![apricot for parents]

Media literacy program and material for adult educators

ANNEX 1:
Media Literacy for Clinicians and Parents

Project APRICOT:
Attentive parental education for wise being and co-being in changing times

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Chapter 9: Annexes

9.1   Annex 1: Media Literacy for Clinicians and Parents

Part 1: How young children perceive and use media

During infancy, from 0 to 6 months, the primary tasks are adjustment to the world outside the womb, eating and sleeping, and the beginning of social interaction through smiling, cooing, and reaching for people and objects. Physical touch is essential, with soft cuddling and comforting important to the actual facilitation of growth. Input to the brain as it is wiring itself and continuing to grow is crucial; it is highly likely that these early touch points with the environment influence neuronal pathways. The human voice and soft music are known to soothe and stimulate interaction, while loud voices and noises produce full-body startle response, interfere with the infant's ability to eat, and raise stress hormone levels. Media, especially music, may have a role in soothing and calming; parents naturally sing to their babies to quiet and comfort them.

From 6 months to 1 year, the infant is continuing to grow and interact with others. Exploration of the world around her through touch and feel is essential. Language is starting through reciprocal interactions, and the child is beginning to understand cause and effect. All of these tasks require an interactive process. The nonreciprocal way in which traditional media, such as television, operate does not provide the feedback loop necessary for children at this age. Infants need to explore through their senses, get immediate feedback, and then repeat these interactions over and over to learn from them. It is highly likely that, at this early age, cognitive and emotional learning are synergistic, that learning to pick up and eat "finger food' is developmentally optimized if this activity takes place with a warm, encouraging adult rather than in front of a screen presenting images and words unrelated to the infant's behaviour or feelings.

Aside from music, and the occasional video chat with far-flung relatives, the best use of electronic media at this stage may be none at all. The American Academy of Paediatrics discourages television watching for children younger than 2 years, encouraging adult child interaction (such as talking, singing, or reading together) that promotes healthy brain development. However, surveys of parents suggest that many infants and toddlers spend time in front of the television. A 2012 survey found that on a typical day, children aged 8 months to 8 years are exposed to almost 4 h a day of background television, which may harm the quality of parent-child interactions. (In the case of infants, it's difficult to know how "watching" is defined, since they don't seem to attend to television for more than brief periods.) The effects of television exposure may vary based on a child's temperament.

Moving on from 1 to 2 years, the development of motor skills and language with purpose continues. Children are beginning to scribble, throw a ball, feed themselves, and walk and run. Media can have a role in teaching language (although print books appear to have an edge over electronic ones) and again music has a role for soothing. Visual images are

fascinating, and yet the ability to understand them is not developed and needs adult explanation; the ability to learn from a video image is limited. Optimal learning at this stage depends on interaction with someone else who is able to continuously modify his or her response, adjusting to what the child has just done and ideally how the child is feeling (frustrated, eager, tired, anxious, etc.). This allows the toddler to figure things out in small incremental ways, building a step at a time in knowledge and self-esteem at her own individual pace. Television, even if playing in the background, may disrupt this interaction and play with parents. However, since toddlers will be surrounded by and using screens throughout childhood and adulthood, too much emphasis on "protecting" them from the media could arguably be counterproductive.

Part 2: Preschool years

As exploration continues from 2 to 5 years, the child is moving more into the world of socializing with others through play. The play skills of sharing, taking turns, and following simple rules begin to emerge. Many skills acquired gradually over these 3-4 years are actually school readiness skills. Some media content is specifically geared to promoting school readiness, such as programs from Sesame Workshop and PBS Kids. They often combine developmentally appropriate cognitive challenges, pacing, and repetition with characters that have feelings and values. Many commercial network programs are not geared to children's developmental stages. Frequent viewing of such programs can hinder later academic performance. The accompanying commercial advertisements for food, toys, and games may also be detrimental. Children this age see little difference between program and commercial content, and don't understand the persuasive intent of advertising. More time watching television and the presence of television in a child's bedroom contribute to preschoolers' increasing risk of being overweight.

