

Considering Media in the Light of Relationship and Attention by Richard Whittaker

A Conversation with Mary Rothschild

Late one afternoon I got a call from Jacob Needleman. He'd been talking with a friend visiting from New York. "She has some very interesting things to say about children and media. I was thinking you might want to talk with her."

It wasn't necessary to spell it out any further. Twenty minutes later, I met Mary Rothschild at my door. I'd already set my trusty recorder out, made some space on the dining room table, and after a few friendly preliminaries, we sat down to talk...

Richard Whittaker: Would you tell me a little bit about your interests?

Mary Rothschild: My main focus is the development of children birth to age six, and media—the implications of media use around children in that age. I teach, among other subjects, Children and Media in the Communications and Media Studies Department at Fordham University and, last semester, at Adelphi University on Long Island. I head a nonprofit called Healthy Media Choices that works with parents and teachers of very young children—children up to age six—about how to be intentional about media use by and with those children.

RW: That seems like a very important area.

Mary: Yes, I feel it is crucial. I came to working in the field through my personal experience with my two daughters, who are ten years apart in age. We didn't have television during that whole period. With Cynthia, when she was younger, it wasn't particularly of interest to anyone outside the family. But when Miriam was four or five that started to change. When there was a play date, I would say the children were just going to play, no tv, it was an issue with the other parents and I wondered about that. Then I would go to buy underwear for her, and everything had a Disney, or cartoon, logo on it. I was thinking, "What happened?" You know?

There were several pivotal moments. One of them was that her classmate, six years old, had a birthday party, and one little girl arrived in a tutu. You know, she was a little dancer. But it was a Power Ranger birthday party, and this little girl was over in the corner looking like, "What's this about?" And then my daughter came out crying because she couldn't get the party favors, because she couldn't answer any of the questions about the Power Rangers.

So I thought, "Wow. What has happened here? This is a dramatic change." I saw how media was replacing hands-on experience for children.

We had a large house at that time in Brooklyn, a big brownstone, and there was an empty floor; somebody had moved out. So I just created this children's center out of nothing; I went through the city regulations for family childcare and put out a flyer about attention and that there would be no media, that the center was about handicrafts and working with your body and sensation. Then these people arrived who were of like-mind.

Right? The center was called Ariadne's Thread, because of the myth of Ariadne.

RW: Right.

Mary: For me, attention, the thread that helps us navigate our lives and connect with a less automatic perception is symbolized by the thread Ariadne gives Theseus. And meanwhile, I was doing my research and found that in those ten years, advertising in children's programming had been deregulated during the Reagan Administration. So the floodgates were opened; all of this advertising was allowed, and that's what had shifted.

RW: Yes.

MR: I was researching along these lines. And the parents who would come with their children were also having all these questions about how to deal with media, how to deal with other children about media. So we started having potluck dinners and reading things together, and talking to each other. This started in 1996-'97 and the nonprofit grew out of those exchanges, alongside the children's center, which grew to include pre-school aged children during the day and classes in theater and crafts after school. The non-profit was formalized in 2000. The "umbrella" name is Ariadne's Children; we do business as Healthy Media Choices.

Then one day this pivotal moment came when we were making bread, six little children and me around a table—we made bread frequently—and each one had their little piece of dough and was making a bread animal or something. I looked up and I thought, "Wow. It's been like four minutes and they're all quiet!" They were all just happily kneading their dough, these very young children—two, two-and-a-half to five-year-old children. "This is what I did this for! I'm in my place." Then this little girl next to me looked up and said, "Mary, the Lion King video is too loud." We were on a corner in Brooklyn, so I thought somebody was playing music in their car, or something. So I listened. Then I said: "I can't hear it."

The little girl said, "It's in my head."

RW: Oh, my God.

MR: It was like I was taken by the scruff of the neck and thrown against a wall. It was so clear what was happening with the children; here was this very beautiful, bright, young child, just turned three years old. That's when I really started working with the nonprofit and going into schools and working with parents and teachers because I couldn't not do this work.

RW: Now the name again?

Mary: Healthy Media Choices. The underlying non-profit is Ariadne's Children. We do business as Healthy Media Choices, because I got tired of always talking about Greek mythology!

It's more about choices than media. You go in through media, but at the end of the day, it's about relationship, it's about priorities, it's about attention. The reason we need to go to media is that's where our attention is, as young families. But in fact, the point is to ask what is the most important thing for me?

Another pivotal moment came when I was in Vermont preparing for a workshop. I looked across at my books and there were all of these titles like: Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill, and Endangered Minds. I saw there was so much fear in the way I was approaching the subject, and the way it was being approached by people I consider my colleagues. And it was not working; it was not going to work. That approach just feeds into the same

dichotomous conversation: either you have to have it, or it's going to kill you. So what I'm looking for is the middle way, the way of discernment. The way of intentionality, the way of experimenting, and conversation, and collaboration in the family around what the central priorities are.

RW: Okay. Now, this story that you told about the little girl who says, "The Lion King is too loud." And then you found out she was talking about what was going on in her head. I mean, that's a pretty disturbing story.

Mary: It is, and it should disturb us. That's what's happening. These images are so strong and so fearful. The father dies, the uncle's evil. It doesn't correspond to children's daily life. It's exactly that that's the issue for me; instead of children having a natural digestion of their own sensory experiences, they're trying to figure out these very strong media images and whether they should be afraid or not.

