

# Television and the Family



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 what you want your child to learn. TV programs and commercials often show violence, alcohol or drug use, and sexual content that are not suitable for children or teenagers. Studies show that TV viewing may lead to more aggressive behavior, less physical activity, altered body image, and increased use of drugs and alcohol. By knowing how television affects your children and by setting limits, you can help make your child's TV-watching experience less harmful, but still enjoyable.

## 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 or DVD 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 exploring 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

Studies show that 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 often snack while watching TV. They also see many commercials for unhealthy foods, such as candy, snacks, sugary cereals, and drinks. Commercials almost never give information about the foods children should eat to keep healthy. As a result, children may persuade their parents to buy unhealthy foods.

### 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. They become numb to violence. If the "good guys" use violence, children may learn that it is okay to use force to solve problems. Studies show that even children's cartoons contain a significant amount of violence.

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

## A word about...TV for toddlers

Children of all ages are constantly learning new things. The first 2 years of life are especially important in the growth and development of your child's brain. During this time, children need good, positive interaction with other children and adults to develop good language and social skills. Learning to talk and play with others is far more important than watching television.

Until more research is done about the effects of TV on very young children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not recommend television for children younger than 2 years of age. For older children, the AAP recommends no more than 1 to 2 hours per day of quality screen time.

## Sex

Television 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 shown as normal, fun, exciting, and without consequences. In commercials, sex is often used to sell products and services. Your child may copy what she sees on TV 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 do not 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 40,000 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. Commercials 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. Do not put a television in your child's bedroom.

### 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. Much of their content is not appropriate for children. News broadcasts also contain violent or other inappropriate material. If your schedule prevents you from watching TV with your child, talk to her later about what she watched. Better yet, record 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 do not agree with certain subject matter, you can either turn off the TV or explain why you object.

### 5. Help your child resist commercials

Do not 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 record programs and leave out the commercials or buy or rent children's videos or DVDs.

### 6. Look for quality children's videos and DVDs

There are many quality videos and DVDs available for children that you can buy or rent. 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 child. Help your child find other things to do with his time, such as playing; reading; learning a hobby, a sport, an instrument, or an art; or spending time with family, friends, or neighbors.

## TV Parental Guidelines and the v-chip

In 1996, Congress passed a law that helps parents control what their children watch on television. The law called for a rating system to be developed. The ratings, known as the TV Parental Guidelines, help parents know which programs contain sex and violence. Parents can use a computer device in their televisions called the v-chip to block programs according to these ratings. The law requires all new television sets with screens 13" or larger that were made in the United States after January 1, 2000, 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 your television set.

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 ratings system was created to help parents choose programs that are suitable for children, even without the use of the v-chip. The ratings are usually included in local TV listings. Before watching, check your local TV listings to find out if a program contains violence, sexual content, or strong language. Remember that ratings are not used for news programs, which may not be suitable for young children. Also, TVs with screens smaller than 13" will not have the v-chip.

More information is available at the following Web sites:

- [www.fcc.gov/vchip](http://www.fcc.gov/vchip)
- [www.vchippeducation.org](http://www.vchippeducation.org)

### 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.

## The Children's Television Act of 1990

The Children's Television Act ensures that TV stations pay attention to the needs of children from age 2 to 16. Under this law, stations must air at least 3 hours of educational and informational shows for children each week. They must also limit advertising during children's shows 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 license.

Keep tabs on TV stations in your community. TV stations file quarterly Children's Television Programming Reports with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). You can access these reports on the FCC's Web site at [svartifoss2.fcc.gov/prod/kidvid/prod/kidvid.htm](http://svartifoss2.fcc.gov/prod/kidvid/prod/kidvid.htm)

You can also file complaints with the FCC. More information is available at

Federal Communications Commission

Consumer Information Bureau

Consumer Complaints

445 12th St SW

Washington, DC 20554

Phone: 888/225-5322 (toll-free)

Fax: 202/418-0232

[www.fcc.gov/cib](http://www.fcc.gov/cib)

## 9. Express your views

When you like or do not 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 if the commercial is for a local business or product. For national advertising, 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 AAP. Ask for the AAP brochures *Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens* and *The Ratings Game: Choosing Your Child's Entertainment*. Information from the AAP is also available on the Internet at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) and [www.medem.com](http://www.medem.com).
- **Public service groups** publish newsletters that review programs and give tips on how to make TV a positive experience for you and your child.

## Toppling TVs pose a hazard

Newer televisions with larger, heavier screens in smaller casings can present a danger to toddlers. Small children are being seriously injured and, in some cases, killed when these front-heavy models fall on them. More than 2,000 children end up in the emergency room each year due to injuries from falling televisions, according to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission.

The following safety tips can be used to prevent such injuries:

- Place your television set on low furniture that is the proper size and is designed to support your TV model.
  - Use braces or anchors to secure televisions and supporting furniture to the wall.
  - Do not place remote controls, videos, or other objects that children might try to reach on top of the television.
  - Do not allow children to play with or climb on the television set.
- You can also help by encouraging manufacturers to design models that are more stable and to provide methods for tethering TVs to the wall.

- **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.

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

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of Pediatrics



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