



How TV Affects Your Child

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Most children plug into the world of television long before they enter school: 70% of child-care centers use TV during a typical day. In a year, the average child spends 900 hours in school and nearly 1,023 hours in front of a TV.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), kids in the United States watch about 4 hours of TV a day - even though the AAP guidelines say children older than 2 should watch no more than 1 to 2 hours a day of quality programming.

And, according to the guidelines, children under age 2 should have no "screen time" (TV, DVDs or videotapes, computers, or video games) at all. During the first 2 years, a critical time for brain development, TV can get in the way of exploring, learning, and spending time interacting and playing with parents and others, which helps young children develop the skills they need to grow cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally.

Of course, television, in moderation, can be a good thing: Preschoolers can get help learning the alphabet on public television, grade schoolers can learn about wildlife on nature shows, and parents can keep up with current events on the evening news. No doubt about it - TV can be an excellent educator and entertainer.

But despite its advantages, too much television can be detrimental:

- Research has shown that children who consistently spend more than 4 hours per day watching TV are more likely to be overweight.
- Kids who view violent events, such as a kidnapping or murder, are also more likely to believe that the world is scary and that something bad will happen to them.
- Research also indicates that TV consistently reinforces gender-role and racial stereotypes.

Children's advocates are divided when it comes to solutions. Although many urge for more hours per week of educational programming, others assert that no TV is the best solution. And some say it's better for parents to control the use of TV and to teach children that it's for occasional entertainment, not for constant escapism.

That's why it's so important for you to monitor the content of TV programming and set viewing limits to ensure that your child doesn't spend time watching TV that should be spent on other activities, such as playing with friends, exercising, and reading.

Violence

To give you perspective on just how much violence kids see on TV, consider this: The average American child will witness 200,000 violent acts on television by age 18. TV violence sometimes begs for imitation because violence is often demonstrated and promoted as a fun and effective way to get what you want.

And as the AAP points out, many violent acts are perpetrated by the "good guys," whom children have been taught to emulate. Even though children are taught by their parents that it's not right to hit, television says it's OK to bite, hit, or kick if you're the good guy. And even the "bad guys" on TV aren't always held responsible or punished for their actions.

The images children absorb can also leave them traumatized and vulnerable. According to research, children ages 2 to 7 are particularly frightened by scary-looking things like grotesque monsters. Simply telling children that those images aren't real won't console them, because they can't yet distinguish between fantasy and reality.

Kids ages 8 to 12 are frightened by the threat of violence, natural disasters, and the victimization of children, whether those images appear on fictional shows, the news, or reality-based shows. Reasoning with children this age will help them, so it's important to provide reassuring and honest information to help ease your child's fears. However, you may want to avoid letting your child view programs that he or she may find frightening.

Risky Behaviors

TV is chock full of programs and commercials that often depict risky behaviors such as sex and substance abuse as cool, fun, and exciting. And often, there's no discussion about the consequences of drinking alcohol, doing drugs, smoking cigarettes, and having premarital sex.

For example, studies have shown that teens who watch lots of sexual content on TV are more likely to initiate intercourse or participate in other sexual activities earlier than peers who don't watch sexually explicit shows.

Alcohol ads on TV have actually increased over the last few years and more underage children are being exposed to them than ever. A recent study conducted by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) at Georgetown University found that the top 15 teen-oriented programs in 2003 had alcohol ads.

And although they've banned cigarette ads on television, kids and teens can still see plenty of people smoking on programs and movies airing on TV. This kind of "product placement" makes behaviors like smoking and drinking alcohol seem acceptable. In fact, kids who watch 5 or more hours of TV per day are far more likely to begin smoking cigarettes than those who watch less than the recommended 2 hours a day.

Obesity

Health experts have long linked excessive TV-watching to obesity - a significant health problem today. While watching TV, children are inactive and tend to snack. They're also bombarded with advertising messages that encourage them to eat unhealthy foods such as potato chips and empty-calorie soft drinks that often become preferred snack foods.

Too much educational TV has the same indirect effect on children's health. Even if children are watching 4 hours of quality educational television, that still means they're not exercising, reading, socializing, or spending time outside.

But studies have shown that decreasing the amount of TV children watched led to less weight gain and lower body mass index (BMI - a measurement derived from someone's weight and height).

Commercials

According to the AAP, children in the United States see 40,000 commercials each year. From the junk food and toy advertisements during Saturday morning cartoons to the appealing promos on the backs of cereal boxes, marketing messages inundate kids of all ages. And to them, everything looks ideal - like something they simply have to have. It all sounds so appealing - often, so much better than it really is.

Under the age of 8 years, most children don't understand that commercials are for selling a product. Children 6 years and under are unable to distinguish program content from commercials, especially if their favorite character is promoting the product. Even older children may need to be reminded of the purpose of advertising.

Of course, it's nearly impossible to eliminate all exposure to marketing messages. You can certainly turn off the TV or at least limit kids' watching time, but they'll still see and hear advertisements for the latest gizmos and must-haves at every turn.

But what you can do is teach your child to be a savvy consumer by talking about what he or she thinks about the products being advertised as you're watching TV together. Ask thought-provoking questions like, "What do you like about that?," "Do you think it's really as good as it looks in that ad?," and "Do you think that's a healthy choice?"

Explain, when your child asks for products he or she sees advertised, that commercials and other ads are designed to make people want things they don't necessarily need. And these ads are often meant to make us think that these products will make us happier somehow. Talking to kids about what things are like in reality can help put things into perspective.