RW: This inpouring media stream bypasses our natural, hands-on process of living. You're probably aware of the marketing aimed at toddlers where video screens are put in toys and cribs. I'd like not to be scared by all this, but I find it kind of terrifying.

Mary: I do, too. What the research shows is that the first six years are the window of opportunity and whether we like it or not, it's where our world view gets formed. It's not that we don't have plasticity—neurologically all our lives we know we do, we can change, but we're always editing that original text, basically. That's where the text gets laid down and children are having this heavily commercialized, heavily fearful, heavily materialism-focused view of life. And there's an absence of silence.

RW: Absence of silence.

Mary: The absence of silence. It's not just that there's this media, it's that there's no stillness.

RW: I don't think I've heard anyone focus on that. It sounds important.

Mary: One example is that children love small places and to feel enclosed. Building a fort with sheets in the living room, for instance. Children will go in and play quietly. Now, because of the mobile digital media, they take the thing in there with them, so these marketers and all this material goes right into their most private spaces.

And one of the biggest things that's happening, from my point of view, is that all of the organizations that look at these issues are being infiltrated by the media industry. I was presenting at a conference. This woman from the industry was there—I think she was from Blue's Clues. She said, "Well, children are born with a digital gene now."

And this is a conference of media ecologists, people who are thinking about media as environments, how it impacts us. So they come in with this narrative that children are born with a digital gene now. There's no option. There's no getting away from it. Right? It's inescapable. Of course, in a way, it is inescapable; we have to recognize that we're in a mediated environment. But someone in their home with their child still has a certain amount of control available.

RW: The idea that we're born with a digital gene is disturbing. There's a way that technology creates its own thoughts, so to speak, and pretty soon people's thoughts are being defined by the technology.

Mary: Exactly. This is exactly what Neil Postman called "Technopoly," the way

technologies shape the symbols we think with, what we think about and the very nature of the community in which we think. I'm paraphrasing.

One of the things that needs to be understood about this digital technology is that you can't do anything within it that the programmer hasn't put there. So fundamentally, it's not creative. You can't think outside of its box, basically. So when they say, "Oh, look, it can do all this. The children can do this so easily and it's so great," the fact is it's training them to stay inside this digitally prescribed world. There are lots of people who are thinking about that. One of the pieces of the puzzle could be teaching children to code themselves. They're saying we're in a mediated world, so yes, teach the children to code so they have a certain way of shaping the material themselves, the same way we teach children to read as well as write.

So, there are caring people thinking that way. But from birth to age of six, which is my specialty, is a blind spot. During that period, it is the parents who need media literacy, to evaluate how they and their children use media. When I talk to pre-school teachers, by the time children come through the door now, they are already immersed in media-generated images and their play is affected by them.

RW: Do you have more specific stories with kids that reflect something around all this?

Mary: Well, I was on a train and there was this beautiful woman. She seemed to be Muslim by the way she was dressed. She had four children, one baby and three young children. The three were scampering around the train, and they just all landed next to me on a seat. I said hello and I looked at the mother. We waved to each other.

I asked the children to tell me a story and they started telling these very scary stories—very elaborate, creative and the kind of scary that a child would tell, you know. Nothing that was truly horrifying. There was another little girl across the way who was with her mother. She kept peeking over at us, because we were having a good time. So I asked her mother and said: "Do you want to come tell stories with us?" And she came over.

So this little girl came over and I said, "We're telling scary stories," because children do enjoy scary stories, right? They need to tell scary stories because they have fears and they're digesting them—as I'm sure, Rue [a family therapist] can tell you.

This little girl came over and said, "I'll tell you a story. I went into my mother's room and she had on the Frankie from Friday the 13th mask. I went into my father's room..."

She went through all these adult horror films that she'd seen, and each of her family members were one of these horror film people. It was absolutely stunning.

On the one hand, there was this very natural, "I'm going to scare you," young child thing, and then this laid-on thing that this other child was actually was terrified of. She'd seen these media images and they were terrifying. There was a difference in texture; it was like there was a joy in being afraid for the others. But for this little girl, she was really afraid—and afraid of something that was completely outside her own experience.

There's no daily experience with the guy from Friday the 13th movie. But the way she described it was so vivid, and I honestly did not know how to address it. I had these other three children and I wasn't going to go there, right? I wanted to get back to and engage this child in this more healthy thing.

RW: Yes.

Mary: I work in coffee shops a lot, especially during the heat of the summer - for the air conditioning. It's actually a great place to observe families, you know. People come in with their kids. Often, I see a child come in, and they're looking around. They're doing the very natural, very important work of observing. Right?

RW: Right.

Mary: ...Very important child-work in observing how people are, and what's on the street. Then the parent will set the iPhone down for the child, before the child does anything untoward. And then the child, of course, is absorbed in the game. And it's because the parents are afraid of the child becoming disruptive, maybe? Or the parent just needs to have a cup of coffee in peace, you know; because parents get tired.

Then there are conversations, especially before Christmas, that indicate the pressures parents feel to buy. "Oh, my God! How did it get to be like this? I remember getting two gifts and thinking it was a good thing." They are overwhelmed and don't see a way out.

A family with a little boy lives down the hall. He's about four. We meet in the laundry room or hallway, and I see the little boy; we've become friendly. The father came into the elevator just before Christmas and said, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God! They really know how to do it to you. All these ads, all this stuff I feel like I have to get for him for Christmas. He wants all this stuff now."