As with television, effects of interactive media on cognitive development seem related to the appropriateness of software and parent involvement. While interactive games have greater capacity to teach cause and effect, they may limit fantasy play within the structure of the software rather than being derived from or related to the child's own life. Children benefit in their social and emotional growth when their own experiences and feelings can be acted out with creative materials. Dress up, pretend worlds created with toys, drawings, paintings, and clay and cardboard creations are but a few examples of how play promotes self-expression at this stage. Still, many of these activities have proxies in the digital world. While research is limited, interactive games and apps that support shared imaginative.

One concern about children's media consumption is that youngsters aged 8 years and younger typically cannot reliably tell fantasy from reality and cannot comprehend complex motives and intentions. Studies by Cantor have shown how children at this age become fearful upon seeing images that they think are real. Although these results are of concern, we also know from daily experience that children have a growing sense of what is real and what is not from an early age. When parents read fairy tales at bedtime, although there may be transient fright, few children suffer long-term harm or attempt the stunts related in

the story. Few have jumped out of windows to mimic Superman or Spiderman. In our clinical experience, those children who have taken serious risks come from chaotic and often abusive or neglectful homes. They know reality and try to escape it. Research cannot easily capture the interplay between the developing child and the thousands of increasingly complex and confusing images they see through television, apps, video games, YouTube, and movies, some exciting, some fun, and some brutally realistic live coverage of a horrific event.

Part 3: How school-age children and adolescents perceive and use media

A national survey of children's media use found that children aged 8 to 10 years' experience almost 8 h a day of total media exposure, and that 11- to 14-year-olds spend more time with media than any other age group. Children rapidly acquire new information during the early school years with an accompanying understanding of time and motion, and greater understanding of cause and effect. During this time, they move from concrete thinking and the world of fantasy to abstract thinking and the ability to understand more complex thought, and thus a greater ability to learn from electronic media. There are also gains in academic and social skills, membership in peer groups, and development of important friendships. Entertainment media begins to shape children's understanding of social relationships and expectations about behaviour and appearance, but the learning is limited since it does not occur through the child's personal interactions. There is also wide variability from child to child as to how they process information, particularly at the early phase of this stage from the age of 6 to 10 years, before the development of abstract thinking. All of development occurs on the substrate of inborn temperament and traits. As established by Thomas et al., children come into this world with styles and traits that are persistent throughout childhood into adulthood. Some babies are easier to manage and learn self-regulation more quickly. Other babies become easily overwhelmed, overreact to stimuli, and require a longer time to be soothed. As infants grow to toddlers, their characteristics of shyness, natural curiosity and ready exploration, and even aggressiveness become more apparent. Thus, the effect of watching a scary movie on a shy 3-year-old or shy 7-year-old might be quite different from the effect on a 3-year-old who is already exhibiting aggressive tendencies or a 7-year old who is known for her daring behaviour. Media researchers have tried to take traits into account, particularly in the area of aggression and violence. Some studies have found greater effects of violent content in video games for subjects who score high on measures of trait hostility or aggression; others have not. More studies are needed to see how children's traits or temperament might moderate media effects. Children with trait hostility and aggression may be drawn to more violent activities, whether those be contact sports such as football or wrestling, more aggressive school yard play, or more violent media. And it is unclear whether playing football or a violent video game is a reinforcer of aggressive behaviour for some children, or a "release" of hostility that is socially acceptable for others. Research data that describe risk factors for groups of children do not take into account individual variability, parental interactions, and a host of other factors that should be a part of parents' daily decision-making.

Part 4: Family context and media

American children now grow up surrounded by a seemingly limitless array of media content. As of 2010, the home of a typical child aged 8 to 18 years featured an average of four televisions, two game consoles, two computers, and multiple video and music recorders/players. The rapid changes in media access are taking place within a family unit and culture that are also rapidly evolving. For example, between divorce and remarriage, death of a parent, out of wedlock births, foster care, and imprisonment, fewer children are raised from birth to 18 in a traditional, two-parent nuclear family. (During 2016, 65% of children younger than 18 years were living with two married parents, down from 77% in 1980.).

