

Did You Know?

Turn Off the TV!

RAISED BY THE MEDIA

"It used to be that parents, extended families, and communities passed on their values to the next generation. Now, many children are being raised by the media," writes author Karina Kenison. "TV characters tell them what to buy, how to dress, what to eat, how to talk, what to aspire to, what to love, and what to scorn." Given the power and the pervasiveness of media in our lives, she asserts, it is not surprising that so many parents feel helpless or have lost faith in their ability to set limits and raise their own children.

Media Shapes Our Values – Dr. David Walsh, president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, understands the dilemma of parents today. He founded his Institute (see www.mediafamily.org) 12 years ago based on the strong belief that "*Whoever tells the story defines the culture.*" What is new, he says, is *who* tells the stories and how they are told. Today, it's the media that tells the stories and defines the values.

Walsh says teams of Hollywood scriptwriters, directors, and video game producers have replaced parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors, counselors, and coaches as the primary storytellers in kids' lives. Kids today are exposed to more stories that are more powerfully presented than at any time in history.

Increased screen time is the most significant lifestyle change for children over the last decade. Kids today spend more time in front of electronic media than any other activity except for sleeping.

"Rejecting the values promoted by the media takes an enormous amount of effort.

♦
It means building a wall around young children and protecting them, for a time, from the culture's prevailing winds.

It means teaching them what we love and what we value, and clearing the space for their own growth."

–K. Kenison

Dr. Walsh says some of the stories kids see and hear on TV benefit them. Many harm them. But there is no doubt, he warns, that *all* the stories being told on television are powerful for children.

No wonder turning off the TV can seem like such a radical step. Most of us are held in the tight grip of the media—shaped by it and dependent on it. We cannot imagine life without it.

Who Do You Want to Be Your Child's Primary Teachers?

Dr. Walsh challenges us to become more thoughtful and aware as parents. What is your child absorbing? What are the lessons being learned?

Keep in mind that advertisers are using the media to influence young children. Notice, he says, that "there are a plethora of new media platforms designed specifically for children fueled by powerful marketing strategies." The average American child may view as many as 40,000 television commercials every year. Children as young as age three recognize brand logos and show a brand loyalty starting at age two.

Unfortunately, young children are not able to distinguish between commercials and TV programs. They do not recognize that commercials are trying to sell something—and they are the guinea pigs.



When the TV goes off, life begins.

Once we see our homes as sanctuaries from a hectic world, then television begins to feel more and more like an unsavory intruder, robbing our rooms of life and meaning, stealing our time, and preying on our souls.

When it comes to TV, less really is more. Or, as my son Henry has advised me: "Just say that TV fills your head up with other people's ideas, which means that you don't have as much room for your own. Also, it's a waste of time."

...Words of wisdom from a product of the counter-culture.

–Karina Kenison

HOW MUCH TIME DOES YOUR CHILD SPEND IN FRONT OF A SCREEN?

Young children are spending more time in front of an ever expanding number of screens. A *Kaiser Family Foundation* study found that 19% of babies in the United States have a TV in their bedroom. It goes up from there: 43% of children aged 4-6 have TV's in their room. A new television station has even been launched that is targeted towards babies under 1 year old. Did you know that children as young as 14 months of age will imitate what they see on TV?

“For too many kids, screen time has replaced time with parents or caregivers doing other brain-building activities like reading, imaginative play and storytelling.”

(Dr. David Walsh)

What about your family? What is the role of media in your home? All too often, we lapse into using the screen as a babysitter for young children. It's an easy time-filler and stress-reducer. Every parent understands the dilemma. Parenting young children is exhausting, and we need a break. We're tired, the kids are stressed, and TV offers a simple solution. It's not that we need to give up screen time altogether, but there are some concerns.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

TV Impacts Early Development - The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that *children two and under should not be exposed to television*. Television viewing may be harmful to language development, motor development (because of lack of physical exercise), nutrition (due to advertisements that promote food without nutritional value), focus/concentration (due to fast-paced nature of the programming), social intelligence, creativity and internal motivation. Heavy TV viewing and video games playing have been linked to obesity, attention deficit problems, and aggressive behavior.

