

Psych Savvy

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Television: Implications for Child Development

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Does T.V. viewing affect your child's development? Many people are interested in whether television adversely affects a child's attention span, activity level, and concentration. For example, Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, and McCarty (2004) concluded parents and caregivers could reduce the chances a child might develop ADHD by limiting television viewing of young children. If true, what parent wouldn't want to try such a remedy? It has been argued that high amounts of television might over-stimulate a child's nervous system and permanently alter the developing brain and central nervous system. In a sense, the brain becomes so accustomed to receiving fast-paced input that children may have trouble sitting still in their chairs and listening to the teacher during slower paced lessons.

Exposure to television violence or violence in the home is associated with increases in violent behavior (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003) and bullying (Zimmerman, Glew, Christakis, & Katon, 2005) in young children. Additionally, Healy (1990) believes that the constant sounds coming from a television may reduce a child's problem solving skills and ability to control impulsivity. Other home factors such as the opportunity for healthy play, exploring the natural environment and being read to are related to fewer acts of aggression.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2002 recommended that children under age 2 not watch television due to worries about adverse affects on early brain growth as well as limiting the development of social and emotional skills. Children over age 2 should be limited to one to two hours a day of TV programming or other screen media (computer or electronic games). The Academy also recommended that this programming be limited to educational materials. Playing, reading, and spending time with family are much healthier than sitting in front of a TV screen (AAP, 2002).

As a school psychologist, I strongly feel that children learn best by exploring and being active, not by sitting in front of a television or playing video games. Television and other forms of media such as computer games take time away from quiet time, imaginative play, personal self-reflection, and development of academic and social skills. TV also takes away from nurturing relationships. Building stable early attachments to primary caregivers as a child (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) can have significant impacts on adult social-emotional functioning. Consider removing television and computer games from the child's bedroom. Encourage your children to engage in more physical activity

outside. Try and spend more time as a family talking and having fun together. When used properly for older children, high-quality and non-violent programs can have a positive effect on the acquisition of academic skills such as reading.

Parents have the ability to significantly influence their children's lives and future. This may start by simply providing structured and clear limitations on television viewing. Take the time to plan what your child watches and then watch the program with your child. Talk with your child about the message of the program and what was learned. Teach children to question, analyze, and evaluate television messages. Remember that children are like sponges and often learn through modeling (Bandura, 1997).

Just the other day I was playing with my son by using a frog puppet. I would tickle him with the puppet and jokingly pretend to eat his arms and hands with the puppet. We both were laughing and having fun. My same-aged daughter was watching us play. As soon as I put the puppet down to go in the kitchen, she picked it up and started playing EXACTLY the same way with her brother as I had just done with my son. The point of this story is to illustrate the power of modeling. Can you imagine what children learn by watching excessive amounts of television and commercials?

In conclusion, the research demonstrates a relationship between television habits and the presence of shorter attention spans and higher levels of aggressive behavior. It does not yet show that television habits *cause* these problems. However, there does seem to be evidence suggesting the need to reduce the amount of television viewing in young developing children. Certainly more longitudinal research needs to be done to fully understand the impact of early television viewing on child development, including attention and concentration. For more information or if you would like to discuss any point in this article, please contact your site assigned school psychologist or this author.

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