

Chapter 6

Five Simple Steps to Engage Popular Culture with Your Children

Let's remember: it is OK to enjoy popular culture only for the sake of enjoyment. Popular culture is often awesome. Why? Because it is made by those who bear the image of an awesomely creative God.

For example, Ted remembers seeing *The Avengers* (2012) in the movie theater. Four or five times during the movie, he prayed a quick prayer of thanks: "Thank you, God, for letting Joss Whedon write that line." Joss Whedon is an avowed and vocal atheist, but that needn't stop us from enjoying the excellence of his dialogue and storytelling. *That's* one proper way to understand Philippians 4:8. "Whatever is [awesome], . . . think about these things."

But in a fallen world, Christians cannot afford to simply suspend our critical faculties. Yes, give room to let the piece of popular culture speak. But if you just float on that enjoyment, you will have nothing to say to those dwelling in a dark and dying world besides, "Yeah, that was *epic*." Your enjoyment of popular culture should lead you to reflection and discussion with others. Those critical faculties, informed by the Spirit and the Word, need to kick into gear. The good news is that such critical engagement doesn't lessen but enriches our enjoyment of popular culture.

In this chapter, we explore how you can engage popular culture personally. This is a necessary discipline if you expect to be able to teach your children to do the same thing! First, we will present a framework of questions that we call *popologetics*. This will help you unpack and respond to a piece of popular culture. Second, we will explore some mistakes people often make in using *popologetics*. Third, we will consider how you can simplify these questions for the needs of children.

FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY WORK OF POPULAR CULTURE

It's not difficult to engage critically in popular culture, but it does take some thought and practice. The key is asking the right questions about each story, song, game, or anything we find in human popular culture. (We adapt these from Ted's first book, *Popologetics*.¹)

1. What is the story?

Most popular culture has a story form, and getting that story straight is the basis for everything else. So make sure you understand the story's characters, plot points, conflict, and so on. Do the story justice, at least in your own mind.

2. What is the moral and imaginary world?

The next step is to think about what kind of imaginary world the story has drawn you into. Think about the style of this particular world. Think about how the producers have created this specific style in this specific medium. Ask questions about the moral and spiritual assumptions that exist in this world. Over time you will build up a pretty good feel for the imaginary landscape of this particular popular cultural work.

3. What is good, true, and beautiful in this world (common grace)?

Remember in earlier chapters when we explored *common grace*? Theologians use this phrase to refer to God's good gifts that he gives to all, such as rain and sunshine and the ability for even sinful people to keep reflecting God's image. All popular culture is made by God's image-bearers, so goodness and truth are still woven into our culture. What aspects of this work of popular culture resonate with goodness and truth? What aspects of this world and story is your heart drawn to? What is awesome here, and why? How does the goodness, truth, and awesomeness in this popular cultural work point to the goodness, truth, and awesomeness of God? How does its story connect with God's story?

4. What is false and idolatrous in this world?

A popular cultural work doesn't only shine with goodness. The work also twists that goodness away from its proper role (glorifying God) and into the service of an idol, a God substitute. To critically engage popular culture, you must accurately diagnose that idolatry and show it to be a forgery—a false god.

5. How is Jesus the true answer to this story's hopes?

In this last step, we show how the gospel actually fulfills whatever good hopes, dreams, and promises the idol cannot give us. What promises did the story or song present that its idols cannot actually fulfill? How does the gospel meet our desires for good things in ways the idol cannot match—in ways that show the idol to be a fraud?

Ask and reflect on these five questions, and you begin to explore a Christian view of that popular culture work. This can lead to interesting conversations in which the gospel arises naturally, not shoehorned into a conversation.

MISTAKES PARENTS CAN MAKE WHEN EXPLORING POP CULTURE

In teaching this method to both kids and adults, we often see some misunderstandings.

1. We can forget to respect the style and excellence of human art.

Christians tend to be so focused on content and worldview that they underestimate the significance of form and style. We are used to reading words in the Bible, and we simply don't register other structures as meaningful. Or perhaps Christians lack the vocabulary to describe the look or feel of a piece of popular culture. We have even heard Christians disparage style as proof a cultural work isn't worth engaging. They say, "Oh, that's just about style, not substance."

