

Television and Your Family



While family is the most important influence in a child's life, TV is not far behind. TV can inform, entertain, and teach us. However, some of what it teaches may not be what you want your children to learn. Read on to find out how TV can affect your children and how you can help make TV-watching safe and fun for your family.

How TV negatively affects your children

There are many ways that TV affects a child's life. When used appropriately, TV can be a positive tool to help your children learn. Studies show that preschool children who watch educational TV can increase their reading and speaking skills. However, parents should be aware of the negative effects including the following:

Time

Most children in the United States watch about 4 hours of TV every day. Watching movies on tape or DVD and playing video games only add to time spent in front of the TV screen. It may be tempting to use TV, movies, and video games to keep your children busy, but playing, reading, and spending time with friends and family are much healthier activities.

Nutrition

Studies show that children who watch too much TV are more likely to be overweight. It takes away from the time they should be running, jumping, and getting the exercise they need. They often snack while watching TV. They also see many commercials for candy, snacks, sugary cereals, and drinks. As a result, children may persuade their parents to buy these unhealthy foods.

Violence

By age 18, the average young person will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence on TV. Children who see violence on TV may become numb to it. They do not understand that real violence hurts people. They may also come to think that it is OK to use violence to solve problems.

Research also shows a very strong link between TV violence and violent behavior in children and teenagers. Watching a lot of violence on TV can lead to hostility, fear, anxiety, depression, nightmares, sleep problems, and posttraumatic stress disorder. It is best not to let your children watch violent programs and violence in cartoons.

TV and toddlers

The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend TV for children younger than 2 years. This is because the first 2 years of life are very important in the growth and development of a child's brain. It is during this time that language and social skills develop. Children need positive interactions with other people to develop these skills. Watching TV takes time away from these important interactions.

Sex

TV exposes children to adult behaviors, like sex. But it usually does not show the risks and results of sexual activity. On TV, sexual activity is often shown as casual, fun, exciting, and without consequences. In ads, sex is often used to sell products and services. Your children may copy what they see on TV to feel more grown up.

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Young people are surrounded by messages that say drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes or cigars are normal activities. These messages often do not say that alcohol and tobacco harm people and may lead to death. TV frequently shows people who drink and smoke as healthy, energetic, sexy, and successful. It is up to you to teach your children the truth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Commercials

The average child will see more than 360,000 commercials on TV before graduating from high school. Commercials are quick, fast-paced, and entertaining and often are louder than the accompanying programs. After seeing the same commercials over and over, children can easily remember a song, slogan, or catchy phrase. Commercials try to convince children that having a certain toy or eating a certain food will make them happy or popular.

10 things parents can do

The following are ways you can help your children develop positive viewing habits:

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

3. **Watch TV with your children.** Whenever possible, watch TV with your children and talk about what they see. If your children are very young, they may not be able to tell the difference between a show, a commercial, a cartoon, or real life. Explain that many characters on TV are not real.
Be especially careful of “reality-based” programs. Most of these shows are not appropriate for children. Even the news can contain violent or other inappropriate material. If you cannot watch TV with your children, talk with them later about what they watched. Better yet, record the programs so that you can watch them with your children at a later time.
4. **Find the right message.** Some TV programs show people as stereotypes. If you see this, talk with your children about the real-life roles of women, the elderly, and people of other races. Remember, if you do not agree with what you see on TV, you can either turn it off or explain why you object. These programs can turn out to be a good learning experience if you help your children find the right message.
5. **Help your children resist commercials.** Do not expect your children to be able to resist commercials without your help. When your children ask for things they see on TV, explain that the purpose of commercials is to make people want things they may not need. You can limit the number of commercials your children see by recording programs and leaving out the commercials or buying or renting children’s videos or DVDs.
6. **Look for quality children’s videos and DVDs.** There are many quality videos and DVDs available for children. Check reviews before buying or renting programs or movies. Information is available in books, newspapers, and magazines, as well as on the Internet.
7. **Give other options.** Watching TV can become a habit for your children. Help them find other things to do like playing; reading; learning a hobby, a sport, an instrument, or an art; or spending time with family, friends, or neighbors.
8. **Set a good example.** As a role model, limiting your own TV viewing and choosing programs carefully will help your children do the same.
9. **Express your views.** When you like or do not like something you see on TV, make yourself heard. Stations, networks, and sponsors pay attention to letters from the public. If you think a commercial is misleading or inappropriately targeting children, write down the product name, channel, and time you saw the commercial and describe your concerns. Call your local Better Business Bureau (BBB) if the commercial is for a local business or product. For national advertising, call the BBB’s Children’s Advertising Review Unit at 866/334-6272 (ext 111) or visit its Web site at www.caru.org. Encourage publishers of TV guides to print ratings and feature articles about shows that are educational for children.