Children between the ages of 3 and 5 are at a critical stage in brain growth for the development of language and other cognitive skills. Heavy television viewing can impact the development of brain neural networks by displacing time a child would spend in other activities and verbal interactions that promote cognitive development.

TV Is Passive – Watching television isn't inherently bad, but it requires nothing of your child. Young children learn more by *DOING* than by watching. Kids watching TV are being handed entertainment, rather than learning to entertain themselves. They are not interacting with other kids. They are not making up their own fantasy games.

TV Doesn't Foster Imagination or Creative Problem-Solving - These are the key skills that are the foundation of learning, says Jane Healy, author of *Your Child's Growing Mind*.

We know from years of experience in early child development, combined with the latest discoveries in brain science, that children's minds are like sponges, constantly learning from experience. The experiences our kids have during their preschool years help create the mental map they will use later on, as youth and eventually, as adults. This means that the more we make, reinforce, and re-create positive experiences with our kids, the greater chance children will have to grow into healthy, successful and happy adults.

Every child needs to learn how to read to be successful. The groundwork for reading success is laid in the preschool years. Watching hours of entertainment TV does not contribute to school success, it hinders it. The time your preschool child spends watching TV could be used for reading or participating in other learning activities.

Remember, to have a fully rich, thinking brain, a child needs exposure to a *broad* range of experiences that call on him to exercise *all* his thinking skills. Dr. Walsh is fond of saying: “neurons that fire together, wire together.” The ones that don't, wither away.

Video Games Teach Quick Fire Responses, Not Critical Thinking Skills - New research from England found that a study group of kids were much better at the quick-fire, instant response answers than fourteen year old kids were in 1976. But but when it came to deeper thinking, the 1976-ers beat today's kids hands down! What's changed? What experiences are wiring their brains differently? It's the experience of interactive media that has made kids today so highly skilled at quick-fire responses, Dr. Walsh reflects. “I am not anti- video games. What kids need, though, is balance. Critical thinking skills... may deteriorate if we don't give our kids practice in these skills also. The future

Did You Know?

- 20% of young children (age 2-7) have TV's in their bedrooms.
- Children spend more time watching TV any other activity in their day except sleeping.
- One in five “educational programs” for children was found to have NO educational value.
- Watching moderate amounts of educational TV can help build vocabulary, number and letter skills.
- For children where English is a second language, watching television can help them learn English.
- A child's preschool years are critical in forming their future TV viewing habits.

From www.mediafamily.org

will belong to creative problem solvers, not to people who deal in only superficial facts.”

Children Are Impacted by Media Violence - Did you know that by the time a child is eighteen years old, he or she will witness on television (with average viewing time) 200,000 acts of violence including 40,000 murders? (Huston, 1992). Young children who see media violence have a greater chance of imitating it and becoming more aggressive themselves. Since the 1950s, more than 1,000 studies have been done on the effects of violence in television and movies. The majority of these studies conclude that children who watch significant amounts of television and movie violence are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, attitudes and values. (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 1999)

28% of children's television shows contain four or more acts of violence
(Woodward, 1999).

The EFFECTS of MEDIA VIOLENCE on CHILDREN

✦ Children can increase their antisocial and aggressive behavior.

✦ Children may become less sensitive to the effects of violence and less empathetic to those who suffer.

✦ Children learn that violence is an acceptable way to settle conflicts.

✦ Children may come to view the world as more mean and violent, and they may become more fearful.

✦ Children start to assume the worst with their peers and react more aggressively towards them.

✦ Children will want to view increasingly more violence over time.

Watching Is Experiencing - Recent research has indicated that young brains have “mirror neurons” which cause a child to “experience” actions and emotions that are witnessed. In the instance of TV viewing, a child’s brain may be literally *experiencing* the situations and emotions conveyed (e.g. the violence and aggression). When exposed, this experience is absorbed during your child’s most vulnerable period of development.