But style *is* substantial because it *forms and informs* the content of a cultural work. Style gives the imaginary world its own unique spin, and this will shape the meanings and messages that emerge from that world.

So, as engaged parents, spend the time and effort to learn the stylistic vocabularies, tricks, and tropes of different media. For example, if you seriously want to learn about film style, go spend some time watching videos on Vimeo's channel Cinemacuteo (and the dozens of other channels that cover similar territory). It's fun stuff, and you'll learn lots. The videos tend to be short and accessible. And watch lots of well-made films that are worth talking and thinking about (it's a wider category than you might imagine), and consider how and why the director chose *that* particular shot, angle, lighting, and so on.

For example, if you're into music, you might read *Pitchfork* or *Paste* online and listen to songs on the website Bandcamp or even YouTube. If you enjoy video games, search for the

particular game followed by the word *playthrough* to get a feel for it.

Stylistic gestures in popular culture *mean* something. Don't underestimate the power of style.

2. We can assume an overly narrow view of God's common grace.

Sometimes when Christians try to find what is good, true, or beautiful in a popular cultural work (question 3), they prefer to identify nice or moral elements. They forget that the Bible doesn't always present niceness and moral decency to us, and yet even these parts are full of grace. If we truly see sin for what it is—ugly and destructive—*that* is evidence of grace. But if we glamorize sin, we may take part in a deadly deception.

Let's remember that it can be deeply disturbing to confront God-given truth. Recall that the Bible itself presents grotesque narratives—such as in Judges 19, which shows the violence of a rebellious Israel, or in Revelation 19, which shows Jesus's violent dispatch of his enemies.

Similarly, when a manmade story's hero (such as Batman or Luke Skywalker) learns about how deeply evil penetrates society and even his own heart, it is God's common grace that he gave the storyteller insight to see that evil *as* evil. It tells the truth about human reality. Of course, this does not mean that bleaker and darker examples of common grace are all appropriate for younger children. They might be too much for a child until she reaches her teens. However, we must know that common grace doesn't always match the ideal of a "family-friendly" story or show. Remember that such stories might actually undermine God-given truth by distorting idolatry into respectable, candy-coated poison.

Common grace comes in all sorts of surprising forms. Be ready to be surprised.

3. We can mistake the fictional character for the world itself.

In discussing a story's idolatry (question 4), Christians may respond like this: "Well, that character killed someone/ lied/committed adultery, and so that's where the idol is."

That's not always the best answer. When we attempt to track idolatry, we are not concerned with the actions and motives of individual characters *unless those characters represent the story's or culture creator's positive viewpoint*. In other words, if we see villains presented as vile persons, that is the voice of writers or directors telling us they *don't* approve of them. You will almost never find the idol there. Instead you need to find where the voice of the culture creator endorses actions and motives that contradict Scripture. Then you need to unveil that idol's ugly ineffectiveness—how it spins a web of lies that ultimately leaves us empty.

Look at the moral and spiritual shape of the imaginary world as a whole, not just this or that part. Don't get so hung up on the morality of the trees that you miss the spiritual condition of the forest.

4. We reduce the gospel to justification by the cross.

When thinking through the last question, about how Jesus is the true answer to the story's hopes, it is easy to confine the grace of God to the forgiveness of sins. That is, indeed, the center of the gospel message, but this means we miss the awesome breadth of the salvation God offers.

Sometimes we reduce the word *gospel* to the process of an individual getting saved. But we may miss the many other facets of the new life that comprise the good news. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul tells us that once we are connected to Christ, we enter into a new mode of existence called the new creation. Or, as Jesus says in Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I am making all things new." Not some things. Not only your

personal guilt and shame. *All* things—the Son of God makes new every aspect of creation distorted by the fall.

This job will be completed when Jesus returns. Until then, we must show this newness in how we live and treat one another and this world. The new creation is about hope. It is woven into every strand of the Christian’s life tapestry, present and future. And the best part of any critical engagement with popular culture is that you get to ruminate on, and sometimes share, the hope offered by life in God. Don’t make it narrow—it’s incredibly huge and diverse.

