

Television and the Family

Part I Guidelines for Parents



Family is the most important influence in a child's life, but television is not far behind. Television can inform, entertain, and teach us. However, some of what TV teaches may not be things you want your child to learn. TV programs and commercials often show violence, alcohol or drug use, and sexual content that may not be suitable for children or teens. Studies show that TV viewing may lead to more aggressive behavior and less physical activity. By knowing how television affects your children and by setting limits, you can help make your child's TV-watching experience not only enjoyable, but healthy too.

How TV affects your child

There are many ways that television affects your child's life. When your child sits down to watch TV, consider the following:

Time

Children in the United States watch about 4 hours of TV every day. Watching movies on tape and playing video games only adds to time spent in front of the TV screen. It may be tempting to use television, movies, and video games to keep your child busy, but your child needs to spend as much time growing and learning as possible. Playing, reading, and spending time with friends and family are much healthier than sitting in front of a TV screen.

Nutrition

Children who watch too much television are more likely to be overweight. They do not spend as much time running, jumping, and getting the exercise they need. They also see many commercials for unhealthy foods, such as candy, snacks, sugary cereals, and drinks during children's programs. Commercials almost never give information about the foods children should eat to keep healthy.

Violence

If your child watches 3 to 4 hours of noneducational TV per day, he will have seen about 8,000 murders on TV by the time he finishes grade school. Children who see violence on television may not understand that real violence hurts and kills people. Even if the "good guys" use violence, children may learn that it is okay to use force to solve problems. Talk about better ways to handle aggression and settle disagreements. It is best not to let your child watch violent programs and cartoons.

Sex

Television exposes children to adult behaviors, like sex. But it usually does not show the risks and results of early sexual activity. On TV, sexual activity is shown as normal, fun, exciting, and without any risks. Your child may copy what she sees on TV in order to feel more grown up.

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Young people today are surrounded by messages that say drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes or cigars are normal activities. These messages don't say that alcohol and tobacco harm people and may lead to death. Beer and wine are some of the most advertised products on television. TV programs and commercials often show people who drink and smoke as healthy, energetic, sexy, and successful. It is up to you to teach your child the truth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Commercials

The average child sees more than 20,000 commercials each year. Commercials are quick, fast-paced, and entertaining. After seeing the same commercials over and over, your child can easily remember a song, slogan, or catchy phrase. Ads may try to convince your child that having a certain toy or eating a certain food will make him happy or popular. Older children can begin to understand how ads use pictures, music, and sound to entertain. Kids need to know that ads try to convince people to buy things they may not need.

Learning

Television affects how your child learns. High-quality, nonviolent children's shows can have a positive effect on learning. Studies show that preschool children who watch educational TV programs do better on reading and math tests than children who do not watch those programs. When used carefully, television can be a positive tool to help your child learn.

10 things parents can do

As a parent, there are many ways you can help your child develop positive viewing habits. The following tips may help:

- 1. Set limits**—Limit your child's use of TV, movies, and video and computer games to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day. Do not let your child watch TV while doing homework.
- 2. Plan your child's viewing**—Instead of flipping through channels, use a program guide and the TV ratings to help you and your child choose shows. Turn the TV on to watch the program you chose and turn it off when the program is over.

3. Watch TV with your child—Whenever possible, watch TV with your child and talk about what you see. If your child is very young, she may not be able to tell the difference between a show, a commercial, a cartoon, or real life. Explain that characters on TV are make-believe and not real. Some “reality-based” programs may appear to be “real,” but most of these shows focus on stories that will attract as many viewers as possible. Often these are stories about tragedy and violence. Much of their content is not appropriate for children. Young children may worry that what they see could happen to them or their family. News broadcasts also contain violent or inappropriate material. If your schedule prevents you from watching TV with your child, talk to her later about what she watched. Better yet, videotape the programs so that you can watch them with your child at a later time.

4. Find the right message—Even a poor program can turn out to be a learning experience if you help your child find the right message. Some television programs may portray people as stereotypes. Talk with your child about the real-life roles of women, the elderly, and people of other races that may not be shown on television. Discuss ways that people are different and ways that we are the same. Help your child learn tolerance for others. Remember, if you don't agree with certain subject matter, you can either turn off the TV or explain why you object.

5. Help your child resist commercials—Don't expect your child to be able to resist ads for toys, candy, snacks, cereal, drinks, or new TV programs without your help. When your child asks for products advertised on TV, explain that the purpose of commercials is to make people want things they may not need. Limit the number of commercials your child sees by watching public television stations (PBS). You can also tape programs and leave out the commercials or buy or rent children's videos.

6. Look for quality children's videos—There are many quality videos available for children that you can buy or rent. If you have questions about children's videos or just want some suggestions, contact The Coalition for Quality Children's Media at 505/989-8076 or visit their Web site at <http://www.cqcm.org>.

7. Give other options—Watching TV can become a habit for your child. Help your child find other things to do with his time, such as the following:

- Playing
- Reading
- Activities with family, friends, or neighbors
- Learning a hobby, sport, instrument, or an art

8. Set a good example—You are the most important role model in your child's life. Limiting your own TV viewing and choosing programs carefully will help your child do the same.

9. Express your views—When you like or don't like something you see on television, make yourself heard. Write to the TV station, network, or the program's sponsor. Stations, networks, and sponsors pay attention to letters from the public. If you think a commercial is misleading, write

down the product name, channel, and time you saw the commercial and describe your concerns. Call your local Better Business Bureau, or send the information to:

Children's Advertising Review Unit,
Council of Better Business Bureau
845 Third Ave
New York, NY 10022

Encourage publishers of TV guides to print ratings and feature articles about shows that are educational for children.

10. Get more information—The following people and places can provide you with more information about the proper role of TV in your child's life:

- **Your pediatrician** may have information about TV or can help you get it through the American Academy of Pediatrics. Ask for the AAP brochure *Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens* or visit the Academy's Web site at <http://www.aap.org>.
- **Public service groups** publish newsletters that review programs and give tips on how to make TV a positive experience for you and your child. Check with your pediatrician.
- **Your local Parent/Teacher Association (PTA).**
- **Parents of your child's friends and classmates** can also be helpful. Talk with other parents and agree to enforce similar rules about TV viewing.

When used properly, television can inform, educate, and entertain you and your family. By taking an active role in your child's viewing, you can help make watching TV a positive and healthy experience.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

