



Television and its affects

Watching TV is an easy and affordable way to entertain children. These days, children can view programs on a TV, computer or a number of other electronic devices. They also use computers and devices to play games, learn and socialise. Using these new screens and devices has not reduced the amount of time children and families spend watching their favourite screen, the TV.

This increased screen time for children has come at the cost of children's physical activity which helps build healthy bodies, and free play which helps them learn to use their imagination and entertain themselves.

There are now recommended limits on the amount of time children should spend watching all screens in a day.

They are:

- no screen time for children under 2 years
- no more than 1 hour per day for children under 5 years
- no more than 2 hours per day recreational use for children 5 to 18 years.

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Watching TV and other screens means less time to play, socialise and be active.
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How TV affects children

Skills such as thinking and talking are affected by experiences in early childhood, including watching TV. While some programs are educational, research shows that very few do more than entertain. Watching TV is mostly passive. Children don't need to think for themselves or be creative. The best way for them to learn is to practice speaking, writing, thinking and solving problems. Reading and playing are much better ways for children to learn.

Studies show that:

- the amount children are affected by TV depends on how real they believe the program to be
- scary content can have a big impact. Short term effects can include intense fear or crying, and long term there can be sleep problems, worrying, not wanting to be alone, or concern about themselves or others being hurt or killed
- after watching fast-paced TV shows children can have trouble sticking with tasks that take longer, like reading or doing puzzles. If viewed before bed they can affect children's sleep.

Watching a lot of TV has been linked to children:

- not getting enough sleep
- becoming overweight or obese. Being inactive for long periods is only part of the problem. They are exposed to more advertisements for high calorie foods, and tend to consume more snack foods and sweet drinks when watching TV. The risk of becoming overweight is increased if the TV is in their bedroom
- having a short attention span or poor impulse control. TV camera shots change every three to four seconds which teaches children to expect constant stimulation. They can become easily bored and even develop attention problems at school
- accepting violence as a normal way to solve problems. Children can become desensitised to violence if they see it often.

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Helping children set limits on TV viewing is easier than trying to change habits once they are formed. Children learn from what you do so this could be a good time to think about your own viewing habits.

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Effects of TV at different ages

Preschool children (under 5 years):

- have difficulty working out the difference between fantasy and reality on TV, especially if things look like they do in real life
- tend to focus on the exciting bits but need help to follow plots. They don't yet understand cause and effect
- can think cartoon characters are real
- can be frightened by scary images such as vicious animals or monsters, or when a normal character turns into something scary
- can become frightened and upset about stories involving the death of a parent or vivid images of natural disasters. They are not able to understand 'probability' so may not be reassured if you tell them 'it isn't likely to happen to us'
- may become fearful if violence is shown in familiar settings. For example, homes, families, schools, or to children or animals.

Lower primary school children (5 to 9 years):

- still have some difficulty working out what is real and what is fantasy. They tend to admire and want to be like the hero or heroine
- may take a message from cartoons that 'violence works and wins' even if they can tell it is fantasy
- 6 to 7 year olds can believe TV families are real families or Sesame Street is a real street. Nine to 10 year olds are much clearer that actors are playing a part.

Upper primary school years (10 to 12 years):

- are likely to be disturbed by content which is based on fact because it means it could happen to them
- are curious about the teenage world, sex and fashion. They can be misled by the way romantic relationships are shown in programs and movies
- understand how TV programs are made. For example, how cartoons are made or the use of special effects
- can be upset by violence or the threat of violence, or stories in which children are hurt or threatened.

Early adolescence (13 years and up):

- can be affected by realistic-looking physical harm or threats of intense harm, by images of sexual assault, or by threats from aliens or the supernatural.

Some children may enjoy being frightened a little, but only when they feel secure. Knowing they are really safe allows them the freedom to have 'thrill' feelings. However, the more children see frightening programs, the more they believe the world is a frightening place. This can make them anxious and fearful.

Advertising

Advertising influences all of us. Most children under 8 years believe what the advertisements tell them, particularly if it shows a well-known person or a favourite character. Children between 8 to 10 years are aware that adverts don't always tell the whole truth. However, they are not sure how to tell when they are not.

You can help children learn how advertising works by talking about what they see on TV and in other places. Help them spot the tricks and gimmicks used to get people to buy products. The hidden message in many advertisements is that you need to buy the product to be happy, to feel good about yourself or to be accepted by others.

