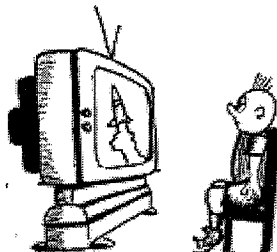




CHILDREN AND TELEVISION



In the past fifty years, television has become an important part of most children's lives. In fact, studies show that children in the U.S. spend more time watching television than they do in any other activity except sleep.

Because children do spend so much of their time watching television, many important questions are raised:

- * How is all of this television affecting young children?
- * What are the benefits of television?
- * What are the risks?

Parents must consider these questions and their answers very carefully.

Some of the Things Children See on Television

***Violence.** Children watch countless acts of violence every day while sitting in front of the television. One recent study estimates that American children see over 1,000 violent acts on television each year. These violent acts include rapes, murders, armed robberies and assaults. It is not only the prime-time programs that contain a lot of violence. News programs and music videos also contain a high percentage of violence. Cartoons, and other children's programs, often contain violence, too. Many of these programs glorify war and fighting. Children may get the message that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems. Studies have shown that children who watch a lot of violence on television are more likely to be aggressive towards other people.

***Sex.** Just like violence, there is a lot of sex to be seen on television. Sex on television is often portrayed as casual, impersonal, and exploitative. Some shows that contain a lot of sex are soap operas, prime-time shows, and especially music videos. Rarely do characters on television discuss contraception before engaging in sex. Rarely do television characters acquire sexually transmitted diseases. Furthermore, sex is often portrayed unrealistically on television. This may lead to the development of beliefs about sex that are not realistic.

***Alcohol.** Children are bombarded with advertisements for beer and wine. They see their favorite rock stars and sports heroes in these advertisements. The underlying message is that cool, popular people consume alcohol.

The Side Effects of Television

*There is a strong link between watching a lot of television and obesity. The more children watch television, the less time they have for more physical activities. Plus, many of the food ads aimed at children are for overprocessed, high calorie foods. Examples are candy or hamburgers. These advertisements promote poor eating habits. Rarely are healthy foods such as fruits or vegetables advertised. Finally, snacking while watching television promotes obesity. Children who eat while watching television can quickly lose track of how much they've eaten. This can increase the chances of overeating.

*Children who watch a lot of television are less creative and imaginative than children who find other things to do with their time.

*Children who watch a lot of television interact less with family and friends.

Some Good Things about Television

Television has many good things to offer children, too. There are some wonderful television programs that promote learning and growth. Many educational programs teach important skills such as spelling and reading. Parents should encourage the viewing of these programs. They should limit the viewing of programs that don't have a lot to offer educationally.

What Parents Can Do

There are many things that parents can do to minimize the negative effects of television. At the same time, parents can encourage their children to use television as a tool for learning. Here are some suggestions:

***Discuss sex and violence.** If children do view sex and violence on television, parents should make it a point to discuss what they see. Discussions and explanations should be geared to children's levels of understanding. Parents should explain to their children that the violence and sex seen on television is "faked." Parents should also discuss the real life consequences for these actions.

***Encourage viewing of programs with characters who are positive role models.** Parents should encourage the viewing of programs with characters who are kind, caring, and cooperative. Such programs promote positive learning.

***Don't rely on television as a babysitter.** Parents should encourage their children to entertain themselves in ways other than watching television. This will promote creativity. It will also help children learn how to entertain themselves instead of relying on television. Parents should encourage activities such as reading, drawing, sports, creative play, and music instead.

***Start limiting television viewing while children are young.** If children learn to limit television viewing at a young age, the possibility of developing bad habits will be minimized. Television habits are probably easier to form than they are to change after bad habits have begun. Parents should start setting limits as soon as their children begin to watch television. This usually happens at about one year of age.

***Set specific rules about television viewing.** Parents should determine what programs will be viewed ahead of time. They should then stick to the schedule. It is not a good idea to allow children to turn on the television just to see what's on. Parents should set specific limits on the number of programs viewed and the hours of viewing per day.

***Get control of your own television viewing.** Parents should set a good example for their children. They can do this by limiting the amount of television they themselves watch. Parents should let their children see them reading or taking part in activities other than watching television.

***Know what your children are watching.** Whenever possible, parents should preview the programs their children would like to watch. If they have a VCR, parents can record the programs their children select, and then view them before their children do. If parents don't have a VCR they can discuss programs with other parents and compare notes.

***Watch television with your children.** Parents should be available to their children to answer their questions and provide information. The best time to do this is while the

family is watching television. This will help promote learning. Parents should encourage their children to discuss what they see on television.

In summary, television can have both a positive and a negative influence on young children. Parents can promote the positive aspects of television by becoming involved in the television viewing of their children.



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