I said to him, "You know, you really don't have to. With a four-year-old child, you can sit down and say, "We have this money. We can go someplace together and have a good time, or we can get this thing that you'd like. And I really want to be with you and do things with you." There isn't a child on earth who doesn't want to hear that. It's more important for me to be with you; every child wants to hear that.

RW: Yes.

Mary: But parents don't see that they have that power. So what I'm trying to do is find a middle way where it's not that this getting things or engaging with media is evil, because it is all around. The parents were brought up in a mediated environment, and they don't see it. It's like the wallpaper. They need to see the relevance for their own situation.

RW: Right. How to start realizing that..

Mary: So that first step back, to even look at how much and what kind of media is in the household, is revolutionary for them— to withdraw from that "good or evil" conversation that the media loves. The media loves to be black, white— yes, no. It's so confusing. And for parents, it really doesn't help. You need to have something that helps with discrimination about how to use what's around you, how to avoid what's negative. It's actually kind of the same action that parents have always needed, but now—because of the power and the speed that's come in the last five years, really—nobody is ready for the impact of media use.

And certainly, we're going to have a generation, at least one generation, before we actually see the result. We're performing this huge experiment with our young children, and it's just Wild West. Nobody knows where it's going. Research says there's going to be attention problems, there's going to be obesity problems, there's going to be relationship problems.

Dr. Sherry Turkle at MIT wrote a book called, *Alone Together, Why We Trust Technology and Not Each Other*. She's somebody who's invested her whole career in studying robotics, artificial intelligence. She's really embedded in that world, but her own experience with her own child made her start questioning where we're going, and she said, "Wait a minute. Let's hold the phone. Let's see where we're going."

She just came out with another book *Reclaiming Conversation*. She finds that young people, adolescents and young adults, don't know how to have the kind of exchange we're having right now.

And there are so many things I've heard from teachers and parents, especially from preschool teachers who have been teaching for many years, about the changes they've

seen. Some have stopped having Halloween parties at school, because the children come with all this violent material and they can't control it.

RW: So let's just underline that for a minute. Teachers have stopped having Halloween parties.

Mary: Right.

RW: Because the kids have absorbed these violent models and now they're acting this stuff out?

Mary: I'm not saying all of them have, but a lot of them. This is what I'm hearing and I'm also hearing just about the coarsening of the conversation.

RW: Yes.

Mary: And the lack of attention—on the part of the parents. One of the things teachers say over and over is that there are changes in the way parent relate at that delicious time at the end of the day, when the child wants to tell the stories of the day to the parent. Now the parent says, "Go get your coat," while they're looking at their phone.

So, it's not just about the influence of media directly on the child. The adults are their models. Where is their attention? If it's on the computer or the iPhone, the child feels they're not together. There is a sense of abandonment.

When I still had a weekly radio program in Vermont, I interviewed Dr. Mike Brody, an adolescent psychiatrist and part of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. He told me that one of the things that used to really be helpful was when he would be having a session with a child, and the parent would use the time before and after the session to help the child prepare and help the child digest the experience. He doesn't see that anymore because the parents and the child are all hooked up to the digital things in the car before and after.

RW: So that space isn't available.

Mary: The space is not available. That's a great way of putting it; the space is not available; it's being absorbed literally by digital media. We need to make space, make room, for something that is more nourishing, for relationship. So let me just describe the process that I've come to over these many years.

RW: Good.

Mary: It's about trying to find this middle way, one tailored for each household. We start by looking at the research about the first six years of life being very important in shaping world view, and at some research about violence. People say, "Well, it doesn't make me violent." Well, it makes a very small group of people violent. People who already have issues. Most of us, it makes us fearful. We think the world is like that and we have to be defended against it.

So we have a very young child who is absorbing this violent imagery, their view of the world is being formed as a fearful place. The amygdala is being affected from a very young age. So we look at the research. Then, we look at the history of when deregulation happened and its effects. We use a number of means to look at that and at the statistics, which indicate that young children use media an average of 24-36 hours a week, depending on whose statistics you read. Then everyone does a personal evaluation, like at conferences with a hundred people in the room. We have personal evaluations so each

person looks at their particular situation.

RW: I see.

MR: Sometimes that's the biggest thing for people, just counting how much stuff they have in their house. It's like, my God! I was giving a workshop for teachers, and one teacher said, "I just realized I have ten televisions in my house!" She had a huge house, a big family and she just hadn't counted. Sometimes, in the child's room, there are sheets, curtains, slippers, everything with a theme from media. It's a total environment.

So they count everything that is a media device or connected to media; then they look at how they spend their time, then there is a look at it all and then try to look at it in terms of the central relationships in the family, with the parents and children. Then they break up into small exchange groups.

RW: Okay.

Mary: There are certain threads that are always there. Fatigue is one of them. We use some basic media literacy techniques to see how media is, itself, affecting some of those threads. Then I have these little magnets I hand out. Each person has one little step they think they can do from what they've seen—to shift a little bit toward relationship, toward attention and amelioration. The aim is intentionality. The aim is that you get on top of it, right? That you can get some ownership of your situation; that you can intend to do this one thing and see how it works out. So they write the intention on the magnet and put it on their refrigerator. Then they try to do it.

RW: Yes.