It's difficult for children to avoid the influence of mass media. They face peer expectations to keep up with the most recent sports story or the hottest YouTube channel, and related fashion trends. Social media has become perhaps the most common means that children, adolescents, and young adults use to communicate with each other. In this digital age, it is almost impossible to find a young person (or adult) who is not texting or tweeting, on FaceBook, or using apps such as SnapChat or Instagram. This is the new mainstream. School assignments require them to search the Internet. Friends discuss the latest social media items before the school day starts. Children play video simulated sports against each other, or join a worldwide game on the Internet.

National and local news is often obtained through social media or online news outlets rather than through traditional newspapers and magazines. The news audience has splintered. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that just 8% of 18- to 29-year-olds often get news from network television, compared with 49% of persons aged 65 years and older. Times have changed. And they are changing at such a rapid pace that it is difficult for parents, caregivers, and grandparents to keep up with the rapid pace of media development and use.

What are reasonable family policies regarding the media? Parents may be tempted to bring it all to a halt, thinking, "I do not want my children exposed to all of these sights and sounds streaming into my home. I don't want their development harassed or hurried by the media." They can try to severely restrict phone, tablet, and app usage. Yet, even if one could be successful in exerting the control necessary to limit media exposure, is this the approach that would optimize a child's development? Appropriately limiting autonomy and peer relationships is good parenting when confronting substance use, gang behavior, delinquency, or protecting a younger child from a friend's irresponsible parents or a peer who is a bully or demeaning. How great does the danger have to be to rationalize limiting the child's developmental trajectory toward autonomy and the free flow of information among peers and preparation for the next stage of life, high school, and college? We know that prohibition and censorship do not work. In fact, limiting access to the very same digital media we as parents use every day would be hypocritical. The key question is how we and our children harness the use of digital media for better and not worse. How can we assume control of a world that has become embedded with digital media?

It is also tempting for a parent to say, "The horse is out of the barn. I have no control over it and they are going to see it and hear it no matter what. I want my child to have friends and not be 'out of it.' I want my child to like me. And who has the time for all this monitoring?" Parents can feel caught in the dilemma of over-controlling their children's lives or surrendering control to the prevailing winds of our culture. Ultimately, each parent must decide what is best for his/her child based on knowledge of that particular child's strengths, weaknesses, or vulnerabilities, and the context of their chosen family values. Begin with a focus on health and safety, such as removing media from bedrooms at night to preserve sleep time and protecting personal information.

Family approaches and rules concerning media literacy and exposure should be consistent with what parents do to encourage autonomy in the many other areas of a child's life. Parents assess the child's readiness, strengths, and weakness; determine the risk associated with the developmental step; prepare the child; provide guidance; set rules or boundaries; cope with their own anxiety; and then launch the next step. For example, is the child ready to walk to school on her own? Can he find the way? Should she go with a friend? Does he understand the risk of going off the path or talking to a stranger? Can she follow traffic safety rules? A reckless or impulsive child may not be ready and need to be older to safely accept this autonomy, whereas an anxious yet competent child may benefit from encouragement to be among the first in the class to achieve this landmark. For most middle-class children in the United States, it would certainly be "safer" to wait and maybe never allow a child to walk to school (or to be among the last in a class). And yet if a child is ready, many would take the risk; the act of walking away is a metaphor for growing up, being trustworthy, and ultimately gaining self-esteem. Thousands of these little gains form the basis of productive adulthood and generative parenting.

The same process of gradual movement toward autonomy, guided by parental involvement, applies to media decisions. Children benefit, given our culture and at the appropriate developmental step, from some decision-making authority about what they watch on television, what they do "to relax," how they balance leisure time with homework, what video games they play, and how they use smartphones, tablets, and the Internet. Parents who live in a safe neighbourhood let a 6-year-old walk to school after initially walking with him, but do not let a child go downtown on a public bus. Similarly, at this young age, a child would be allowed to go to a G-rated or maybe a PG movie, but not a PG-13 or R-rated movie. Parents set a range of acceptable options and let the child make some choices, the boundaries being set by the advantages of building autonomy and the risks of choices.