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You might ask 'Why do you think everyone in that advertisement is happy, slim and beautiful? Is that how it is in real life?', or 'Do you think the product will make people like them more?'
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Violence

Many studies show that children who see lots of violence on TV:

- are more likely to use aggressive ways to solve problems
- become less sensitive to violence in real life
- become anxious about the 'mean and scary' world in which they live.

The children most likely to be affected by TV violence are:

- those who watch over three hours each day, particularly boys
- younger children
- children who feel insecure or who see or hear violence in the home.

You can help children realise the violence they see on TV is often 'pretend' and would have a much bigger impact in real life. You might point out that when someone gets shot in real life they probably wouldn't be able to get up and keep on fighting, or when a car rolls over in a high speed chase it would probably cause serious injury or death.

What parents can do

Make a family media plan

Write down a family media plan that is agreed by the whole family. It is a great chance for children and parents to work things out together and to talk about your family's values. You can decide as a family how you will create a balance with other recreational activities. It is important to review the plan often as children get older.

You might want to agree about:

- how much time is spent viewing TV and other screens
- keeping all screens in a room that is open so you can keep an eye on what children are watching
- not having TVs in children's bedrooms and leaving electronic devices outside bedrooms after lights out
- no TV and other screens while getting ready for school, at mealtimes, while doing homework, and an hour before bedtime
- only switching the TV on after all jobs are done, and not having TV on in the background
- bedtimes that suit your child's age rather than when a TV program finishes. Select programs that finish well before bedtime, or record them to watch another time
- watching music videos. Many of them are very sexual and show negative stereotypes which can impact children's self-image. Children as young as 5 or 6 are more likely to have concerns about their body shape if they watch music videos.

Planning what children watch

Help children plan what they watch from an early age. Use program classifications to select what is suitable for their age. Help children become choosy about what they watch by making their own ratings, such as C (can't be missed), S (so-so), W (waste of time). Encourage them to first stop watching W and later S.

It is also important to plan screen-free time so children can do other activities. Make a list together of fun things they love to do and things you can do as a family.

Watch TV together

Watching TV with children is a chance to teach them to be critical viewers. Help them question what they see and to know how stories work. If you can't watch with them, talk with them before or after the show.

You might want to:

- know the characters in the programs your children watch. Talk with them about their favourite characters and what they like about them
- help them make sense of what they see by understanding the structure of stories. For example, that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. Stories also usually try to solve a problem. Helping them understand how the character solves the problem also helps them problem-solve in real life
- help them understand that programs can affect our moods. Ask them to describe how they feel when they watch something. For example, bored, happy, scared, sad, excited, grumpy or worried. Help them talk about any uncomfortable feelings so they learn how to work through feelings and reactions to things
- ask questions that help them be critical viewers. For example, 'What do you think would happen if they did that in real life?', or 'How do you think you might feel if someone did that to you?'

Don't let TV shape children's values. If you don't express your views children can think you agree with what's on the screen.

Watching TV news

TV news programs often show the most violent or shocking things that happened that day. It is only a small part of what happens in the world. For example, the news doesn't focus on the thousands of planes that take off and land safely, only when there is a crash.

Watching the news can frighten children because they:

- can't understand the low chance of these events happening in their own life
- may think when they see the same event over and over again that the event is happening multiple times. For example, when they see a tragedy or disaster in the news over many days.

It can help to:

- talk with children early and often about news images that might come up during other programs and help them understand what they are seeing. Children might see the 'news headlines' or a 'newsflash' during their favourite programs
- not allow younger children to watch the news. You can record the news and watch it after children are in bed
- watch with children as they get older and start to become interested in what's going on in the world. It is a chance to talk about current events and help them understand what's happening. You can help them get a balanced view.

Getting help

There is a lot of information available about suitable TV programs, movies and apps for children of different ages. Check TV guides for classifications and take advice or recommendations from friends on appropriate things to watch.

You can get further advice and support from:

- School
- School Nurse
- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/healthylifestyles/move-more/screen-time>
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/home-learning-a-parent-s-guide-to-television-time>

Attribution to: The Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Government of South Australia, Community Engagement, Sourced on 14/12/2021, <https://parenting.sa.gov.au/easy-guides>