Mary: There's a range to those intentions. I had a pregnant couple who said they were going home and throwing out the television (something I don't recommend)—but for those first two years, it's true that the pediatricians recommend no media at all, because of the neurological development—so they were throwing the television out. On the other end, there was a woman who said that the television was going to be on because of her husband—there would be an argument if she confronted him about his constant watching; they were in this small apartment. And she said, "I think he would go for a walk with us every night after dinner." So that was her intention. It wasn't about media directly.

RW: Right.

Mary: One thing I definitely advise is not to cause conflict, not to go head-on, because what is the child going to see then? So you have to find a way around.

RW: That's interesting to try to find a non-violent path.

Mary: Yes, a non-violent path. Then you have something to build on. But you have to keep going then.

RW: When you talk about all this to other adults, are you finding resonance?

Mary: Yes. Of course, people know they "should" say they are concerned about media and the child. The people who come to my workshops, generally speaking, are halfway to an intentional use already. But the people who are really in need don't come to workshops because they are so involved or so busy. It's not that they're not good parents or trying their best, but they don't see it as an issue.

So I do feel resonance from the people who arrive. With other professionals and researchers in the field, there are two divides. One, I visualize as the difference between seeing the child + media in the center of the concern (which assumes media will be there), and the other as seeing just the child in the center and media as one of a constellation of influences. That's the approach I favor. I don't buy into the attitude that there's nothing we can do, no way to avoid media being central to the lives of young children. Another thing is that some organizations take money from the industry; some, like mine, do not.

RW: Well, it's a reality that people have the fatigue factor, like you said. "I'm just tired." And it's so easy to just put a device in front of a kid and your problem is solved.

Mary: Especially if you think that the material isn't harmful. Right? If it's "just PBS" or "just Disney."

RW: Even more so.

Mary: Right. I can't begin to tell you how many times I hear, "My children only watch Disney and PBS." Disney is so full of racist, sexist stereotypes. Not to mention gratuitous violence. And PBS, you know, they're the ones that brought Teletubbies, which was developed for under two-year olds, to the United States. I decided I had to watch it because people were talking to me about it, so I started watching it. I thought well, it's stupid, but it's pretty benign. It's pre-language, so there's no verbalization. They jump up and down, they wave. But I kept watching and they were jumping up and down and waving at this boat, and what is on the back of the boat? The British Petroleum symbol.

What the researchers say is that if you implant a symbol in a child's mind early enough it will stay, and 18 years later, as they're driving down the road, if there's a choice... It's called "cradle to grave" advertising.

RW: That's scary.

Mary: They're doing research in order to market to children. Research on how to get children to nag their parents for things. There's a group at Harvard, The Center for Media, on Media and Child Health headed by Dr. Michael Rich that brings together the research in a user-friendly way. They're trying to tread water to sort of be all things to all men, to see how it can be used for health education and how to ameliorate the effects on very young children.

The fact is that the American Academy of Pediatrics, which always said no media before two, is coming out with a new statement because nobody is listening to them, and a lot of us are afraid they're going to soft pedal. As soon as you say "limit," all people can see is that you've said "limit."

You know, there shouldn't be any before the age of two. There was this hue and cry, "It's impossible to say no media before two." Why is it impossible? It's impossible because we're addicted, that's why. And that's what people don't want to face.

RW: Right.

Mary: What if somebody said that sugar is going to be harmful to your child? Would possibly stunt their attention, affect relationships? People would probably would give up sugar. But because this media, the Internet, etc., have become so necessary for just doing anything—for me telling my son-in-law that I'm ready to go home—we really can't detach completely from it. Marshall McLuhan called media "the extensions of man." He was prescient.

So it's a much more complex problem, and it's come so quickly—it's developed very quickly for young children. It's gone from regulation on advertising to every child having an iPad, since the late '80s to now. The iPad is only 6 years old and it's ubiquitous; it is on potty chairs, back seats of cars, travels with the child.

RW: Right. It's incredible.

Mary: To get back to the process I advocate: the intention, one doable thing that comes out of a sequence of looking at the big and the personal picture—that's the part that's important. It's not somebody telling them to set a timer for 15 minutes. They do that because they think it will work for their home, with the people in their home. So even if people just turned all their media devices off in the car and said, "This is our time together. It's important for me to be with you and find out how you're doing, so we're going to turn everything off." That would be a big thing.

RW: I feel that what you're talking about is so important.

Mary: You and I know that, but it's very difficult to sell.

RW: Have you given a Ted Talk?

Mary: I've never even thought of giving a Ted Talk.

RW: I mean, I've just been talking with you for an hour and now I'm telling you that you have to give a TED talk. These are big and alarming realities, but I'm struck by how realistic you sound in talking about how we could start to address some of this stuff. It's a wonderful thing showing people ways they can look at their own situation and begin to take steps. But it takes some consciousness raising and some focus. Right?

Mary: Yes. I should explore giving a TED talk. I'm open to any avenue to get the word out that we have the means to craft solutions for ourselves: we don't have to buy into the media narrative about children and media. It does take exactly that consciousness raising, as you say, and the earlier the better. Because what happens when habits get embedded is that it's much more difficult to change—even when in schools that share have a low-media policy.

RW: It's essential to have sensory experience, right?

Mary: Yes, a sense of being on earth, to know I'm here. When I do longer workshops, like a weekend retreat, we do an exercise where we try to spontaneously remember the first time each person knew he or she was there, as a child. You know, that first memory of just being there. People draw or write about it, and then we share it. Then, we look at the conditions that helped that direct experience and we ask if children now, our children, have the room for those experiences.