Children are affected at any age, but young children are most vulnerable to the effects of media violence. (Bushman, 2001)

Young children:

- are more easily impressionable.
- have a harder time distinguishing between fantasy and reality.
- cannot easily discern motives for violence.
- learn by observing and imitating.

Aggression without Consequences - When thinking about the effect of violence on young children, keep these facts in mind.

When the violence is committed by an attractive, charismatic hero with whom a child identifies, the effect of that violence will be greater. Also, the more a child’s attention is intently focused on the screen/or emotionally aroused he is, the greater the impact will be on his brain.

In addition, if a child sees the violence as being *real* (i.e.: reflecting real life), the greater the effect on him. Furthermore, if children see that aggressive behavior on the screen lacks consequences or punishment, they presume that violence is justified or rewarded. (Walsh, Media & Family)

“Highly Sensitive” children especially need to be shielded from the overstimulation of media intensity or violence.

TV Affects Children’s Sleep – Viewing exciting or dramatic content is known to produce physiological changes (increased stress and arousal hormones). A *Kaiser Family Foundation* study found that young children

may be particularly susceptible to these effects. Secretion of stress and arousal hormones is associated with sleep problems. Both sleep onset and the quality of sleep are affected. The study suggests that viewing frightening or conflictual programming (even in children’s programs) may also produce nightmares and night wakings.

TV Stimulates the Desire for MORE - Television programs and commercials may also create a sense of envy for status and material possessions. Television may cause difficulty for your child in knowing the difference between his wants and his needs. Research indicates that children who watch a lot of television want more toys they have seen in advertisements, and they eat more advertised food than children who do not watch as much television.

TV Affects the Acquisition of Early Reading Skills - Children achieve more success in early reading skills if they have experiences with books and other print media and if they were read to as preschoolers. When television replaces the time a child would otherwise spend on reading practice, it delays a child in acquiring good reading skills. Research does indicate, however, that children who watch a limited amount of carefully constructed educational programming aimed at their level (such as Sesame Street) do better on pre-reading skills. But the same studies show that children who watch cartoons (or purely entertainment TV) during preschool years, do poorer on pre-reading skills at age five. These were the same kids less likely to spend time with books or print media.

WHAT TO DO?



SUGGESTIONS for "TAMING THE TUBE"

Limit television watching—even in the background - You don't need to banish the television. But how about aiming for balance? Maybe the better question to ask is this one: *Is my child missing time doing other important brain-building activities at this time?*

Know what your kids are watching - It is important to be aware of program content as well as the content of the daily news. The younger the child, the more impressionable he or she is, and the less experienced in evaluating content against the values of family and community. Additionally, emotional images may intrude upon and interrupt sleep.

Turn off TV during meals - Catch up with one another. Focus on each other. Share stories and activities from each person's day.

Keep the TV out of kid's bedrooms - It is difficult to monitor what your children are watching when they are watching TV in their own room. Having a TV in a child's room discourages participation in family activities and encourages them to watch TV when they could be studying, reading, or sleeping.

Set some guidelines about when and what children watch - This can be done in conversation with your children, but *the final call belongs to the adults*. The clearer the rules, the better (i.e., no TV before school, or until homework is completed, etc). Setting new limits may be upsetting to your children at first, but consistency is very important.

Use Your V-Chip - All new television sets contain a V-chip that parents can program to filter out objectionable programs. Use it!

Practice "appointment" TV - Decide in advance what's good and watch it as a family. Go through the guide and make family decisions on shows to watch for the week. Discuss reasons for the decisions with your children. If in doubt, get more information. In choosing TV shows or videos, make use of independent evaluations, like [KidScore®](#). Discuss issues and ideas with other adults, friends, and parents of your children's playmates.

Put the family on a TV diet or challenge them to a "NO TV" Day - Schedule some fun alternative activities. When you do watch television, watch it with your children.

