

Television: Teacher, Trouble Maker, or Tool????

By Karen Eble, Certified Parenting Educator

I don't know about you, but the TV is on in my house far more than I like. Before resorting to throwing it out a window, I decided to do some research to see if TV is as bad as my gut tells me it is. While there are a few bright spots, research says most of what is on TV is worse than neutral. Most television programs harm our children.

Television is a tool. If we use it wisely, it can educate and entertain. There are excellent shows like Sesame Street, Blues Clues, Discovery, History, and shows on hobbies like cooking. When age appropriate, TV can expand our children's horizons. But most TV is limiting our children. The following is a summary of the research and more importantly, suggestions of things we as parents can do to minimize and mitigate the damage. Keep in mind that the following also applies to computer use, music videos, DVD's, etc.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry states that television viewing can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. ALL television programs are teaching our children something. And when we take a close look at what most programs are teaching our children, it can be rather scary. Research on children's behavior, school performance, weight, sleeping habits, and brain development back up the assertion that TV is harming our children.

Violent Behavior: Many studies have explored whether there is a link between exposure to media violence and violent behavior. Most studies conclude that there is. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Extensive research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed." Children become immune to the horror of violence, gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems, imitate violence they observe on TV, and identify with characters (victims or victimizers) they see on TV.

Furthermore, this research has shown that the more time children spend watching TV, the more likely they are to display aggressive impulses and hostile feelings. This effect has been found to apply whether the televised behavior is performed by a human or by a cartoon character. And aggressive impulses have been found to occur with girls as well as boys and with teenagers and adults as well as children.

Many parents think that since they grew up on violent cartoons and turned out alright, their children will also. But studies have found that the amount of violence

has increased dramatically and the type of violence has changed. It is now more pervasive, more sinister, and more frighteningly realistic.

Other Behaviors: Kids who watch more TV start smoking at an earlier age. Television viewing was a stronger influence on starting smoking than peer smoking or parental smoking. Exposure to alcohol use on TV and in music videos is a risk factor for increased drinking in adolescents. Exposure to sexual content increases the likelihood that children will become sexually active earlier in life.

School Performance: Research has a lot to say about television and school performance. Television viewing may replace activities that we know help with school performance, such as reading, doing homework, pursuing hobbies, and getting enough sleep. Television's effects on education are long term - positive and negative. Studies have found the following:

-Children who watched exclusively educational TV as preschoolers had higher grades, less aggression, and placed more value on academics than those who watched all kinds of TV.

-Children who watched little television before the age of three had significantly better scores in math and reading at age six.

-Watching television as a child affected educational achievement at age 26. Watching more television in childhood increased chances of dropping out of school and decreased chances of getting a college degree, even after controlling for confounding factors.

-Children who watched a lot of violent television at age 5½, defined as cartoons and G-rated movies, had lower grade point averages in English, math, and science in high school. Each hour per day viewing for kids 5 - 15 was associated with a 30% reduction in likelihood of obtaining a college degree even with IQ and parent's level of education taken into account.

Weight: TV is one factor in childhood obesity. Studies have shown that the more TV watched, the more likelihood of a child being overweight. Having a TV in a child's bedroom increases the chances of obesity even more. The more TV watched as a child the higher weight, serum cholesterol, poor fitness and likelihood of smoking in adults. Girls who watch a lot of TV are at increased risk of developing eating disorders.

Sleep/Relaxation: TV viewing leads to sleep problems, especially if viewed right before bedtime. Many of us believe that TV is relaxing. And while we are viewing it, it is relaxing, although not as relaxing as reading a book. But studies show

that a person is less relaxed after the TV is turned off than they were before it went on. And they are less relaxed than people who completed a physical activity or a calmer activity like reading or playing cards.

Brain Development: Research on early brain development and TV is not clear. Many studies link early television viewing with later attention problems, such as ADHD. Other experts disagree with these results. However, most researchers agree with the American Academy of Pediatrics when they state that children aged 2 and younger should have NO screen time. Children older than that should be limited to 1-2 hours per day of nonviolent, educational programming.

So what's a parent to do? How do we help our children develop positive television viewing habits? How do we teach our children to view television as a treat or special entertainment - especially when we may not view television that way ourselves? How can we help mitigate TV's negative effects in a world inundated by TV? Many of the following suggestions come from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Observe: How do our children act after watching various TV shows? Are they more violent? Are they more likely to have nightmares? Do these behaviors decrease when we decrease/eliminate TV viewing for a period of time? Or when we eliminate certain shows? Short term effects are easier to observe - long term effects are far more muddled.

Listen: What are our children saying after viewing different shows? What do they seem to be feeling? Reflect back to them what you think they are saying or feeling. This may help them and you clarify their thoughts and feelings. Do they understand what happened? Very often children miss the story line completely or get a different view than adults anticipate. It is easier to address children's feelings and perceptions in a calm, factual way after we have truly listened to what they are.

Ask questions, and listen some more: Questions can help our children think about what they've seen, process it, and clarify values. Questions, adjusted for age, might include: Are characters mad, sad, scared? Who might be hurt? How do you think they feel now? Would someone get hurt if they did that in real life? What would happen if you tried that? What safety equipment do you think is there but not shown? Did anyone break things? Who is going to fix it? Why do you think that character hurt the other? What could be done instead without hurting anyone? What would you do if you were that character? Does the character look unnaturally thin? How many people really look like that in real life?

