

## Overview...

Today's world, with its seemingly everincreasing levels of violence, crime, sex and drugs, presents today's parents with the most intimidating circumstances any generation of parents has yet had to face. With the media's penchant for sensationalism, through some talk shows and some books, parents may be wary of games, suspecting that roleplaying and fantasy ideas are corrupting the youth of America.

Many of us know and have experienced first hand the results of one-sided media reporting, which often fails to balance the picture by not reporting about the millions of intelligent and well-adjusted youngsters and adults who comprise the mainstream of the gaming hobby.

As a concerned business retailer and gamer I believe that parents not only have a right to hear a balanced portrayal of the gaming hobby, but that it is our duty as retailers to share parental concern and work hand-in-hand with parents as their ally in the parenting process. By acting in concert with parents we can do our part in assuring that both our community and our business continue to grow together in a positive and wholesome direction

Many parents enter our stores confused and looking for direction and information. They are confused because the negative words they are hearing from the media or their church pulpit do not match their own observations of their children. They know that their children have generally shown good and moral judgment and character in the past but they are concerned from the stories in the media that fantasy roleplaying has led to criminal acts, satanism or even suicide. They see no immediate danger and they are glad to see a creative side to their intelligent child. But they also wish to exercise good parental judgment and protect their child from potential harm. They may be concerned with the large amount of time their children are spending playing games and wonder whether this is a healthy preoccupation. They may be concerned with the coverage of occult descriptions and symbols and somewhat compelled to suspect that some satanic connections ascribed to fantasy roleplaying are true. But they are willing to give someone who has experi-

ence with this subject a listen. So they visit their local neighborhood game store which their son/daughter frequents to see and judge for themselves.

## The Entrance:

This is our best chance to communicate. It comes a parent to my store. My ace college commission salesman approaches the parent but soon discovers that there is really no buyer's appetite and is just a "looker," so he leaves the parent alone, waiting for a "real buyer." Here is where I can make all the difference. A parent doesn't walk into my store with a sign around their neck telling me that they are here to judge whether their child's new hobby is one they can accept. I can safely assume, however, that most first-time interested (but uninitiated) lookers are probably at least giving the games and books a close look to see if they can find out "if the stories are true." Parent or not, this person needs communication from me to undo some possible misrepresentations to which they may have been introduced. This is where my store's appearance, personnel, attitudes and appearance are so critical to my customers entire initial impression. Do we strike them as people they would want their kids to be around—is this a "healthy environment" for their children? How does your store measure up?

## The Approach:

If this person is a parent they will probably chose to tell me their parental concerns if they sense I could be sensitive to their problem. My conversational approach and slightly formal appearance (I wear a tie when out on the floor) tend to set them at ease. I try to make them feel comfortable enough to introduce any subject. But knowing the reluctance of most parents to share such personal thoughts, I usually bring up the subject by asking them how they feel about our products. I like to personally make the approach rather than my ace salesman because my age (40s) implies maturity and perhaps a sympathetic thought that I, too, may be a parent who has the same concerns. At any rate, I'm not going to take a chance of not knowing why they're in my store. I'm going to find out by striking up a conversa-

tion. If I can be of help I will and I will risk rejection. If they absolutely refuse my overtures, I believe I'm sensitive enough to know it quite quickly and not appear overly aggressive.

Nonetheless, I believe in the importance of assessing our Customers' needs and filling them. I rank the parental need for information and assurance as one of our organization's paramount priorities.

## The Objections:

Serious objections to the adventure games we sell generally fall into one of two categories: religious and psychological.

Religious arguments generally are the more difficult to answer since religion is truly personal and discussion is not apt to change those deeply seated emotional beliefs no matter what facts are presented. Nonetheless, I believe that discussion can cause a person to reevaluate why he or she believes what they do and explore whether they can personally tolerate exposure within their family to, say, a fantasy character who is evil in nature. If it is obvious to me that a person's religious beliefs do not permit such exposure I would attempt to deflect their choices to other games that would (i.e., from fantasy to science fiction or sports). I believe it's important, however, not to offend them by ignoring their sensitivities. My experience suggests that even the more fundamental groups can abide with the majority of games we carry but I will respect their right to decide and try to insure my opinions do not offend them. I choose, therefore, at some point to deflect our discussion to games we can agree on. I still do feel it is important enough to discuss to give people with deep seated religious belief the opportunity to explore their own feelings and come to their own independent conclusions. Usually some will agree to accept our games without feeling guilty.

Psychological arguments usually are easier to counter simply on the basis of appealing to a person's common sense and asking them to refer to their own experiences—for example, I often point out that a car is not evil simply because it assists a bank robber any more than it is inherently good when it serves a lifesaving ambulance.

It is, I insist, the “driver behind the wheel” that “makes the car.” Likewise, I remind the customer, so it is with a game. Certainly it has potential for evil and could be so used, however, it is ultimately the user that is accountable. When dealing with a parent I do admit that a child who cannot pretend has no business roleplaying or using guns or driving a car or any of a million activities. To admit otherwise would be dishonest and it is especially important not to speak in half-truths. But I do believe that when a parent shows confidence in their children’s judgment (based upon that same parent’s teaching that child their value structure), adventure games can have a very beneficial and positive effect. Our games teach group togetherness and cooperation to achieve group goals. They teach optimization: minimal effort for maximal results. They teach problem solving and statistical relationships. They reward the organized planner and point a positive correlation between planning and winning. They appeal to the intelligent and inquisitive mind (how many of your customers are A or A potential students?). Certain consequential relationships become readily apparent. The roleplaying thief must face the wrath of his peers when caught. I have remarked to more than one parent that this “game laboratory” is certainly preferable to learning this same lesson on a real trip to the police station.

At Wargames West we have had the benefit of “growing up” with our younger customers over the last decade and can point with pride to our first crop of gaming youngsters who are now successful military officers, scientists, geologists, think-tank specialists and computer specialists. This is certainly reassuring evidence to all of us. I frequently quote a Newsweek letter to the editor from an intelligent young man who, using the current almanac and the TSR-released figures for copies of the game Dungeons & Dragons sold, showed that the teenage suicide rate of these fantasy roleplayers was significantly lower than the national average. He further mused that maybe because 95% of all penal residents ate mashed potatoes that we should beware of people who ate them in our midst.

Parents who hear these ideas and the experience of those of us in the industry who have seen two decades worth of adventure gaming young-

sters are comforted by these honest and common-sense thoughts. If nothing else, we as concerned businessmen and citizens owe them that... the honest truth.

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*“How To Deal With Parents...” is produced for the Industry Watch Committee of GAMA and is available to retail stores upon request.*

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# **How To Deal With Parents**

## **A Guide for Retailers**