Talk to your children about what they are watch - Young children need interpreters for some of the anxiety-laden material they may see in the media. Ask specific questions. Ask what your child sees, as it may be very different from what you see. Ask him to tell you what things mean to him. Ask him why he wants to watch specific shows, what characters he likes and doesn't like. Discuss the commercials and his perception of toys, cereals, etc. and the people who sell them.

Use the DVR to your advantage - Record a good show and schedule a special family viewing – complete with popcorn. If a show is on at an inconvenient time such as meal time, homework time or family time, record it to watch later.

Create a TV coupon system – Give kids coupons that they turn in when they watch a program. Unused coupons can be "cashed in" for a special family activity. Better yet, have your kids "earn" TV time by reading, helping, or exercising,

Don't make the TV the focal point of the room - Make your children the focus of your attention, not the TV. Research shows that people watch less TV if it is not in the most prominent location in the room.

Patronize good programs and demand more of them - Express your opinions to TV and radio stations, network executives, and advertisers. Tell them not only what you do not like, but also what you like. Addresses for networks and local stations are in your TV guide. Also, remember that your money has a voice of its own.

GUIDELINES TIPS FOR A SMART START

1. Limit the amount of TV your child watches:
0-2 years: No TV at all
Preschool/Elem: 1-2 hours/day*
2. Be careful of the content.
3. Limit preschoolers to educational programs.
4. Read to your child.
5. Have books in your home.
6. Take your child to the library.
7. Talk, talk, talk with your child. (Have real conversations!)
8. Do homework away from TV.

(* Recommended by American Academy Pediatrics)

(from Tips from Dr. Dave)

UNPLUGGING HAS BENEFITS

Going “All the Way” - One family who turned off the TV found that “eliminating television cleared a space for the things we really care about.” Author Katrina Kenison writes, “I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that turning off the TV was the greatest single thing my husband and I have done to foster creativity, imaginative play, and independent thinking in our children. What’s more, we realized that we suddenly felt more connected to each other and more in touch with ourselves. Somehow, we got far more than we gave up.” Does this sound a little scary?

Here is Kenison’s list of the benefits her family experienced in turning off the TV in her home. She shares this observation: “Television turns us all into jaded voyeurs. You can’t help but become desensitized to the images that wash over you. Once we eliminated the daily flood of sensory information from our lives, our own senses seemed heightened. (Now) our children experience life fully and feel it deeply—both its beauty and its sadness.”



For One Family, No TV Means...

More time for music - Listening. Playing instruments. Practicing. Singing.

More time for reading - Reading aloud, reading alone, reading for pleasure, reading for education. Rediscovering the sheer pleasure of losing oneself in a good book.

More time for art - Hours for drawing, coloring, painting. Creative projects abound.

More time to play - Freedom for spontaneous, unstructured, activity. Daydreaming. Fantasy.

More time for each other - More time to get to know each other. To connect. To “make our own fun.”

More time to live - Doing, instead of watching. Engaging in real life activity, instead of passively disengaging. Being present to the moment. Creativity.

K. Kennison, *Mitten Strings*

TAKE A STEP BACK FROM TV – BOOKS CAN HELP!

Try these books for a fun way to celebrate the wonderful things that can happen when we turn off the TV. Reading to your child is still one of the best brain-building activities you can offer. And, it builds relationship at the same time.

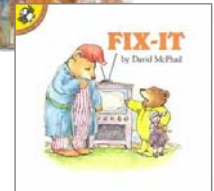
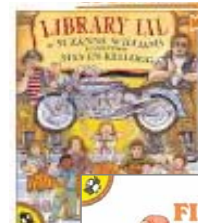
Mouse TV by Matt Novak, 1994. - One night when the television doesn’t work, the mouse family decides to spend time doing other fun things they don’t usually do.

When the TV Broke by Harriet Zeifert, 1989. – Jeffrey goes through withdrawal when his TV doesn’t work, until he “gets busy” and creates an imaginary city out of boxes. When the TV comes on, he’s having too much fun to watch it.

Library Lil by Suzanne Williams, 1997. – The town librarian converts all of the TV addicts in town into readers one stormy night when the power lines go down.

