and nurture.

The greatest gift we can give our children is to teach them that there is a God that loves them; that He knows their names, and knows how many hairs are on their heads. They must know that God created them as unique individuals, in His image, with unique contributions only they can make to their fellow men. We must teach them the two greatest commandments: to love God with all their hearts and to love others as they love themselves. And we must teach them to tell truth from lies, good from evil.

We should remember that it is adults who create pornographic Web sites and spam our children's inboxes with pornographic e-mail; adults who design and build trashy billboards and run topless bars; adults who design thongs for ten-year-olds; adults who create MTV programming and own the record labels and publish trashy teen romance novels. In other words, our battle is not with our children, but with adults who hold a corrupt view of the purpose of life.

Please hear my heart on this matter: Modern technology is not the enemy. I believe that modern technology has the potential to be a great liberator of families, allowing more parents to spend more time working from home. My goodness, the world is at our children's fingertips, enabling them to access information and do research in minutes that used to take hours to complete. But there are a lot of people who use this technology for harm, too. We must harness

the good and filter out the bad.

I wrote *Home Invasion* as a wake-up call to parents and as a handbook for how to take back their homes. I didn't want just to talk about our societal problems; I wanted to provide resources to help people fight back. So it lists counseling organizations that can help if someone in the family is addicted to pornography; resources on educational choices; information about controlling Internet infiltration; and research on the tremendous impact that simple acts like having family meals together can have on children.

Probably the single greatest safety act you can perform today is to download an Internet filter. The one I use takes a few minutes and a few key-strokes to download, and costs about 50 bucks a year. As far as the television, don't throw it out; just monitor how it is used. If you subscribe to digital cable television, you can obtain parental controls at no charge by contacting your local cable provider. What about the movies your kids see or rent at the video store? Be smart. Check out movie reviews written by people who share your concern for decency. Internet sites such as pluggedinonline.com are excellent tools in this regard.

There are several practical resources available to help us make wise choices for our kids. But the best tool we can use is our expression of our love for them as people. And sometimes, that commitment is difficult. I know what it's like to have my 13-year-old daughter look at me with tears streaming down her face and say, "But Mom, all my friends are going to that movie." It rips my heart out. But

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in those moments, I sit Kristin down and I say, "You know what, Kristin? God made me your mom, and I love you more than anybody else in the world could possibly love you. I have to do what I think is best for you. Please allow me to be your Mom, allow me to love you, allow me to protect you the best way I know how. I might make mistakes, but as long as there is breath in me, I will be here for you." And then, we always find something else to do that's fun for her.

Those situations could easily turn into ugly scenes where I scream, "No, you're not going to that movie and I don't care what you say! Go to your room!" Or they can turn into moments where I give in, too tired to fight another battle, sending my daughter off with the message that standards only apply when I'm not worn out. Instead, when I remember that I'm the one who is supposed to model love, forgiveness and

integrity, those situations turn into wonderful bonding moments that we both cherish, and that children desperately crave.

We must remember that our kids want us to be involved in their lives. They don't really want or need another gadget or the hottest video game. What they really want is more time with Mom and Dad. They need us desperately, not to build walls around them that shut them off from the world, but to build within them a moral compass that will guide them when they go out into the world each day. Not only will they be spared much harm having this compass, but they will succeed better as adults. And maybe, just maybe, if enough of us commit now to taking back our homes, there will one day be enough adults to reclaim our culture.



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