My own memory is of looking up at a hollyhock. I must have been a toddler to be looking up at a hollyhock. That sense of presence with nature is so important.

Then we go from there to, "How can my child have the opportunity to have those kinds of experiences?" Are they ever in nature? It's horrifying to say, but this is not an isolated problem; there's a matrix of children, especially in the inner city, who are afraid of nature. They've never been in nature; all they've heard about is violent things happening in the woods. My husband is a Quaker and they have a retreat house in the country. When they bring kids from the city out there, the kids won't go outside.

RW: They won't go outside? Because the kids are scared?

Mary: They're terrified, yes. And these aren't young children, these are pre-teens and teens. So that's part of it.

When I had my radio program, one year it fell on Veterans Day. So I did some research on PTSD, figuring I'd do a program on PTSD, and I was amazed. I got so involved because the research says that children catch PTSD like the flu. Because they see the fear. You know, the parent models fear reactions. So the whole culture has a lot of fear in the atmosphere since we've been at war, hot or cold, so often in this country. Right?

RW: Yes. And this fear mongering seems to be a constant beat, at least in the media.

Mary: There's a man named George Gerbner, who was Dean of Annenberg Center for Communications at UPenn who founded Cultivation Research. He said, "Look, if violent media caused violence, we'd all be killing each other." He found that some, who have mental health problems and/or poor support systems do become violent. But what does it do to the rest of us? It makes us fearful. He calls it the Mean World Syndrome.

Douglas Gentile at the University of Iowa brought together research about video games in a book called Media Violence and Children and the findings complemented Gerbner's view: the whole society is getting more coarse, the threshold is being raised on violence, for sure. So, it is both violence, fear and coarseness...they feed on each other. His findings are eye-opening and show the effects that are less extreme, that don't make the nightly news.

RW: The Mean World Syndrome?

Mary: Yes, we spoke of this earlier in general. Very young children, especially if they're exposed to violent imagery, think the world is a mean place; that's what's forming the world view.

RW: Well, I know in my own experience how true it is. I've absorbed stereotypical messages that can make me anxious, like if I travel out into the desert, for instance. I'll notice thoughts coming up about running into some gun-toting psychopath out there. I'm sure there are movies about that.

Mary: Probably. You absorbed it from some visual. Sad, since it could offer such an expansive experience.

RW: Exactly, And when I meet people out there, it's fine. I go out into the desert once or twice a year, at least. But I understand very well that this kind of anxiety gets absorbed from media stereotypes.

Mary: And what they're finding in children is a lot of anxiety. A lot of anxiety isn't generated in their everyday lives—Media is just one aspect; it's mixed with and compounds other things—violence or some conflict in the home, of course, and the over-scheduling of children's lives.

RW: Are other people doing research on these issues?

Mary: There are lots of studies; many are available online, but it is important to see who is funding the research, what the academic alliances of the writers are, so as to make a judgment about the impartiality of the study.

RW: I see.

Mary: One of the things that's troubling right now is that there's this strange confluence of events. Those trying to do research on young children come up against ethical considerations, right? If there's any indication the material is harmful, you can't just expose children to it. And then there are no children who haven't been exposed to media to use as a control group. So there are limitations on regular research.

RW: Yes.

Mary: Meanwhile, the whole society, the whole world, is doing this very haphazard Wild West research with our young children. And the power of the industry is pretty overwhelming.

For instance, in 2009, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) in Boston—they brought a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) about the wording on Baby Einstein videos. These videos are for very young children, really infants, about cows and things—and they were advertised as educational. This is false advertising. Nothing on any video is educational for a child under two, because they can't absorb it and it is inappropriate for their age.

So CCFC brought a complaint, offering to compensate parents for the cost of the videos and the FTC said they would hear the complaint. CCFC had worked at Harvard's Judge Baker Center for ten years, since its inception, and its head, Alvin Poussaint, was about to get the highest award of the Judge Baker Children's Center at some big festivity.

RW: Okay.

Mary: All they know for sure is that Disney made a couple of calls, and lo and behold, the CCFC was evicted from their long-time digs at Harvard. And suddenly, the Judge Baker Center, that was giving their head their highest award, was saying "your mission is no longer in line with our mission."

RW: Wow.

MR: It's very difficult to stay without funding, to depend on donations. Funding is coming from the industry to organizations who are doing work that's very good, but not entirely independent. The fundamental difference is that it does not question the necessity of media involvement with very young children. Their line is, instead of being afraid of it, let's just go there and teach them how to use it. Again, they're assuming it's going to be there. Their interest is in how to make it work. So it's useful.

The two primary concerns for me are that one, the child needs to learn with all their senses, and in nature, and two that love and attention from a loving adult is what they actually need at the end of the day.

So that's the difference. I am anxious to work with other organizations, but I don't do the same work and I don't take money directly from the industry.

RW: To your knowledge, are there people from the realm of psychology and childhood development who you would find in your camp?

Mary: I would say the person who paved the way for new approaches to child psychology was Jerome Bruner, who died recently. His work in cognitive psychology shone light on the ways environment affects development. His influential paper, "The Narrative Construction of Reality" shows that children are not "sponges"—they have some agency in their learning. There remains, for me, the question about the "faux agency" that digital media

seems to give and the real agency that comes with intentional use of it.

