

How TV Affects Your Child

Most kids plug into the world of television long before they enter school.

The Canadian Pediatrics Society recommends no television for children under two years of age and one hour or less per day for young school-aged children.

The first two years of life are considered a critical time for brain development. TV and other electronic media can get in the way of exploring, playing, and interacting with parents and others, which encourages learning and healthy physical and social development.

As kids get older, too much screen time can interfere with activities such as being physically active, reading, doing homework, playing with friends, and spending time with family.

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:

- Children who consistently spend more than four hours per day watching TV are more likely to be overweight.



The average Canadian child:

- watches nearly 14 hours of television each week.
- will have spent more time watching TV than in the classroom.
- views 12,000 violent acts on television annually.

- Kids who view violent acts are more likely to show aggressive behavior but also fear that the world is scary and that something bad will happen to them.

- TV characters often depict risky behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, and also reinforce gender-role or 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 kids 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 kids don't spend too much time watching TV.

Violence

Research is finding that high exposure to aggressive, violent, or fearful media with little or no adult supervision can result in toxic stress in children.

A strong, prolonged activation of the body's stress response system can actually affect children similarly to abuse, neglect, severe maternal depression or parental substance abuse. This type of stress can disrupt normal brain development in children.

Although the possible consequences are less alarming, even in lower doses and with supervision, exposure to media violence can result in the following:

- Kids may become desensitized to violence and more aggressive. TV violence sometimes begs for imitation because violence is often promoted as a fun and effective way to get what you want.
- Many violent acts are perpetrated by the "good guys," whom kids have been taught to emulate. Even though kids 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.
- Young kids are particularly frightened by scary and violent images. Simply telling kids that those images aren't real won't console them, because they can't yet distinguish between fantasy and reality. Behavior problems, nightmares and difficulty sleeping may be a consequence of exposure to media violence.
- Older kids, too, can be frightened by violent depictions, whether those images appear on fictional shows, the news, or reality-based shows.



Risky Behaviors

TV is full of programs and commercials that depict risky behaviors such as sex, substance abuse and cigarette smoking 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.

Obesity

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



Commercials

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), kids 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 eight years, most kids don't understand that commercials are for selling a product. Children six years and under are unable to distinguish program content from commercials, especially if their favorite character is promoting the product. Even older kids may need to be reminded of the purpose of advertising.

To limit kids' 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).
- Record programs – without the commercials.
- Buy or rent children's videos or DVDs.

Teaching Good TV Habits

Here are some practical ways to 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 kids to do something other than watch the tube.
- Keep TVs out of bedrooms.
- Turn the TV off during meals.
- Don't allow kids to watch TV while doing homework.
- Treat TV as a privilege to be earned – not a right. Establish and enforce family TV viewing rules, such as TV 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.



- 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).
- Come up with a family TV schedule that you all agree upon each week. Then, post the schedule in a visible area (e.g., on the refrigerator) 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.
- Preview programs before your kids watch them.

- Set a good example by limiting your own TV viewing.

- Watch TV with your child and only in small segments. Tape the program and plan to watch for only 20 minutes at a time, pausing every five minutes. During pauses, discuss and ask questions about:

- fantasy vs. reality
- current story line vs. ending
- emotions/beliefs in the program vs. the child's own

This creates awareness and helps the child understand how the media information compares to their prior thinking and beliefs.



Why watch only segments of a program/movie?

- A young child's brain can organize and make sense of a single event more easily than multiple events simultaneously.
- This allows the child's increased stress levels to return to normal during breaks.

- Offer fun alternatives to television. If your kids want to watch TV but you want to turn off the tube, suggest that you all 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 together.

Adapted by CHADS Behavioural Services from:

1. Kidshealth.org (The Nemours Foundation) - October, 2008
2. Canadian Pediatric Society - February, 2008
3. "Screen-time Junkies: Media Violence and the Effects on a Child's Developing Brain," a presentation by MaryLou Godard, M.A. C.P.T. - July, 2008
4. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (Public Health Agency of Canada) - June, 2005