**Teaching Discernment**

**Ken Canfield, Ph.D.**

*April 27, 2007*

The continuing barrage of negative media influences-particularly violent video games-challenges fathers to teach their children skills in discernment. A recent Gallup poll found that the "Grand Theft Auto" series is extremely popular among adolescent boys. Even though it received an "M" rating (intended for mature audiences) by the entertainment software rating board, 71% of boys and 34% of girls between the ages of 13 and 17 have played the game.

Although the research is ongoing regarding how exposure to violent games influences behavior, this summer two teens in Tennessee testified that the idea to plan and carry out two sniper-style shootings came from playing "Grand Theft Auto." Additionally, a recent study at Tokyo University found that violent video games stunted the development of the brain in the frontal lobe, affecting a child's ability to control anti-social behavior.

Here are three strategies to propel you in your efforts to teach your children discernment:

1. *Seek wisdom yourself.* King Solomon, who was renowned for his great wisdom, provides a powerful reminder of what is really important. upon becoming king, this was his prayer: "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong."
2. *Develop a decision-making plan to help your children (and yourself) develop discernment.* Come up with a step-by-step process or a list of questions that will help guide them in tough situations. Getting the facts and gaining understanding is a prelude to making good choices. Also, helping your children establish standards for their behaviors and choices is crucial. Without those standards, they will have no basis for examining, analyzing, and judging from among the many behavior and lifestyle choices they will face. This is particularly important as children enter adolescence.
3. *Plan to hand off decision-making responsibility.* Often, dads get caught in the trap of making all the decisions all the time. As children mature, they need to progress steadily from dependence on their parents, to joint decision-making, to making wise choices on their own. Especially with teenagers, it's easy to focus on behavior issues and forget that one of our primary roles as parents is to help them develop discernment skills that will help them make good decisions once they are on their own.

**ACTION POINTS**

* Review your expectations for your child's behavior and ask yourself: Are they reasonable? Am I following through with proper guidance and support? Do I tend to defer supervision of my child to others?
* Carefully monitor or evaluate the programs or activities your children are involved in and ask yourself, "Have I over-committed them in any way?"
* Discuss with your child's mother the boundaries that need to be established this year. Make sure you have a way to evaluate your child's progress.
* What skills, attitudes, and values do you hope to instill in your child by the time he leaves home? Make a list, then pick one to focus on during the next week.