Dr. Susan Linn, an instructor in Psychology at Harvard, wrote *Consuming Kids* over ten years ago. As one of the founders of the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, she focuses on commercialization.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin, who both hold doctorates in early childhood education, have focused on common sense approaches to violence and response to the “boys will be boys” clichés that allow for a lot of violent toys, especially for boys spanning, twenty-five years, from *The War-Play Dilemma* to *Beyond Remote Controlled Childhood* a couple of years ago.

Linn and Jean Kilbourne wrote *So Sexy, So Soon* about early sexualization. They, and many others have written many papers as well.

Anyone interested in the research in the field can go to the website of the Center on Media and Children at Harvard: www.cmch.tv The director, pediatrician Dr. Michael Rich, is the most level-headed, passionate advocate for children’s mental health in relation to media, in my view. He hosts a very accessible part of that site called, “Ask the Pediatrician.” Very useful.

Dr. Dimitri Christakis, Director of Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children’s Hospital has done research on attention. Together with Frederick Zimmerman, who is a health policy teacher at UCLA, he wrote *The Elephant in the Living Room: Make TV Work for your Kids* about ten years ago; practical approach.

But people are throwing in the towel. Even psychologists and early childhood educators are saying, “Well, we knew it was coming and here it is. Get in, don’t fight it anymore.” But I think fighting is the wrong model, you see.

RW: Yes.

Mary: That only creates this back-and-forth, back-and-forth. The thing to do is you look at yourself and ask, “What are my priorities?” You know? This is my home. This is my child. What are my priorities and how am I going to navigate this? It doesn’t matter what everybody else is saying.

RW: I think it’s very important for this point of view to be getting out there more and more.

Mary: Yes. Everybody wants a relationship with their child. And they don’t see what’s impeding it. So it’s a matter of really just looking around, seeing, evaluating, even keeping a diary of how much time you spend. The research says that on average in this country children under six spend 4 1/2 hours a day with media and 45 minutes with their parents.

So the math is there. If people just looked and tracked it a little, had that aha! moment themselves, it would be a huge thing. But it takes looking. Otherwise, we wake up when it’s too late—which happens to so many people.

I was at a workshop with a teacher for whom I have great respect. There was a couple there who had adolescent children. They said, “We can’t reach them. They’re always plugged in.”

She said, “It’s too late.” That was her answer, just “you missed the boat.”

I would never say that to anyone, but I do feel that once those habits are formed it’s much more difficult. The child doesn’t look to the parents exclusively after about age nine (that age is actually getting lower); the peers become very important, which complicates matters.

RW: A friend who’s a child psychiatrist talks about this also, and with great concern—I think he’s mostly dealing with adolescents. He talks about how the immersion, especially

in video games, can interfere with a kid's development of social skills and coping abilities. Then, because they're falling behind in interpersonal skills, their social life becomes more stressful. So then they retreat more into the digital world. It becomes a self-perpetuating thing.

Mary: That's right. And the reason it's so addictive is that it's always there. It always responds; it never judges. It gives you what you want. You can watch a movie, you can get news, whatever you want, and there's no human being on earth who's going to do that for you. Right?

RW: That's true.

Mary: So it gives a sense of comfort, almost a sense of home for people who really haven't got much going otherwise, and that's where the addiction comes in.

A few years ago the American Psychological Association (APA) was considering designating this condition as an actual addiction, so you could code it for insurance purposes and so on. I thought it would be a good thing and I asked Mike Brody, whom I mentioned before as one who works with adolescents, "What do you think about it?" He said, "I really hope they don't do it."

This was five or six years ago now. I was surprised and asked him why.

He said, "Because they'll medicate it."

RW: Yes.

Mary: The pharmaceuticals have enormous influence in research, because of the funding; hence, the end game is always a pill. Dr. Brody says 75% to 80% of the research in psychology is funded by the pharmaceutical industry. What should be treated is the depression and the isolation.

RW: This is alarming stuff.

Mary: And the narrative that's being fed to children is you can never have enough stuff; you can never look good enough; the world is a fearful place; violence is an acceptable way to solve conflict, and - more and more- there's a pill for everything.

Now the pharmaceutical companies do direct advertising to the end consumer, to the children who are watching that stuff. On the face of it, it's ludicrous. It's almost like it's a comedy. There's somebody running through a beautiful woods and the voice is saying, "This may cause internal bleeding." It's crazy on the face of it.

RW: It is.

Mary: There's a joke in media literacy community about this five-year-old boy who goes to his doctor. The kid asks, "Is Cialis right for me?"

The doctor says, "What?"

And the kid says, "Well the TV said, 'Ask your doctor if it's right for you.'"

RW: Wow.

Mary: You know? So my work at Fordham is with these young people who are going to be parents in ten years. So it's all related, and the gender aspect is a deep and long-lasting concern. The issue of body image; the hero and heroine that are so coarse. And the video games, that's another huge thing—the violence against women in video games.

RW: It seems to be like an arms race of who can be the coarsest.

Mary: Because that's what sells. Gerbner, whom I mentioned earlier used to say, "The reason there's so much violence and sex in our cinema is that films get exported and you don't need a translator for it." It's something that goes across borders of language: violence and sex. So it's partly because of the whole way the underlying economics of the entertainment industry works internationally.