The common thread that ties all of these missteps together is that each narrows the focus of analysis too much. We don’t mean that your analysis should be vague. Be as detailed as you like. But keep in mind that your real target is the imaginary world as a whole, for it is the overall resonance of these imaginary worlds that shape cultures and attitudes. And keep in mind the magnificent breadth of God’s grace that answers the idolatrous challenges of these imaginary worlds. Keep the big picture in view.

MAKING THESE QUESTIONS ACCESSIBLE TO KIDS

We have used these five questions in conversations with middle and high school students. But for younger children, here are some tips for scaling down the discussion.

First, keep it short. The younger the child, the shorter amount of information he or she will be able to absorb and sit still for. Lengthy lectures don’t work. Give bits and pieces as they are able to listen. Pro tip: if they squirm, that’s their body telling you they are too full of information. Time to move on.

Ted once led discussion on the film *Wreck-It Ralph* for children between ages four and six. We found lots to talk about, such as by asking: Who were the good guys? Who were the bad guys? The film doesn’t make this easy; Ralph is a video game “bad guy” who’s lonely and tired of being

bad. We even explored how we can tell a good act (Jesus would like it) from a bad act (Jesus would *not* like it). Unlike college students who can go for a couple hours, these kids lasted maybe fifteen minutes. Don't worry if you don't have a "complete" conversation. Kids that young can only absorb so much. Use your few minutes well.

Second, encourage them to ask questions. Younger kids loooooove asking questions. Make sure they understand that it's OK for them to interrupt a movie or television show to indulge their curiosity (within reason). If the initiative comes from them, you will have more of their attention. And the discussions will be much more fun for both of you.

Third, ask *them* questions. Don't just throw statements their way. Make them think. "Why do you think Iron Man did that even though he knew he might never come back? Why do kids like making stuff in *Minecraft*? Why do you think 'Old Town Road' is as popular as it is? Princess Vanellope was all alone for so long. How do you think that made her feel? Have you felt like that, too? The bad guy did a really bad thing. Why do you think he did it? Why was it bad? How do you know it was bad?" It is when they have thought about it and come up empty that they'll really want to know. Drawing them in to active participation will also help discussions last a bit longer.

Fourth, make the discussion age appropriate. For older kids, you can expect a degree of sophistication (more for later teens than early teens and tweens). Older kids can handle abstract concepts like worldviews and moral assumptions. Elementary-age kids are still developing the ability to think that way. They have a hard time grasping abstract concepts. Instead, you have to make the discussion concrete: "Who was the good guy? Who was the bad guy? What made the good guy good? What did he do that was good? What did the bad guy do that made him bad? What do you think God wants

the bad guy to do?” By sticking close to concrete things, events, and persons, you can help young minds sort through pretty complicated moral and spiritual concerns.

For teeny-tiny children, age five and younger, make these questions even clearer. Young children are quite empathetic. Very small children have been known to cry when they see another child fall or get hit because they feel their pain. They don’t distinguish between self and others as automatically as older children. Use that. “How would you feel if you had a power like Elsa’s that could hurt your sister? Would you maybe avoid her too? Do you think she felt lonely?” Even though they lack systemic thinking, their levels of empathy can be much higher, and that allows them to attune themselves to the emotional weight of a character. The work you do here will be more about feeling the security of God’s love, the rightness of walking his path, and the warmth of loving others the way Jesus has loved us.

All of this assumes you’ve already done a popologetics analysis yourself and you’re ready to talk to your child about it. By using these four tips, you can help break it into understandable chunks that won’t make your child choke.

WATCH, LISTEN, PLAY WITH YOUR CHILD—AND ENGAGE!

Popular culture is a fertile field ripe for exploration if you want to engage it with your child. The key to effective engagement is to learn to love (or at least like) what your children adore and are amazed by in popular culture. Watch, listen, and play with them, talking about what you’re doing. Look for teaching moments, and, above all, *listen* to their heart.

How can you know what is healthy and appropriate for your child to engage and what you should avoid? There are no hard-and-fast rules that can substitute for nuance and wisdom. Instead, learn to trust the wisdom God gives through his Word, through wise counsel, and through your

own parenting instincts. Consider what is age appropriate as well as the unique strengths and weaknesses of your child's heart. The next chapters explore how you can know the heart of your child and the various developmental stages.