To limit your child's exposure to TV commercials, the AAP recommends that you:

- Have your kids watch public television stations (some programs are sponsored - or "brought to you" - by various companies, although the products they sell are rarely shown).
- Tape programs - without the commercials.
- Buy or rent children's videos or DVDs.

Teaching Your Child Good TV Habits

Here are some practical ways you can make TV-viewing more productive in your home:

- **Limit the number of TV-watching hours:**
 - Stock the room in which you have your TV with plenty of other non-screen entertainment (books, kids' magazines, toys, puzzles, board games, etc.) to encourage your child to do something other than watch the tube.
 - Keep TVs out of your child's bedroom.
 - Turn the TV off during meals.
 - Don't allow your child to watch TV while doing homework.
 - Treat TV as a privilege that your child needs to earn - not a right to which he or she is entitled. Tell your child that TV-viewing is allowed only after chores and homework are completed.
- **Try a weekday ban.** Schoolwork, sports activities, and job responsibilities make it tough to find extra family time during the week. Record weekday shows or save TV time for weekends, and you'll have more family togetherness time to spend on meals, games, physical activity, and reading during the week.
- **Set a good example** by limiting your own television viewing.
- **Check the TV listings and program reviews ahead of time** for programs your family can watch together (i.e., developmentally appropriate and nonviolent programs that reinforce your family's values). Choose shows, says the AAP, that foster interest and learning in hobbies and education (reading, science, etc.).
- **Preview programs** before your child watches them.
- **Come up with a family TV schedule** that you all agree upon each week. Then, post the schedule in a visible area (i.e., on the refrigerator) somewhere around the house so that everyone knows which programs are OK to watch and when. And make sure to turn off the TV when the "scheduled" program is over, instead of channel surfing until something gets your or your child's interest.
- **Watch TV with your child.** If you can't sit through the whole program, at least watch the first few minutes to assess the tone and appropriateness, then check in throughout the show.
- **Talk to your child about what he or she sees** on TV and share your own beliefs and values. If something you don't approve of appears on the screen, you can turn off the TV, then use the opportunity to ask your child thought-provoking questions such as, "Do you think it was OK when those men got in that fight? What else could they have done? What would you have done?" Or, "What do you think about how those teenagers were acting at that party? Do you think what they were doing was wrong?" If certain people or characters are mistreated or discriminated against, talk about why it's important to treat everyone equal, despite their differences. You can use TV to explain confusing situations and express your feelings about difficult topics (sex, love, drugs, alcohol, smoking, work, behavior, family life). Teach your child to question and learn from what he or she views on TV.
- **Talk to other parents, your child's doctor, and your child's teachers** about their TV-watching policies and kid-friendly programs they'd recommend.
- **Offer fun alternatives to television.** If your child wants to watch TV, but you want him or her to turn off the tube, suggest that you and your child play a board game, start a game of hide and seek, play outside, read, work on crafts or hobbies, or listen and dance to music. The possibilities for fun without the tube are endless - so turn off the TV and enjoy the quality time you'll have to spend with your child.

Understanding TV Ratings and the V-Chip

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Two ways you can help monitor what your child watches are:

TV Parental Guidelines.

Modeled after the movie rating system, this is an age-group rating system developed for TV programs. These ratings are listed in television guides, TV listings in your local newspaper, and on the screen in your cable program guide. They also appear in the upper left-hand corner of the screen during the first 15 seconds of TV programs. But not all channels offer the rating system. For those that do, the ratings are:

- **TV-Y:** suitable for all children
- **TV-Y7:** directed toward kids 7 years and older (children who are able to distinguish between make-believe and reality); may contain "mild fantasy violence or comedic violence" that may scare younger kids
- **TV-Y7-FV:** fantasy violence may be more intense in these programs than others in the TV-Y7 rating
- **TVG:** suitable for a general audience; not directed specifically toward children, but contains little to no violence, sexual dialogue or content, or strong language
- **TV-PG:** parental guidance suggested; may contain an inappropriate theme for younger children and contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), occasional strong language (L), and some suggestive dialogue (D)
- **TV-14:** parents strongly cautioned - suitable for only children over the age of 14; contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong language (L), and intensely suggestive dialogue
- **TV-MA:** designed for adults and may be unsuitable for kids under 17; contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), strong sexual activity (S), and/or crude language (L)

V-chip (V is for "violence").

This technology was designed to enable you to block television programs and movies you don't want your child to see. All new TV sets that have screens of 13" or more now have internal V-chips, but set-top boxes are available for TVs made before 2000. So how exactly does the V-chip work? It allows you to program your TV to display only the appropriately-rated shows - blocking out any other, more mature shows.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires that V-chips in new TVs recognize the TV Parental Guidelines and the age-group rating system and block those programs that don't adhere to these standards.

For many, the rating system and V-chip may be valuable tools. But there is some concern that the system may be worse than no system at all. For example, research shows that preteen and teen boys are more likely to want to see a program if it's rated MA (mature audience) than if it's PG (parental guidance suggested). And parents may rely too heavily on these tools and stop monitoring what their children are watching.

Also, broadcast news, sports, and commercials aren't rated, although they often present depictions of violence and sexuality. The rating system also doesn't satisfy some family advocates who complain that they fail to give enough information about a program's content to allow parents to make informed decisions about whether a show is appropriate for their child.

So even if you've used the V-chip to program your TV or a show features the age-group ratings, it's still important to preview shows to determine whether they're appropriate for your child and turn off the TV if the content becomes inappropriate for your child.