

Television is a very powerful medium presided over by very skilful programmers. It can influence the way we shop and it can manipulate the way we think by shaping our opinions regarding countless issues of varying significance.

Young Children & Television



Television programmes in the 1950s, 60s and 70s were vastly different to those of today. Nowadays, children have access to round the clock programming on a multitude of channels dealing with a multitude of subjects. But it is the messages that come from what children view that can have a profound impact on their lives as it shapes how they see the world and what they perceive as important.

So, how much television should your child be watching? And just what effect can television have on the mind of a child?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says that children of all ages are continually learning new things and that the first two years of life are especially important in the growth and development of a child's brain. During this period connections take place between the billions of neurons we are born with. Doctors sometimes refer to this period of enormous brain development as the "wiring" of the brain and it is suspected that watching television during these early years can affect that "wiring". The AAP is also concerned that watching television can affect the development of a child's social, emotional and cognitive skills; and that learning to talk, play and interact with other children, as well as

adults, is vital during these formative years. Because of this they recommend children under the age of two get no "TV time" at all, while those older than two should receive no more than one to two hours viewing per day.

There are, of course, some positives to be gained by watching television. Educational programmes can teach pre-schoolers numerical skills as well as the alphabet.

It can provide a source of entertainment and laughter and, for older children, a chance to travel, learn about different cultures and gain exposure to ideas. But they can also learn about, and be exposed to, things of a damaging nature. And it is this, as well as the amount of viewing time, that has the experts concerned.

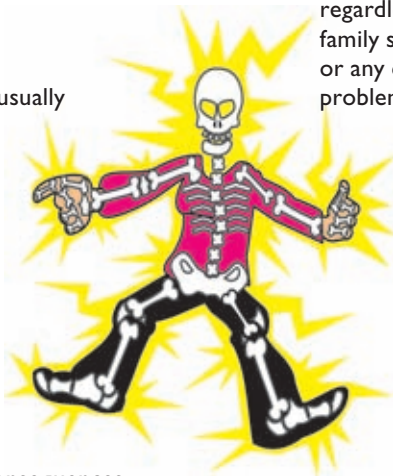
A typical American child spends more than four hours in front of the television every day. Paediatricians are concerned that this excessive amount of time is detracting from healthy activities such as playing with friends (outdoors), participating in sport, art, music and hobbies, as well as eating meals together as a family unit. All of these healthy interactions are beneficial in promoting creativity, language skills as well as the social development necessary to a growing child. Two-thirds of all programming in the United States contains violence. By the time they are 18, the average American will have witnessed 16,000 murders as well as 200,000 other violent acts. Saturday morning cartoons contain an average of 26 violent acts per hour. And every single US-made animated feature film (produced between 1937 and 1999) contains violence. ⇨

Children aged between eight and 12 years who view violence are often fearful that they will become a victim of violence or a natural disaster. Indeed older children, even adults, have been shown to develop an exaggerated sense of danger, and many fear becoming a victim of a violent act.

Most violent acts go unpunished on television and are usually accompanied by humour with the consequences of human loss and pain rarely depicted. It can often be glamorised and promoted as an effective way to get what you want, minus the consequences, meaning that children can become desensitised and interpret violence as a means to problem-solve.

Educationalists argue that television can discourage and replace many of the activities known to aid academic performance such as reading, homework and acquiring adequate sleep. Reading, for example, requires more thought than watching television and fosters healthy development in a young brain. Children that grow up in families in which the television is on most of the time spend less time reading and being read to. Consequently, they are less likely to be able to read themselves.

Studies have show how the average number of hours a person spent watching television during childhood was a strong predictor to their level of achievement later in life. Researchers found that the effects of watching television on an individual's educational achievement remained significant, regardless of the child's intellect, family socio-economic status or any childhood behavioural problems.



Influence

Children under the age of eight years cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. Frightening images (such as monsters) can be particularly traumatic for them as convincing them they are not real can be quite difficult. The leading cause of death among children is from

injuries; and watching unsafe behaviour on television may increase a child's willingness to take risks. And television often depicts unhealthy behaviours (smoking/alcohol consumption) in a glamorous light, reinforcing them as the "norm".

