ELLEN'S TERRIBLE TV TROUBLES: Teachers' Guide

GENERAL THEMES AND CONNECTIONS:

Ellen's Terrible TV Troubles is an early reader for children who want to read short chapter books. This book is approximately the same length as a picture book but broken into chapters. It is a story about a girl who wishes hard for her broken TV to work – with surprising results as the characters come right into her living room. This book is the perfect vehicle to promote awareness of, and initiate discussion on the influence of TV in our lives ie: Media Literacy. It is vital for children to become more astute and critical viewers of television and develop an awareness of how television programs and commercials impact on them. The following are just a few ideas to get started:

1) Media Literacy: Dependency on TV and the impact of TV on our lives

* how many hours of TV we watch
* how dependency on TV can diminish our interest in other activities
* the physical impact of watching TV for long periods of time
* the intellectual impact of passive watching
* how we watch TV even when we are bored, sometimes exacerbating boredom

2) Media Literacy: Lack of Content Control

* our lack of control over what we watch because we are dependent on what is aired
* the concept that every time we turn on the TV we have no control over who we let into our living room/family room/homes

3) Media Literacy: Commercials and how they influence us

* the impact of commercials in our lives
* how the volume increases with commercials
* the kinds of commercials aired with different programs
* the subtle messages of commercials that equate happiness or success or other states of mind with certain products
* the purpose of commercials (to make the manufacturer money)

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

1) Topics of discussion

* Discuss how much TV is watched daily and have children keep a chart of hours watched over a week. Discuss how much is actually enjoyed and how much is passively watched because we can't think of anything else to do, or can't be bothered to turn off the TV.
* Discuss what other activities we would have time for if we watched less TV or even no TV. How did people entertain themselves before TV?
* Discuss the idea of how, when we turn on the TV, we essentially let the program with its characters into our homes – as happens in this story. How would we really like to have some of the characters we watch on screen to come into our homes? Which ones would we love to have in our homes, and which ones would we try and get rid of?
* Brainstorm for other ideas as to how else Ellen might manage to get the TV characters out of her house and back into the TV set.
* Commercials: Who is Honest Ollie in Chapter Six? What is he trying to do? Do you believe that his Suckeroo vacuum cleaner is really available at a rock bottom price? Does he seem reliable and honest?
* Tie in the above discussion with the purpose of commercials in general and how they impact on us, as well as the subtler messages they try to convey. Do they employ ethical means to convey their message? What do they really aim to do and why? (Make the consumer want their product so the manufacturers make more money.)
* Class discussion on the economics of commercials and why people advertise: ie: to sell products and to make money. Have students research the cost of commercials and how the cost varies depending on the popularity of the shows and hence the prospective audience. What is the impact of remote controls with mute buttons on commercial exposure? How might commercial makers try and compensate for that?
* Class discussion on the personal impact of commercials. Discuss which commercials students like to watch and why. Discuss which products students want after having seen them on TV. Would they be happy if they never knew about the product? Once they get the product are they happy forever? Does the product evoke the feelings that the commercial indicates it will?
* Discuss how products are sold in other ways apart from commercials – such as products being displayed or named in dramas and situation comedies, or endorsed by celebrities.

2) Writing Exercises

* Write an account of what might happen if you let the characters from your favourite programs physically enter your home.
* What other shows might Ellen have watched and what else could have happened? Write or discuss outcomes.

* Write a sequel to Ellen's Terrible TV Troubles when her mother and father turn on the TV and the characters enter their home.
* Write an account of what happened to the blue cartoon cat. Did it ever return to TV land or did it stay in Ellen's world?
* Pick any product, or make up one, (eg toothpaste, soap, dental floss, anything) and write two short, snappy, paragraphs promoting it – one being confined to the absolute truth, the other as you wish.

3) Art Activities

* Art project: show what might happen if your favourite characters came into your home. Draw a series of pictures, like a cartoon strip.
* Make a poster of a special product and try to sell it as best you can by highlighting its desirable qualities.

4) Drama

* In groups of five, have students choose a product and act out a commercial promoting it. Discuss later how they did or did not bend the truth in order to sell the product. Discuss the use of the terms "new" and "improved."

5) Field trip

* Arrange for a field trip to a local TV studio so students can see the process of airing a show.

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