And the fact is, there's no oversight. All the powers of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) were taken away from them. So I think our country and New Guinea are the only countries that don't have regulations for material for children, or for advertising to children.

So let's see—is there any stone we've left unturned? There's always this feeling of not having delivered the message.

RW: I know the feeling, but I think you're coming through loud and clear.

Mary: Well, here's something; there's a lack of stillness. I don't know if you've heard of Richard Louv; he wrote a book called, *Last Child in the Woods*. He coined the term nature deficit disorder.

RW: I'm familiar with that phrase.

Mary: He has an organization called, Children and Nature Network, that's trying to help people understand how important it is for children to be in nature. If there were more of that, it wouldn't matter so much if there's some media going on over here. Right? It's just that so much time is being spent with media, and it's compounded by the fearful society and the overextended child who gets out of school, goes to ballet, then to gymnastics and then goes home and does homework. And is stressed out on so many levels.

RW: Right.

Mary: Because the parent thinks the child is going to be successful that way. They want the best for their child. But things are changing so fast that the college that they think that young child is going to go to is probably going to have changed radically by the time that child is college age, anyway.

There is so little trust of one's own gut, you know? Parents need to learn to trust themselves.

RW: That's a major point, that's it's so difficult to trust your own gut.

Mary: That's what we would like to have happen, a process that helps parents learn to trust that. And also learn that they can experiment with something. If it doesn't work, they can try something else. All they need is a couple of other like-minded families to have support.

That's one of the reasons I've been trying to work with faith communities. I was invited to the Religious Education Association's conference a few months ago to speak to them, because faith communities are kind of a natural place for this conversation to happen. It's where people invest their highest aspirations usually. Right?

RW: Yes.

Mary: And it's really a blind spot. People are talking about using media for outreach, using media to educate children, but not how is media impacting the development of the

child, how might spiritual development be impacted by a lack of stillness? People don't understand the impact.

RW: They don't. And you touched on it when you said people are coming in and saying there's a digital gene. Our thought has been co-opted by our technology. 15 years ago, I heard a talk by a professor of philosophy at Penn State [Kostas Chatzikyriakou]. He told a story from being at an AI conference. He asked this guy what he thought about the prospects for artificial intelligence. The guy said "It's already here."

"What do you mean?" Kostas asked.

"My thermostat can already think," this guy said. "It has three thoughts. It's too cold; it's too warm; it's just right."

The scary thing is that this guy considered that to be thought.

Mary: Thought, right. Exactly.

RW: It's an example of how our thinking is taken over by our technology. We don't even know there's something different about a thought from a circuit that is on or off.

Mary: This relates to Sherry Turkle's work at MIT. I mentioned Alone Together, right?

RW: You did.

Mary: She had an experience with her child. I'm paraphrasing, but they were at an exhibit of exotic turtles. They were just in their shells asleep. Her daughter looked and said, "A robot is alive enough to do that."

And this woman, whose whole life had been involved with robotics and artificial intelligence, was shocked: she saw that the very definition of life, what is alive and what is not alive, is being changed.

RW: This is another huge thing. What is life?

Mary: What is life?

RW: Jaron Lanier was an early figure of this new digital frontier, one of the founders of virtual reality. But he's become a skeptic. He wrote a book a few years ago called, You Are Not A Gadget. He's now saying that there's something really kind of crazy going on.

Mary: Yes, pioneers like Lanier and Turkle, are being heard, because they're immersed and then they see something sobering from within the field. So it's not somebody coming from outside saying it's evil or something. They're actually seeing it from the inside. But the thing that bothers me about academics in general, is that it doesn't filter down into the population.

RW: There's a big divide between the academic world and regular people.

Mary: The people who live and work with the children need to know what researchers have found. And there's now this push for what's called translational research. This is an attempt to pair researchers with people like me on the street so that gap can be somewhat ameliorated.

RW: Well, just to identify this chasm between the academic world and regular people is a big thing, I'd think.

Mary: It is a big thing—and to see who is getting to fill the gap and define what the research means: the media. And they have no interest in bringing in any research that threatens their bottom line. They'll bring it as a headline to grab your attention. "Study says iPads great for kids" or "Study says kids with iPads will have ADHD." So we can't look to them. And since that's where everyone's attention is, that's the problem.

How to privilege the stories of people who are not buying into the dominant narrative of "the horse is out of the barn: kids need media in this world," and there are a lot of them. It's not that there aren't any families who are not going the media route. But who's going to tell their stories? So the model is the child with the iPad having a great time—movies on-demand for children.

I encourage having family meetings, where even the youngest child is included. Everybody sits down one evening once a month, looks at what's happening and how much time they're spending together, how everyone is doing and feeling. And looking at what they want to do together—making the relationship the center of the family.

This prolongs and increases the effectiveness for those who have been to a workshop where there are stated intentions that need follow-up. Then it's not the end of the world if they watch some TV. It's just that the central focus is time together. Are we having enough time together? Maybe if we turn things off in the car, we can use the time to talk to each other and catch up." Then the child understands why the media is turned off. It isn't punitive. It's happening because of the priority of the relationship. They may moan and groan for a while, but they actually want it, they really do.

Also, media can be used to cement family ties. My daughters and granddaughter are all on the west coast, I'm in New York. FaceTime reinforces and extends the relationship between our visits. Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life studied the place of family narrative in development and found increased resilience (measured by drug involvement, truancy and other factors) in adolescents who knew their family stories. Videos made for children by extended family can extend and deepen the family narratives—and give something beneficial for the child to watch when the parent needs down time.

