

CHILDREN *and* TELEVISION



USING TV SENSIBLY

Television has been around for more than a half century. The first appearance of TV in the United States occurred at a World's Fair in 1939, but regular television broadcasting did not begin until the late 1940s. Still, concern about the impact of television on children began when TV was in its infancy. By the early 1950s, parents, teachers and social scientists started to ask their legislators to "do something" about the amount of violence on TV.

In addition to this initial worry about violence, many professionals and parents questioned the quality of television programs designed for children, the amount of advertising directed to young viewers, and the way television portrayed men, women and ethnic minorities. Another concern is the amount of time that children spend watching television in general.

Over the years, social scientists have published thousands of articles and books in response to the questions raised about children and television. The results of this research provide the basis for the issues discussed here: What is known about the ways in which television influences our children? What can parents or teachers do about television? How can television be used to encourage children's growth and development?

The following sections summarize what we know about:

- the effects of the amount of *time* children spend

watching TV;

- the impact of *violence* seen on the small screen;
- the way *life* and *values* are portrayed;
- the influence of TV *advertising* directed at children;
- the signs of *quality* programming for young viewers.

Suggestions for parents and teachers to deal constructively with each of these issues will also be provided.

Time

Surveys by audience rating services show that the typical American household has a TV set turned on for about seven hours each day. This figure, multiplied by the number of households and residents in the United States, suggests that in the space of only one calendar year, Americans spend approximately *20 million years* of human experience watching TV. These same studies show that by the time youngsters graduate from high school, they will have spent about 11,000 hours in school but more than *15,000 hours* watching TV.

What are the effects of all of this time spent with an electronic playmate and teacher? Researchers have found differences between children who are light viewers (one hour or less per day) and heavy viewers (four or more hours per day) of TV. Heavy viewers put in less effort on school work, have poorer reading skills, play less well with friends, have fewer hobbies and activities, and are

more likely to be overweight.

Should you be concerned about extensive TV viewing? Most child development specialists suggest that you review the “balance” of your child’s daily activities. If your child often chooses to watch TV rather than play with friends, talks only about TV programs and characters, or is not performing well in school, you may wish to cut back on the amount of time the youngster spends in front of the television set. Some researchers suggest that preschoolers watch no more than one hour of TV each day and elementary school children watch no more than two hours daily.

To reduce the amount of TV viewing:

- Work together to keep a time chart of your child’s activities, including TV viewing, homework, and play with friends. Then, discuss what you believe to be a balanced set of activities.
- Set a weekly viewing limit. At the beginning of the week, have your child select programs you approve of from television schedules.
- Rule out TV at certain times, such as before breakfast or on school nights.
- Make a list of alternative activities — riding a bicycle, reading a book, working on a hobby. Before watching TV, your child must choose and do something from the list.
- Encourage planned viewing. Have program choices in mind before turning the TV set on, and turn it off when the particular show is over.
- Don’t locate a television set in your child’s room.
- Remember that children learn from their parents. If you watch a lot of TV, chances are your child will also.

Violence

About five violent acts are committed during one hour of “prime time” evening television programming, and 20 to 25 violent acts occur each hour on Saturday morning “children’s programs.” While still in their formative years, before they leave elementary school, children who watch the typical amount of TV will see about 20,000 murders and more than 80,000 other assaults. That’s around 100,000 violent acts witnessed by these children before they become teenagers. Some of the violence will

be seen on “realistic” programs and some will be seen on cartoons, but social scientists have shown that all forms of violent programming may have harmful effects on young viewers.

There are three possible effects of viewing TV violence: Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, they may be more fearful of the world around them, and they may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others. Although scientists are convinced that children can learn aggressive behavior from television, they are also sure that parents can limit some of these effects.

To limit the effects of violence:

- Judge the amount of violence in the shows your children view by watching several episodes over a period of time.
- View TV together and discuss the violence with your child. Talk about why the violence happened and how painful it is. Ask the child how conflicts can be solved without violence.
- Explain to your child how violence on an entertainment program is “faked.”
- Restrict violent videos. Some states have passed legislation that prohibits children having access to R-rated, violent videos. Explain these restrictions to your children and discuss your views.
- Encourage your child to watch programs with characters that cooperate, help, and care for each other. These programs have been shown to have a positive influence on children.
- Read to your child rather than watch television. Children’s stories, written by thoughtful authors, portray conflict in a realistic and constructive manner.

Life on the Screen

Children may develop distorted views of society because, although television has changed over the years, women, young people, and the elderly still do not appear on the screen as often as they do in real life. Furthermore, minorities are often portrayed in narrow, stereotyped roles. On the other hand, male doctors, lawyers and police officers are still overrepresented on television. Topics such as drug abuse, alcoholism and sex may also be brought to

your child's attention sooner than you want. In addition, children often have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality on TV.