10. **Get more information.** The following resources can provide you with more information about the proper role of TV in your children’s lives:
 - Your pediatrician may have information about TV or you can visit the AAP Web site at www.aap.org.
 - Public service groups publish newsletters that review programs and give tips on how to make TV safe for you and your child.
 - You can ask the parent organization at your child’s school.
 - 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.

TV Parental Guidelines and the v-chip

A TV rating system, known as the TV Parental Guidelines, was created to help parents know which programs contain sex and violence. Parents can use a computer device in their TVs called the v-chip to block programs based on these ratings. The v-chip is programmed from a remote control. All new TVs (13 inches or larger) that were made in the United States after 2000 are required by federal law to have the v-chip.

The ratings apply to all TV programs except news and sports. They appear for 15 seconds at the start of a program. When the rating appears on the screen, an electronic signal sends the rating to the v-chip in the TV.

The ratings are as follows:

TV-Y	For all children.
TV-Y7	For children age 7 and older. The program may contain mild violence that could frighten children younger than age 7.
TV-Y7-FV	For children age 7 and older. The program contains fantasy violence that is glorified and used as an acceptable, effective way to solve a problem. It is more intense than TV-Y7.
TV-G	For general audience. Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. There is little or no violence, no strong language, and little or no sexual content.
TV-PG	Parental guidance is suggested. Parents may find some material unsuitable for younger children. It may contain moderate violence, some sexual content, or strong language.
TV-14	Parents are strongly cautioned. The program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children younger than age 14. It contains intense violence, sexual content, or strong language.
TV-MA	For mature audience. The program may not be suitable for children younger than age 17. It contains graphic violence, explicit sexual activity, or crude language.

Additional letters may be added to the ratings to indicate violence (V), sexual content (S), strong language (L), or suggestive dialogue (D).

This rating system was created to help parents choose programs that are suitable for children. The ratings are usually included in local TV listings. Remember that ratings are not used for news programs, which may not be suitable for young children.

For more information go to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Web site at www.fcc.gov/vchip.

Toppling TVs pose a hazard

Newer TVs with larger, heavier screens can be dangerous to toddlers. Small children have been seriously injured and, in some cases, killed when these front-heavy models fall on them. Use these safety tips to keep your children safe.

- Place your TV on low furniture that is designed to hold your TV model.
- Use brackets or anchors to secure the TV to the wall.
- Do not place remote controls, videos, or other objects that children might try to reach on top of the TV.
- Do not allow children to climb on the TV.

The Children's Television Act

The Children's Television Act ensures that TV stations pay attention to the needs of children aged 16 and younger. Under this law, stations must air at least 3 hours of educational shows for children each week. They must also limit ads during these times to 12 minutes per hour on weekdays and 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends. Stations that do not follow the law risk losing their licenses.

Keep tabs on TV stations in your community. TV stations file quarterly Children's Television Programming Reports with the FCC. For more information call 888/CALL-FCC (888/225-5322) or visit the FCC Parents' Place Web site at www.fcc.gov/parents.

Please note: Listing of resources does not imply endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this publication. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

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

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of Pediatrics



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