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Be Careful, Little Eyes

Does it really matter what people watch on TV or personal electronic devices? Does it really matter what kinds of video games children play?

Often people say that it is simply entertainment and they can differentiate between what is real and what is not. But, is it really as simple as that?

In the 1990s, scientists were studying monkeys as they ate raisins. The monkeys had very fine electrodes attached to their heads, measuring neurons which fired when they picked up a raisin and ate it. When the scientists took a break for lunch, they put the raisins on a shelf. The monkeys were still hooked up to the electrodes while the scientists ate their lunch. A monkey was intently watching the scientist. When the scientist started eating the raisins, the monkey's brain reacted the same way it did when the monkey was eating the raisins itself. The monkey's brain could not distinguish between observing an action and doing it. This was the beginning of a breakthrough on "mirror" neurons. Scientists have spent the past two decades researching mirror neurons, their effects on both monkeys and humans, and found that humans also have mirror neurons. Mirror neurons actually do mirror the behavior and emotions of those who are observing it. Scientists also found that if they added sound and participation to their study, the mirror neurons and the reactions in the brain and body increased even more.

This study has been applied to people watching movies. Watching a movie can actually cause a physiological response such as increased heart rate, sweating and body tensing, even though the person is not in any danger as they sit in their living room. Scientists also found that in human participants, muscles would actually twitch when watching a person throw a baseball. Facial expressions of people watching movies mirrored the emotion of the movie. There were physical reactions to what was being observed. These neurons make

us share the experience of others, while also triggering a tendency for us to do the same thing. With mirror neurons, scientists have used the phrase: "your actions become my actions."

This brings a heavy responsibility to parents when it comes to what their children watch and the video games they play. Many popular movies today focus on the supernatural, violence, carnal activities, murders, lust, dishonesty, etc. Science indicates when you observe these portrayals, "their actions become your actions." The brain interprets these activities as if you, yourself, are doing what is being observed. Video games use observation, sound and interaction. It requires a higher level of participation. It requires interacting and reacting over and over. The story lines in the games are often violent, not a model of how we would want our children to behave.

As early as 1870, Ellen White warned to be aware of the universal principle: "by beholding, we become changed" (Appeal to the Battle Creek Church, p. 61). Science is starting to catch up and validate that concept. From the first century A.D., Paul instructs us: *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things* (Philippians 4:8 KJV). ■

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▲ Susan Allen