Young children are emotionally vulnerable and many advertisements are especially developed to take advantage of that susceptibility. This unsavoury practice was criticised in an article, *Stuffing Our Kids: Should Psychologists Help Advertisers Manipulate Children?* (2000). Co-authors Tim Kasser and Allen Kanner reported that

psychological consultants had been engaged by advertisers to develop sophisticated commercials intended to have a desired effect on children. As a result many psychologists came out in protest at the lack of ethics in targeting those so young. Adults tend to "mute" commercial breaks, but children do not. The average child is exposed to around 20,000 commercials a year; of which two-thirds encourage unhealthy eating habits. The soft drinks and snack foods (low in nutrients, high in sugar, fat, salt and total calories) that are promoted during these commercials are often snacked on while the child is watching TV.

Health

Doctor Aric Sigman is an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society. The results of a review of 35 academic studies were recently published in the science journal *Biologist*, in which he stated,

"The findings implicated television in the greatest unacknowledged health scandal of our time."

Doctor Sigman claimed that, based on national viewing figures in the United Kingdom, "the average child will have spent a full year watching television by the time they are six, and that more than half of three-year-olds had a TV in their bedroom". He warned that watching television, irrespective of content, is increasingly associated with unfavourable biological and cognitive changes. Doctor Sigman was scathing in his criticism of government and parental inaction and said,

"To allow children to continue to watch this much screen media is an abdication of parental responsibility – truly hands-off parenting."





All television viewing can be considered a lost opportunity for physical activity in a child's life. While watching television the metabolic rate appears to become even lower than when at rest doing absolutely nothing. Fewer calories are burned, and research has shown that children who watch four hours of television a day tend to be overweight. According to the AAP, about 85 per cent of children who develop diabetes are overweight. Other medical problems associated with excessive weight in children include high blood pressure, heart problems, high cholesterol, depression and low self-esteem, so there is clearly a considerable and potentially dangerous "knock-on" effect. The AAP also says the number of overweight or obese children (and adolescents) has doubled in the past 20 years and that even children under five, across all ethnic groups, have shown significant increases in becoming overweight or obese. Significantly, the amount of hours spent watching television and DVDs has also increased dramatically in the corresponding time.

Pre-school children of the past did not watch as much television as today's children and spent more time engaged in activities that made use of their hands such as modelling clay and finger painting. These activities encouraged the use of the hands and fingers, which developed manual dexterity and also improved hand-eye coordination.

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Teachers today have noted that more children are experiencing difficulty developing writing skills than ever before and it is suspected that the increased time spent in front of the television and watching videos are the likely culprit.

Where to now?

It is important for children to be active. They learn by doing things, and sitting passively in front of a television screen for hours at a time is a poor substitute for creative play. Nowadays, the average child is more likely to be found in front of the TV at the weekend rather than helping Dad wash the car or Mum around the house. And it has become all too convenient to let the television become the "baby-sitter" while parents get involved in other things. It is surprising how many households have the television on as background noise, which can, of course, be a great detractor from time better spent on child-parent communication.

A study conducted at Michigan State University on a group of five-year-olds showed that, given the choice of giving up television or their father, one-third chose to give up their father. Another study showed that during the week the average five-year-old spent just 25 minutes in close interaction with their father while 25 hours was spent in close interaction with the TV.

To date there have been countless studies and much research conducted into what effect television might have on young children.

There seems to be a familiar and sobering trend that poorly supervised, children who watch too much television are at risk of being overweight as well as developing behavioural problems, poor sleep patterns, increased violent behaviour and lowered grades at school.

The AAP says it is vital that parents take an active role in their children's television viewing habits by setting limits and helping their child develop media literacy skills so they can better question, analyse and evaluate the television messages that bombard them every day.

Cause for concern – the American model

- The average American child spends more than 1200 hours in front of the TV every year (as opposed to 900 in the classroom).
- 68 per cent of eight- to 18-year-olds have a TV in the bedroom.
- 63 per cent of households have the TV on during meal times.
- 51 per cent of households have the TV on most of the time.
- 53 per cent of households have "no rules" regarding TV.
- 70 per cent of child care centres use TV to occupy children during the day.
- The average two- to 11-year-old watches around 27 hours of poorly supervised TV per week.
- Children see around 2000 beer/wine commercials every year.
- A special cable channel has been designed and marketed for babies. 🗑️