

The Times

EDITORIALS

What we can learn from

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BY LYNNE AZARCHI

Miley Cyrus's topless photos (but for a satin bed sheet) appear in an upcoming issue of Vanity Fair. Britney Spears is addicted to drugs and lost custody of her children. Jamie Lynn Spears, a child, is pregnant with a child, and is too young to be a mother. Pointing the finger is easy to do, but unfortunately not instructive. Miley, Britney and Jamie Lynn have been raised in a different "Tinseltown" culture than most of our kids, and clearly, these girls offer no instruction for us as parents.

However, observing some parents interviewed on network television or in print media describing the girls as "role models" is alarming, eye-opening and instructive. The parents said that Miley or Jamie "let them down"; they seem to perceive the celebrities to be role models for their tweens.

Jamie Lynn Spears a role model? Do they not know that Jamie Lynn is an actress who plays a tween on television, that she is a character in a sitcom? Jamie Lynn and other actors are paid to recite lines written by others to promote drama and conflict so more commercials can be sold. She is not a role model unless parents and their children make her one. (Jamie Lynn's role model is her older sister -- oops!)

A role model is defined as "a person whose behavior, example, or success is or can be emulated by others, especially by younger people." The word to focus on is "person." A character in a sitcom or reality show is not a person. Do not look for role models in the media or on TV: Turn it off more often and pick up your virtual sword to fight such misconceptions.

Most tweens and teens spend six hours a day on the Internet or watching TV. The media have a vast impact on how our children develop their self-image, social justice and empathy. Before we discuss celebrities' decisions in real life at the dinner table, we need to ground ourselves in reality and certify those persons that we want our children to emulate and revere.

The world is full of real role models -- adults, teens and tweens. With a little bit of research, we will find them. Unfortunately, real role models are competing with inappropriate, mean and disrespectful media personalities who explode upon impressionable minds in our homes.

When we word-search "role models," "teen heroes" or "tween heroes" on the Internet, search engines return artificial and commercial use of these words. We need the patience to dig deeper and search lower than Page One. When you notice people in the news who inspire you, cut out the articles and share them with your children. Let them know what it takes to be a real role model. Go on-line and visit some of our favorite hero/role model websites: myhero.com; heroes.com; family.samhsa.gov/be/ and giraffe.org, which features a Kids Only section.

And go to the library to check out books on role models and heroes and read them to your kids.

If you insist on movie stars who are role models, Natalie Portman supports an international self-sufficiency organization and has just visited lowland gorillas in Africa; Mia Farrow has adopted Darfur as her cause and travels the globe to advocate for it; and of course, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are building homes in New Orleans.

Efforts to counteract the allure of the media feeding frenzy on Miley, Britney and Jamie Lynn will be well worth the time investment. Defend your children's minds. Your decision, should you decide to accept it, is to educate and inspire. Good luck!

Lynne Azarchi is executive director of Kidsbridge. Kidsbridge has created a tolerance museum (www.kidsbridgemuseum.org) aka learning lab on campus at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, with college students and retired seniors as its docents. The museum features the exhibit "Face to Face: Dealing with Prejudice and Discrimination," and includes additional exhibits on role models, heroes, community service and sensitivity to persons with disabilities. Each year, the museum is visited by elementary pupils and middle-schoolers, day campers, teachers, leadership groups, Boy/ Girl Scouts and faith groups. Kids bridge conducts an annual competition for community service and provides other character education and diversity appreciation programs.