Part 5: Understanding media content

The pervasive presence of violent or sexually inappropriate content in American media has unfortunately created a general negative tone regarding its influence on children and family life. One only has to look at the line-up of series on Netflix, HBO, and other networks to worry about the impact they have on our children. As researchers try to help parents

manage the potential risks of excessive and unsupervised media use, the positive ways that media can be used within the family are often neglected. In fact, television can bring family members together, both for shared recreation and as a trigger for relevant discussions. On the recreational side, cheering on a favourite sports team or just spending time together is special and creates important shared memories. In terms of building character, rooting for a team that does not often win, but continues to play hard and embodies local pride can teach patience, anger management, and tolerance! On a more serious note, television can provide many hours of enjoyable time through educational shows, especially those on history, science, hobbies, or current issues relevant to families. But watching entertainment programs as a family can have unexpected benefits.

For example, it can be fun to watch a television talent competition with a teenager and to compare ratings of the contestants. But this is also an opportunity to discuss unrealistic expectations, being over dependent on other people's opinions or adoration, and coping with defeat. Discussion of the songs can lead to an appreciation of music favoured by the younger or older generation that would not otherwise have been heard. Similarly, watching family dramas and films set in the recent past can lead to Internet searches on the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement, and meaningful discussions of substance use, racism, premature and premarital sexuality, abortion, over- and under controlling parents, grief, anger, and forgiveness. In one national survey, one in three teens aged 15 to 17 years reported that television content had triggered a discussion about a sexual issue with a parent. Just as they learn the alphabet or English grammar, children in the elementary grades can start to understand both the technical and content aspects of television and movies. The technical side includes the electronic workings of televisions, explained through interesting books (e.g., The Way Things Work Now), programs and Websites (e.g., HowStuffWorks.com), and the commercial aspect of television, including how programs are paid for by companies selling their products. Children can also learn about the different types of programs (comedies, dramas, news, documentaries, etc.) and how to tell the "real" from the pretend. Finally, parents can describe the technical aspects of producing a program, from casting actors and making costumes and sets to camera angles and special effects. Again, parents can search for television programs and Websites that explore topics such as these.

As children get older, they are more able to understand subtler aspects of program content, such as plots, themes, and historical or geographical settings, and how these combine with technical elements to affect how the program makes us feel. They can also explore motivations for characters' behaviours (from interpersonal relationships to substance use) and aspects of their appearance (such as clothing or weight), and identify common, perhaps harmful stereotypes (such the portrayal of grandparents, scientists, or "crazy people").

While many parents cringe at a series such as "Thirteen Reasons Why," focusing on a highly exaggerated portrayal of high school stress factors leading to a girl's suicide, it does raise important issues about bullying, misuse of drugs and alcohol, and sexual assault.

These kinds of issues are openly discussed among our middle and high school students. We know that while many adolescents are binge watching, few parents watch with them. Some television content may be uncomfortable to watch with a teenager, but it's likely that these same scenes will be watched with peers in their homes, or at the movies, with no adult available to help put the behaviours and feelings in context. Discussion of these topics without the show as a substrate or facilitator would be difficult at best, and very unlikely to occur at all.

These sorts of questions can form the underpinnings of discussions with older children as you watch television and Internet videos together:

• Who created this content and why are they sharing it? Who owns and profits from it?
• What techniques and issues are used to attract and hold attention?
• What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in this content?
• What (or who) is omitted from this content? Why was it left out?
• How might different people interpret this content?