Fix-It by David Mc Phail, 1984. Emma loves being read to so much when her TV breaks down, that she ends up wanting to reads to her dolls. When the TV is fixed, she’s too busy to care.

The Best Way to Play by Bill Cosby, 1997. – Little Bill and his friend discover that it’s more fun to pretend to be space explorers with each other than to sit around playing a video game.



AIM FOR BALANCE

Thoughtful Parents Are the Counterculture - Columnist Ellen Goodman suggested several years ago that “*thoughtful parents have become the real counterculture in our society.*” That is, they counter the culture’s prevailing messages with deeper, richer values. So be a thoughtful parent. Notice what your child is learning from the particular media he is exposed to. Be watchful of who is doing the teaching. Define your values and begin asserting them. Practice being clear and strong with your preschooler now. This will give you confidence for the bigger issues you will encounter later on. Build your child’s brain by offering a wide variety of new experiences for him. Above all, give your child time for *active* and *imaginary* PLAY--without distraction from competing influences.

SOURCES:

Children’s Advocate, March-April 2004.

One Hundred Child Development Tips: Insights and Suggestions from Montessori Teachers by Heather Pedersen, Ph.D. Sandpiper Press, 2007.

Kaiser Family Foundation Studies, Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Preschoolers, and Parents/Children’s Media and Sleep Problems

Mitten Strings for God: Reflections for Mothers in a Hurry by Katrina Kenison. Warner Books, 2000.

Your Child’s Growing Mind by Jane Healy. Doubleday, 1987.

MediaWise, National Institute on Media and the Family.

www.mediafamily.org

TEACHERS FIND SCHOOL SUCCESS TIED TO PARENTS SAYING “NO”

I recently received an interesting letter from a middle school math teacher. A few years ago this teacher did an informal survey of his students. He wanted to find out how many of his students had TVs in their bedroom and other media habits. What he found correlated with the national average: approximately 2/3 of his students had TVs in their bedroom and 1/3 did not. Then he went to his grade book to calculate mean grade point averages for each group. The non-TV in the bedroom group had a grade average of 3.2, the TV in the bedroom kids had a grade average of 2.3. Now on the surface it looks like kids with TVs in their bedrooms do poorer in school. Which on the whole I think is true. But there is a bigger lesson in this little informal study and this teacher went on to find it.

He looked at his most successful students, including those in an honors math class. What he found was that irrespective of whether they had a TV in their bedroom or not, (although most did not), these kids had parents who said “no”, put limits on their kids media use, enforced homework time and a regular bedtime, and had high expectations. Unsuccessful kids, also irrespective of bedroom TVs, tended to spend little or no time on homework, frequently stayed up past midnight, excessively played video games, and heard “no” from parents much less frequently, if at all. He found that many of these kids could succeed, but lacked motivation and the self-discipline needed for school success.

Now researchers could immediately poke a thousand holes in this little study, but that’s not the point. This teacher resonated with the **Say Yes to No** message because of what he sees in his classroom every day: **the values of More, Fast, Easy and Fun have, for many kids, overtaken the character traits of self-discipline and the ability to say “no.”** This teacher is worried not only about individual kids’ futures, but our country’s future also.

FROM--MEDIA WISE: National Institute on the Media and the Family www.mediafamily.org

Media use that involves excitement, suspense, drama, and conflict may be too exciting for children, especially at bedtime. Viewing exciting or violent content—whether actual or implied—is known to be associated with physiological changes consistent with increased stress and arousal hormones.^{38, 39} Young children may be particularly susceptible to these effects.³⁸ Because secretion of these hormones is associated with increased delay of sleep and poor sleep quality,^{3, 40} it is likely that viewing exciting or dramatic content delays sleep onset and reduces sleep quality.³⁷ Beyond direct physiological effects, viewing frightening, conflictual, or violent content may produce nightmares and associated night wakings, a significant contributor to poor sleep quality.^{37, 41-43} These reactions are not limited to frankly violent adult fare, but include seemingly innocent

children’s programs and the television news as well.^{41, 42}