



Television and Your Child: What Every Parent Needs to Know



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The statistics about violence in the media as it relates to children is shocking. A typical

child in the United States:

- Watches 28 hours of television a week (four hours per day)
- Sees 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts in the media before finishing elementary school
- Witnesses an average of 20 violent acts per hour on "children's television," including cartoons and five acts of violence per hour on Prime time

Yes, Touch that dial!

With hundreds of stations to choose from, and what appears to be minimal standards of decency, the chances of your child being exposed to information he is not ready for

is high. Ever since Janet Jackson's now infamous "wardrobe malfunction," there is now a greater awareness that television is not a safe haven for children. They need guidance in choosing shows to watch and help in making emotional sense out of the images and situations they are exposed to. Even though today's child is very savvy when it comes to the amount of information he possesses, developmentally, he does not have skills to integrate many of the messages he is getting in a healthy way.

Northern Over-Exposure

Often times when a child is exposed to inappropriate images and messages, the effects make themselves known through behavioral changes. Many studies show a strong correlation between TV viewing and aggressive behavior in children and teens. The three main problems these studies have found in children are that they are becoming:

- Desensitized to the pain and suffering of others
- More fearful of the world around them
- More likely to behave aggressively towards others

What these experts have found is that children who are frequently exposed to inappropriate images and messages are 11 times more likely to be disruptive, fight with family members, hit other kids, and destroy property. To make that statistic stand out even more, those same researchers claim that children who watched a lot of TV when they were eight years old are more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults. While these statistics may seem severe, the correlation between viewing habits and poor health hit most families a little closer to home. Experts have found a significant relationship between children's long-term health and television viewing habits. According to the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit in New Zealand, children who watch more than two hours of television per night are at a higher risk of becoming smokers, turning out to be overweight, physically unfit, and suffering from high cholesterol as adults, which increasingly leads to heart disease, diabetes and other life altering conditions. As little as one or two hours of television viewing per night for 5 to 15 year olds was associated with higher body-mass indexes, lower cardio-respiratory fitness,

increased cigarette smoking and raised cholesterol. Follow up studies of 26-year olds found the same poor health issues.

Researchers acknowledge that it is difficult to know which comes first when they said, "Television viewing might be a marker for some unidentified determinant of adult health, and individuals who have a natural tendency to obesity and poor physical fitness might prefer to watch television than do other activities." But there is clearly a strong correlation.

Family Ties

Television is not all bad. There are many great educational shows out there for kids to watch. But it is important that parents monitor the content of their children's viewing. There are five key things parents can do to help their children.

Watch at least one episode of your each of your kid's shows. That way you can evaluate whether or not it is age appropriate for your child and evaluate what kind of messages your child is receiving.

Talk about shows with them. It is important to teach children to question the messages they are being fed. In addition it is a good way to open a parent-child dialogue. The more you talk to your child, the more insight you will have about the way he thinks.

Limit the number of hours of TV viewing your child does. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents limit their child's viewing to two hours per day. Each hour that your child spends in front of the television is an hour they are not socializing, playing, being creative, learning, and developing motor skills and social skills.

Ban shows you find inappropriate. Many parents forget, especially with teens, that they can limit their child's viewing choices.

Analyze commercials with your child. Advertisers spend millions of dollars every year trying to influence children's thinking and behavior to get them to spend their own and their parents' money. They are counting on children's underdeveloped analytical skills. If you are able to help them question those messages, you will also be helping them to develop an analytical mind.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.

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