Listen and share views: Was there a moral to the story and did your children get it? Was there no moral to the story or no consequences and do our children think they can get away with unacceptable behavior because their favorite character did? Tie the story into your family's values. Studies show that in areas

where a child does not know his/her parents' point of view and has little knowledge or experience to use as guidelines, television can clearly influence beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Point out that although the actor has not actually been hurt or killed, such violence in real life results in pain or death. For older children/teens, use controversial programming as a stepping-off point to initiate discussions about family values, violence, sex and sexuality, and drugs. Reinforce positive behaviors and positive nutritional messages seen on TV. Present alternatives to violence.

Challenge claims of advertisements - will they really make you happier, more popular, sexier. Explain what the purpose of advertising is.

Reduce/Eliminate screen time: Discourage television viewing for children younger than 2 years, and encourage more interactive activities that will promote proper brain development, such as talking, playing, singing, and reading together. Be aware of second-hand television - younger children watching shows their older siblings or parents watch. It is okay to say that some programs are just for grown ups. This could include news - which can be upsetting for many children.

Limit children's total screen time (TV, videos, computer games) to no more than 1 to 2 hours of quality programming per day. Again monitoring is crucial. The V-chip is industry regulated, and very loose in interpretation. Often programs that purport to be educational, really aren't. Eliminating or reducing TV on school nights sends the message that school is more important than TV.

Monitor: Monitor the shows children and adolescents are viewing. Most programs should be informational, educational, and nonviolent. Choose shows that engage through challenging and interesting content, rather than flashy graphics and noise. Make sure programs are age and developmentally appropriate. Do your children pay attention and interact with the program? If not, it may be too complicated or too easy.

If you haven't put a TV in your child's bedroom, don't. If there is already a TV there, consider removing it. Studies show that children with a TV in the bedroom watch over an hour more TV per day than children who don't. And it is far more difficult/impossible to monitor and discuss program content if the TV is in the bedroom.

If your child has a computer in the bedroom, then do periodic "spot checks" to monitor what your child is accessing.

Refuse to let children see shows known to be violent. Change the channel or turn off the TV when offensive material comes on. Make sure you give an explanation of why. If you choose to view a violent show with your children, stress the belief that violence is not the best way to resolve a problem.

Minimize the scary stuff, especially programs that glamorize or sexualize violence - even for tweens and teens. If you choose to watch violence, make sure there are real consequences.

Talk to other parents: While you can control viewing at home, unless the screen is in a bedroom, you cannot control what is viewed at other homes unless you are in contact and agreement with those parents. Similar rules help minimize peer pressure.

Plan TV viewing: Do you control TV - or does TV control your family life? Does TV bring your family together or pull it apart? How much TV do your children watch? Does your guess include TV watched at friends, at daycare, in their bedroom, after you are asleep? What is the content and quality of the programs your children watch? What is the context of what they watch? Is TV on in the background so one eye is on TV and the other on trying to hold a conversation? Do you channel surf out of boredom or intentionally choose a program? Is this the result you want? Most parents don't know the answers to or haven't really thought about these questions. Keeping a TV diary for a couple of weeks will help answer these questions and get you started towards mindful viewing. Mindful viewing means treating TV as the tool it is and consciously using it to help your children, not harm them.

Model behavior: If you want your children to view TV mindfully, you will need to set an example.

Provide alternatives: When your child says I'm bored, does it become your problem? Or is it an incentive for your child to be creative? Are the raw materials for creativity available?

Make time for physical activity, creative play, and positive family interaction: Even educational TV is no substitute for active play. Children need to spend considerable amount of time in active play. Encourage alternative entertainment for children, including reading, athletics, hobbies, and creative play. What are some things you can do together? Can you prepare dinner together? Can your child play in the kitchen with the pots and pans while you prepare dinner? What activities are available that you can do together? Can you play board games or cards together? Often newspapers or websites have lists of inexpensive or free activities that can be done as a family.

Make your children part of the planning process: They may come up with all kinds of fun things you might not think of. And it will make them more invested in the process of mindful TV viewing. Your family could make a boredom jar. When your children say they are bored, they get to pick something from the jar to do

And no, I haven't tossed the TV out the window yet, but we are trying to be more mindful viewers!

Resources:

Christalis, Dimitri, The Elephant in the Living Room: Make television work for your kids, Rodale Press, 2006.

www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/children_and_tv_violence (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) No. 13; Updated November 2002

www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm (American Academy of Pediatrics) Media Guidelines for Parents: Television - How it effects children; Television's Impact on Children; Using television Wisely; Television and the Family

www.apa.org/monitor/feb03/unraveling.html (American Psychological Association) Unraveling new media's effects on children: Responding to a barrage of questions from the public, researchers are just starting to discover how electronic technologies influence child development

http://www.ithaca.edu/cretv/research/tv_lives.html Television in the Lives of Children, Cyndy Scheibe

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/tv_affects_child.html How TV Affects Your Child

www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/tv.htm University of Michigan Health System Television - What do I need to know about children and TV?

About the Author

Karen Eble, is a Certified Parenting Educator at The Center for Parenting Education. The mission of The Center for Parenting Education is to educate and support parents to raise their families in emotionally healthy ways so that their children can thrive personally, socially and academically. Programs include educational workshops and one-on-one Personal Coaching, both of which are conducted in a face-to-face or online format. In addition, the Center's website contains a large variety of articles that address the everyday parenting challenges parents face. www.CenterforParentingEducation.org