



Family Issues Facts

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

How Television Viewing Affects Children

Bulletin #4100

Many parents, providers, and educators are expressing a concern about the amount of television and the type of programming to which children are being exposed. The Department of Education states that children in the United States watch an average of three to five hours of television every day. Studies show that too much television viewing

can have adverse affects, such as more violent and aggressive behavior, poor school performance, obesity, early sexual activity, and drug or alcohol use.

Children aren't engaging in the activities they need to help them develop their bodies and brains when they watch television. The Parents as Teachers National Center says that young children need to "explore, move, manipulate,

smell, touch and repeat as they learn. Studies have found that watching television does not increase attention, promote social skills, or foster creative play."

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For older children, it is important to play, read, do homework, and talk with other children and adults for healthy development, according to the Department of Education. Children who watch too much TV have less time for these activities, which are so important for healthy development.

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Language Development

The Department of Education states that language skills are best developed through reading and interactions with others in conversation and play. Excessive television watching can impede this development. Hours spent watching TV make risk-taking and social relationships difficult for many children.

Children as Couch Potatoes

The problem of obesity has risen, and television watching consumes only a few more calories than sleeping. Children who watch too much television don't get as much physical activity and don't explore new activities, according to the Family Education Network. Eating too much junk food and watching too much television are two major causes for obesity. Do we want to promote these behaviors at young ages?

Advertising

According to J. Van Evra, author of *Television and Child Development*, young children are particularly vulnerable to the influence of commercial advertising. They do not have the capacity to evaluate it critically, and as a result

parents are pressured to buy products such as cereal and toys.

What Are Children Watching?

Violence in the media, television programming, video games and movies are a growing concern. According to Carla Kalin, M. S., statistics indicate that the typical American child will be exposed to 12,000 violent acts on television a year. The American Psychological Association Help Center reveals that children's TV programming alone contains about 20 violent acts an hour.

Children are imitators and those who watch violent shows are more likely to display aggressive behavior. They are more likely to "strike out at playmates, argue, and disobey authority" according to the American Psychological Association Help Center. The Parents as Teachers National Center suggests that violent television programming teaches children that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems.

According to the Parents as Teachers National Center, the toddler and preschool years are an important time for emotional development, as well as a time

when fears increase, and many children do not have the capacity to distinguish reality from fantasy. Watching a violent act on TV may be very disturbing to a toddler. Children who watch shows with violent content have more anxiety about the world around them, according to the Parents as

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Teachers National Center.

The American Psychological Association Help Center indicates that there are three types of harmful effects associated with viewing violence. They are:

- Learning aggressive behaviors and attitudes
- Becoming desensitized to real world violence
- Developing a fear of being victimized

Is All Television Bad?

The Research Center for Families and Children indicates that moderate television watching with discretion in program viewing can be somewhat beneficial for school age children. Van Evra is in agreement. Both indicate that those children who watched a moderate amount of TV performed better academically than those children who excessively watched television or those children who did not watch television at all.

Karen Jaffe, from the Family Education Network, has suggested that some contemporary shows such as "Blue's Clues," "Bear in the Big Blue House," and "Big Bag" can be educational and promote prosocial behavior. The Research Center for Families and



Children states that television, if properly used in moderation, can stimulate a child's education and creativity.

What You Can Do

How can you guide your child's television viewing? The government, in cooperation with the television industry, has implemented a rating system for television programming. This system is to help guide parents and assist them in establishing guidelines for their children's TV viewing. However, the American Psychological Association Help Center reminds us that television networks rate their own programs, unlike the motion picture association

In 1996, the Telecommunications Act was passed in an attempt to help parents restrict the viewing habits of their children. The Act specifies that all television sets sold in the United States must contain a programmable v-chip. Mark Nadel, an attorney specializing in communication law and policy, explains that this will allow parents to block undesirable programming.

Even with the rating system and the v-chip in place, parents still need to take an active interest in what their children are watching on television. Here are some suggestions from the Department of Education.

- **Set Limits.** Know how much TV your child is watching. Set some basic rules such as no television before homework or chores are done or during meals.
- **Participate.** Watch TV with your child and discuss the program. Ask them questions and express your views. This will also let you know what your children are watching.
- **Monitor.** Avoid shows, movies, or video games that have violent or sexual content.



Ten Things Toddlers Can Do Besides Watch TV

Interaction, reading, and play activities are always better than watching television. These activities are important in the healthy development of social, emotional, and intellectual skills. Here are some ideas from the Parents as Teachers National Center for activities to do with your child instead of watching TV:

1. **Explore.** Baby-proof an entire room and put an assortment of toys and safe household objects in the room to play with.
2. **Watch.** Hang a bird feeder outside a window where the child can see the birds and squirrels.
3. **Listen.** Play music at a moderate volume and encourage your child to sing and dance.
4. **Touch.** Toddlers like to dig, scoop, and mold, exercising their emerging fine motor skills. Provide some play dough or a bowl half filled with beans, and cups for scooping.
5. **Splash.** Let your child play in the bathtub. However, never leave you child alone even for a minute when he or she is in the tub.
6. **Look at Books.** Read a book or just look at the pictures with your child. Try to have some books that are unfamiliar so they will hold your child's attention.
7. **Bag it.** Let your child unpack and repack a suitcase or tote bag with toys or safe household items.
8. **Sleep.** Help your child develop a good sense of naptime and bedtime habits.
9. **Help.** Since toddlers like to be where the action is, let them play alongside you while you work. Think creatively about how your child can help you with a task.
10. **Find a Friend.** Trade babysitting time with other parents of toddlers so your child can experience being with other children. This interaction will contribute to healthy development.



Encourage children to watch programs about characters who show cooperation and caring.

- **Analyze Commercials.** Help children to critically evaluate advertisements.
- **Be a Good Role Model.** This suggestion comes from the Parents as Teachers National Center. Because children model behavior, set a good example with your own television viewing habits. Avoid watching programs containing adult content when your child is in the room or nearby.

Resources:

American Psychological Association Help Center, *Family and Relationships: Children and Television Violence*. <http://helping.apa.org/family/kidtvviol.html> (referenced 12/22/00)

Family Education Network, *Watching TV with Preschoolers*. <http://familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,1-504,00.html> (referenced 12/22/00)

C. Kalin, *Television, Violence, and Children*. (Master's synthesis paper, Department of Educational Leadership, Technology, and Administration, College of Education, University of Oregon, 1997). <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/FA/MLArticleFolder/kalin.html> (referenced 12/22/00)

Kidsource Online, *What parents need to know about children's television viewing*. <http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/tv.viewing.html> (referenced 12/22/00)

M. Rupured, P. R. Smith, S. Quick, "Television: Friend or Foe," *Research for Families and Children Newsletter*, 6(2) 1997, 10-13.

J. Van Evra, *Television and Child Development*. (NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1998).

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