

"Dad, Do You Know How to Read?"

Television Can Be Dangerous for Our Children

by David Epstein, MD and Jon Jantz, MD

Regardless of whether they are in your care as a parent or as a day care provider, television can be dangerous to our children. Why? Consider the following:

- American children watch, on average, 21 to 23 hours of TV per week from preschool through high school, with younger children watching more. This data does not include time in front of the television for purposes of watching a video, nor does it include video games or computer time. The average child sees more than 20,000 TV commercials per year, and will spend seven to ten years of their life watching TV by the time they reach 70 years of age.
- By the sixth grade, children witness an average of 8,000 murders and over 100,000 other acts of violence on television, including rapes and aggravated assaults. Children's Saturday morning programming shows 30 violent acts per hour, compared to 5 violent acts per hour on prime time evening television.
- Research has shown several major effects on children of seeing violence on television, including desensitization to the pain and suffering of others, becoming more fearful of the world around them, becoming more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others, and imitate the violence they observe on television.
- American teenagers see an estimated 14,000 sexual references and innuendoes per year on television, but only 150 of these references deal with sexual responsibility, abstinence or contraception.
- The average US teenager views 1,000 beer and wine commercials yearly, which glamorize the use of alcohol. Teenagers will see 25 to 50 such commercials for every public service announcement.
- Most of the time a child spends with TV is wasted time, compared to getting exercise, reading or practicing social skills. Television has been linked to obesity: children who watch more than four hours of television per day are twice as likely to be obese. Television has been linked to lowered academic performance: the typical American eighth-grader spends four times as many hours watching television as completing homework.
- In one study, watching only nine minutes of scenes of sexual violence against women, selected from television programs and R-rated movies, lowered college students' disapproval of rape. In another study, the same increased tolerance for rape could be obtained by viewing 3 hours of sexually explicit films over a six-week period.
- Many parents do not realize how much television their children watch. You might try keeping a diary for a week: record how many hours of TV (including video games and movies) your child watches in a seven-day period and you will probably be surprised at the large amount of TV your child is exposed to. Imagine what they could do with that amount of extra time!

But for better or worse, television is here to stay. It is estimated that 99% of US homes have televisions, and about 66% have two or more televisions. Television is frequently used as a babysitter for overworked parents. Unfortunately, we frequently do not scrutinize this babysitter as well as we evaluate our human babysitters and day care providers.

It's important to set limits, but we should also teach our children how to deal with what they are seeing and hearing. Making television safe is hard work, but well worth the effort.

Eight Principles for Television Viewing

1. Limit television to 10 hours per week.

A nice way to do this is allot a "TV allowance," just as a child might receive a monetary allowance each week. Try making paper slips with the phrase "1/2 hour TV time" written on them. A child might receive 20 such slips every Sunday night, and "pay" 1 slip for each show or half hour of video games they play. This way the total TV exposure is limited, and you do not have to haggle over each show.

One family limits television viewing by trading a half-hour coupon for each book the children read. This family reports their children rarely watch more than three hours of television a week—they are too busy reading.

If this is too complicated, try limiting viewing to two hours per day with no carry over; so, if the time is not used on Monday, the television is NOT available for four hours on Tuesday.

2. No one should eat while the TV is on.

Eating in front of the TV is a prescription for obesity. That's where the phrase "couch potato" comes from!

3. Talk about the show with your kids.

Ask for your children's thoughts about what they are seeing. ("Would you have done what that character did?" "Can you think of a toy that's more fun than that one?").

For an insight into the characters, ask which character they identify with most strongly; for example, in The Lion King, would it be Mufaso, Scar, Simba or Nala, and why?

Talk about how the TV characters solved their problems. See if you can come up with a better (or more realistic) solution.

Discuss TV violence. Try to decide why it happened. See if your child can think of a non-violent solution to the same situation.

Vote on whether or not each show is worth watching again. Keep your family's decisions on a wall chart, so everyone can refer to it.

4. Talk about commercials.

Television is a business, and businesses exist to make money. From the start, begin teaching your young children about commercials.

Compare toys you have purchased or toys and food you see on shopping trips, with the claims made in the advertisements. Have your children "redo" the commercial based on what they know about the product.

Make children aware of the large amount of time devoted to commercials during their favorite shows. Time them, or count them, for fun.

More simply, consider using the "mute" on the remote control during the commercials.

5. Take control of the TV.

Don't let television schedules run your schedule. Make a chart for each family member. Let him or her record what they watch, and how much time is spent. Add up the totals over a week.

Keep the TV out of kid's rooms, and out of heavily used family areas. Don't put a TV in a playroom.

Rent, borrow, buy or make video tapes. "Time shift" using the video recorder, then plan a "family TV night" as a family activity. Try to avoid random TV watching, such as "channel surfing."

6. Put the TV in perspective for your children.

Tell your child that the violence is "faked" for TV shows. Tell them how it is done.

Help your child think of nonviolent solutions to TV situations.

Reassure children that their world is basically safe. TV news and shows often leave children feeling unsettled. Explain that "news" is chosen so that people will watch.

With younger children, watch cartoons carefully. Point out when "real life" won't work that way. . .like dropping an anvil on a person's head.

7. Use TV to learn.

Ask your child to draw a picture, or write a story, about a show he has seen.

Have your child list TV shows that have interested him or her. Then take trips to the library to find books that can tell you more. Try to visit sites he/she found interesting on TV.

8. Practice makes perfect.

All of these suggestions assume that the parents are aware of what their children are watching on TV, and how much. The more you teach your children to be active TV viewers, the more natural these skills will become.

Pretty soon, you'll be showing your kids a new way to think for themselves.

What We Can Do

Support the Children's Television Act of 1990. This Act makes broadcast of high-quality children's programming a condition of license renewal, specifically mandating some programming of educational and instructional benefit to children, as well as limiting the amount of advertising time allowed during children's programming.

Urge that sexuality be portrayed responsibly by the media.

Support efforts to eliminate alcohol advertising on television and encourage extensive counter advertising.
Be aware of the negative effects of televised violence on children and adolescents and actively join the debate on strategies to reduce the amount of violence shown.

References

The authors gratefully acknowledge the information and statistics and ideas from the following sources:

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