RW: And you don't have a radio program anymore, I take it?

Mary: No. I was commuting between Brattleboro and Brooklyn every week for five years. Just as I realized that wasn't sustainable, the building that housed the station burned down.

RW: Again, listening to you, I'm having fantasies like, "You have to be heard by more people!"

Mary: More people, I know. I'm officially a producer on the local cable television in Brooklyn, but I haven't gotten my act together. I'm comfortable in radio

RW: Have you ever heard of Alternative Radio—AR? They have people talking about stuff like this.

Mary: I should look into it, but they're talking to the converted, probably. Of course, that audience is needed. We can think of "the converted" as kind of yeast in the culture. The stereotype about readers of Prevention magazine, 25-30 years ago was this fringe group of little old ladies in sneakers. And now you can't find Wonder bread. It's all Whole Food.

And the feel of it is similar. I think the same thing could happen, but it has to happen—from my point of view—in this middle way of including the person in their own struggles, their own life, their own family, and then telling their stories.

RW: And that's very challenging.

Mary: I would love to hear Rue's take on all this. [Rue sits down with us] You're a family therapist. Right?

Rue Harrison: Yes.

Mary: I've just been sharing my process that I offer parents and teachers and young kids around media use, that it isn't "throw it out," or anything about conflict, but more about discernment.

Rue: So you work with that issue with families?

Mary: Yes. It's been my mission for over 20 years;

Rue: I should have been sitting here, because this is really interesting. Is it a lot about the media?

Mary: It's really about attention and about relationship. But we go in through media because that's where we are. The questions I want people to ask are: "Where am I spending my attention? Do I have to?" For instance, in my Gender Images in Media class, when I say, "You can choose not to look at this material if it makes you feel terrible about yourself," it's a new idea for some students.

It's more about trying to come from love and impartiality. What's going to bring relationship? What's going to bring me to loving myself?

There are a few things that everybody writes down: impressions are food. Everybody writes it down. because they see it's true. These impressions are food for our feelings, right? And so there are some things that just go directly into people. I feel that's where it's alive. It's something that's germinating out there. I just turned 70 and I'm feeling like it has to be articulated into the world in some way.

Rue: It's such a big job.

Mary: That's right. I probably have a visceral relationship to this, in terms of my own upbringing in a very poor, regimented, Irish Catholic family. My parents were working double jobs and we had little positive time together.. They were sort of managing the situation with television, and I think a lot of people do that because they're tired.

Rue: That's an issue that I come across seeing clients. I have a client who I've seen since she was a little girl. She was really engaged in her art process and then she hit puberty. Now she's all about her screens. When we talk about what's going on in her TV shows there's a lot about things that she's struggling with herself —gender issues and things like that. But there's also this sense of the media being like a drug. Like, "I can get completely away from all the things that are torturing me."

Mary: Right. It's the addictive nature of digital media. Richard and I were speaking of this earlier It's always there and it never judges. Right?

Rue: Yes. It never judges.

Mary: It gives me whatever information or sense of connection I want instantly. Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. So people put their trust in it, and that's what addicts us, because we want relationship. We want a trusting relationship and we're having it with

machines, but we don't think of it that way, you know.

Rue: Do you go in the AI direction—like we're being appropriated?

Mary: No. I'm trying to project a sense of agency that, actually, you can trust yourself. That you can look at your own family, in your own four walls at least, and can actually make some decisions. If we can make that action our own, we can face whatever comes.

Rue: You can talk about it.

Mary: Talking about it at the family meetings is a big thing. You can identify it. Then, it isn't about "you're to blame because you are always online or watching TV." It's that we have an issue: who do we want to be as a family? And I use the term "family" in the most elastic sense. Then, it becomes about how much time are we spending together, not how much time we're spending with media. We love each other; we want to be together. Then everything can orient around that and the media will have to move aside. Right?

Rue: I like that. There's been such a massive change in the last 20 years.

Mary: Especially for children. We were talking earlier about the role of deregulation of advertising in children's media and just the ubiquity of media in children's lives. What I'm hearing from experienced teachers is that by pre-school, children are already totally commercialized. You know: the princess dress, the very delineated gender play, especially. It's no longer the tomboy, you don't go there.

But it all feeds back, for me, to the same thing, and that's questioning whether or not I have to give my attention to media-generated stereotypes? How much attention do I have to give to it?

People don't understand that things that seem benign for the toddler are creating a physiological habit, right? This feedback and response thing, the instant gratification and thumb action. And then the material changes, perhaps isn't quite as harmless, but the habit is formed. It's not something that's easy to change.

Rue: This seems really kind of cutting edge, you know?

Mary: It's hard to know how to frame it. I'm working on something about how families can talk to nannies, because so many children, at least in New York, are cared for by nannies—who are always on the phone.

RW: That's a great idea - and maybe something for grandmothers, too?

Mary: It's a complex issue between grandparent and grandchildren. I hear from grandparents, how they're concerned about their grandchildren and media. I hear from the parents, how the grandparents are giving the children the media stuff, and nobody's talking to each other. They don't know how to talk because there's this not wanting to step on each other's toes thing going on. So how to navigate that would be another piece of the puzzle. It all comes down to learning how to speak to each other and set common priorities centered on relationship and sensory experience.