If you are concerned about the values that your child sees portrayed on TV:

- Ask your child to compare what is shown on the screen with the people, places and events he or she knows, has read about or studied in school.

- Encourage your child to read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk to adults about their work and meet people from different ethnic or social backgrounds.

- Discuss with your child what is real and what is make-believe on TV. Explain how television uses stunt actors, camera zooms, dream sequences and animation to create fantasy.

- Explain to your child the values you hold about sex, alcohol and drugs.

- If you own a VCR or DVD player, begin a selective video library specifically for children.

- Before subscribing to cable television, be aware of the variety and types of programming seen on it. Many of these easily accessed channels are for adult viewing only. Ask for a parental "lock out" device from the cable company which will allow you to select channels for your child.

Advertising

The evidence suggests that children younger than 6 or even 8 years of age do not understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell a product.

Also, children have trouble distinguishing between ads and programs. Yet, the average child may see more than 20,000 TV commercials each year. In addition, some television programs for children are actually hour-long commercials for expensive toys and games.

While it is true that advertising helps to support the programs on commercial television, scientists have found that advertising can cause children to "want" toys or foods that they do not need and that their families cannot afford. In addition to the tension that may arise in families, many parents feel that advertising encourages their children to be too concerned about "things" rather than people.

If you are concerned about the effects of advertising:

- Tell your child that the purpose of advertising is to sell products to as many viewers as possible.

- Put advertising disclaimers into words children understand: "Partial assembly required" means "You have to put it together before you can play with it."

- On shopping trips, let your child see that advertising claims are often exaggerated. Toys that look big, fast and exciting on the screen may be disappointingly small, slow and unexciting close-up.

- Teach your child a few facts about nutrition. Then, find ways to let the child practice them. For example, if the youngster can read package labels, allow him or her to choose a breakfast cereal from those where sugar is not one of the first ingredients listed.

Quality

What is a "good" television program for children? Parents differ in the ways in which they assess the quality of a program, and you are the best judge of what you consider to be suitable for your child. However, there are some guidelines that you might use in selecting programs for your children to view.

We know that television is most effective as a teacher when it is attuned to the needs of the viewer. For children, the best programs are those that speak to them in ways they can understand about topics that are important to them. Also, good programs encourage children to explore their feelings, learn about their world, and increase their competence and self-worth.

Programs that exploit children's feelings of envy, competitiveness and anger, or encourage narrow and stereotyped views of the world, do not help children grow and develop.

Good programs do not need to be "educational" in the sense of being designed to instruct children. Rather, the best TV-teachers are entertaining as well as informative, and they are also child-centered and designed to expand horizons.

If you are concerned about the quality of children's programs:

- Look for programs that are designed for your child's particular age group.

- Talk to your child's teacher or the children's librarian

in the public library about their recommendations of programs.

■ Every program has a message or theme. Ask yourself what the main message is of a particular program and whether it will help your child grow in wisdom or understanding.

■ Remember that a balanced “diet” of entertaining and informative television programs is like a balanced diet of food — both help your child’s development.

Other Information

If you want to learn more about children and television, here are some books, pamphlets and videos that you might find useful:

Television and the family. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003. (Available from your pediatrician.)

Violence on TV: What do children learn? What can parents do? Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1994. (Available by writing APA Public Affairs Office, 750 First Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-4242.)

Berry, Gordon L., and Joy K. Asamen. *Children and*

television: Images in a changing socio-cultural world. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993. (Available from a library or bookstore.)

Huston, Aletha C., Edward Donnerstein, Halford Fairchild, Norma D. Feshbach, Phyllis A. Katz, John P. Murray, Eli A. Rubinstein, Brian L. Wilcox, and Diana Zuckerman. *Big world, small screen: The role of television in American society.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. (Available from a library or bookstore.)

Murray, John P., “TV violence and brain mapping in children.” *Psychiatric Times*, October 2001, pages 70-71. On the Web at www.psychiatrictimes.com/p011070.html.

Murray, John P., and Barbara Lonnborg. *Children and television . . . A primer for parents.* Boys Town, NE: Boys Town Press, 2003. (Available by writing Public Service Division, The Boys Town Center, Boys Town, NE 68010.)

Palmer, Edward L. *Television and America’s children: A crisis of neglect.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. (Available from a library or bookstore.)

Pecora, Norma, John P. Murray, and Ellen Wartella. *Children and Television: 50 Years of Research.* Mahweh, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers, 2004.

Prepared by John P. Murray, Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University; and Barbara Lonnborg, Director, Public Service Division, Girls and Boys Town.

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Publications from Kansas State University are available on the World Wide Web at: www.oznet.ksu.edu

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit John P. Murray and Barbara Lonnborg, *Children and Television*, Kansas State University, December 2004.