As children begin to master abstract thinking and are able to explore more content on their own, it's important to talk about the credibility of Internet content and how to determine the quality or biases of what they find. The fragmenting of news media and increased consumption through social media means that children also need guidance on judging the credibility and possible biases of news sources. A Stanford study found that 82% of middle schoolers conflated online "sponsored content" (advertisements) and real news. An online educational resource is available in conjunction with that study to teach adolescents how to evaluate news Web sites and claims on social media. Parents need to be mindful of their own behaviour. Recent research on children aged 12 to 17 years and their parents found that teens tend to imitate their parents' news consumption behaviour; that is, they mirror what parents do, not what they recommend. Experience with the Internet should not just be viewed through the lens of harm reduction. While there is a real risk of unwanted exposure to X-rated material or solicitations from strangers, when one weighs this potential risk versus the gains of autonomy, access to information, and communicating with a group of friends, the benefits greatly exceed the risk provided the parent(s) have assessed the degree of autonomy their child is ready to manage and have discussed the dos and don'ts of online behaviour. These include not giving out personal information such as phone numbers, account numbers, and passwords; recognizing that "free" stuff (games, ringtones, special content) might come with malware or demand information in return; and the importance of strong passwords. All of these media risks are happening in the home where there are opportunities to listen, observe (gently and at a distance), explain, and reassess. The key to media literacy is ongoing parental involvement that is geared to the child's developmental level, with gradual movement toward more and more autonomy as the child matures.

Part 6: The striving family. Difficulties with peer relations

Some families are on overdrive in terms of work, daily schedules, expectations, and achievement orientation. Any time focused on an activity, either individual or group, has to be productive or a step to a more evolved "useful" activity. Even fun is defined as a lesson or practice that is part of making progress. These families are quite resistant to any "downtime" or "senseless fun." Often children in these families, if given a bit of permission, readily wish for or identify media opportunities through television, Internet, video games, or movies to take time off or feel more in tune with peers. These children state that their parents would never allow them to watch a desired television program or watch with them. Such parents assume a kind of elite status in their blanket condemnation of virtually all media.

These circumstances may call for a family prescription mandating a regular hour of senseless fun watching a comedy or drama to encourage a slight change in expectation or intensity of the striving. Sometimes families have rejected this single hour as the beginning of a moral decline, while others have discovered a series or a video game that has had a positive effect. (It is often an added benefit to have the child tutor the parent in a video game, reversing the common pattern in the striving family of parents constantly teaching and tutoring children.)

Some children have difficulties with peer relationships and need some structure to facilitate time with friends. Often this structure can be an activity like a sports team, band, or Scouting. Some children do not participate in activities or groups, and the media can serve this bridge function. In fact, for some isolated children or those with weaknesses in social skills, texting (and avoiding eye contact and nonverbal interaction) may be highly useful in developing relationships with peers. Going to a movie is among the most structured of activities, as is watching television or playing video games. Children who are quite socially awkward may master certain video games and gain status by teaching others. Inviting a potential friend over for the newest version of a game can feel safe and facilitate a relationship.

Children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are frequently particularly devoted to media, including television, video games, and computers. Many of these children find school stressful, demanding, and even with a customized treatment plan, not very supportive of their self-esteem. Coming home from school and immediately starting on homework can be overwhelming. Children with ADHD seem to benefit from an after-school activity, especially a sport, and a little "down time" watching a television show as a transition to homework or as a break. Electronic games and the Internet are forgiving, can be reset, turned on and off, and do not criticize. The child is in control, errors are private and reversible, and there is always another chance. Some children with ADHD are very adept at video games and using computers, which can provide a highly valued source of self-esteem. Research suggests that judicious use of interactive games can enhance both social relationships and learning for children with ADHD.

Children who are developmentally delayed often use media in ways similar to the child with ADHD. Television, videos, and computer games can occupy large amounts of time,

filling the void of social contact. This population is at risk, however, of having difficulty distinguishing the fantasy world from the real world. Some children in particular will mimic what they have seen and heard in the wrong social context and thus put themselves potentially at risk. An example of this is the young teenager with Asperger's who watches the Comedy Central show "South Park," then enters school the next day and calls another student a name used in the show. The guiding principles for parents with developmentally delayed children are to be aware of their child's ability to tell fantasy from reality and tendency to mimic what is seen or heard in socially inappropriate ways. Children who are developmentally delayed may have trouble in these areas into their teenage years and beyond; parents must consider their child's developmental age versus chronological age when using the age-based media rating systems.