

Managing Children's TV Habits

Consider these facts:

- Children spend more time watching TV than any other activity except sleeping.
- Preschoolers spend more time in front of the TV than it takes to get a college degree.
- By the time they graduate from high school, most children will have spent 15,000 hours watching TV, compared to 11,000 in school.



You can learn a lot in 15,000 hours. Next to parents, TV is the most influential teacher most children will have. Children learn from TV all the time. Programs don't have to be "educational" to teach.

What children learn from the "flickering blue parent" can either interfere with or enhance their growth. The choice is up to you.

Interference with growth

Most programs children watch are meant for adults. But children don't have our broad experience with the real world. For young children, TV is the real world, even when it differs from their own values and experience.

Children believe what they see on the screen. They can't always tell the difference between what is real and what is make-believe, and this can confuse and mislead them. In some cases, the consequences are more severe. Children have been known to hurt themselves and other people by imitating what they have seen on the TV screen.

TV can hurt children in other ways. We know, for example, that children who watch a lot of TV can become passive. Children need to do things in order to grow. When they spend a lot of time in front of the TV, they lose chances to be creative, use their minds, and develop their motor skills.

Many parents and other experts on children worry about some of the "hidden" messages of TV. They fear that some programs teach negative attitudes toward



women and minorities. They are concerned about the desire for toys and sugary food that TV commercials create in their children. And, of course, the mounting evidence on the relationship between TV violence and violence in our society is disturbing to us all.

Enhancement of growth



But TV is not all bad. TV can also be a window on the world. It can broaden children's knowledge and interests by introducing them to:

- Things they've never seen
- Places they've never been
- People they've never met
- Things they've never done

TV also can teach children skills such as reading, counting, spelling, and problem-solving, and healthy attitudes toward themselves and other people.

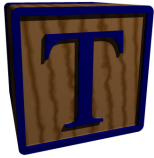
Sharing, self-control, and courage are among the positive behaviors children can learn from watching TV.

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H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

The overall picture



Television is here to stay. It is an extraordinary invention that can enrich children's lives—or stunt their growth. It all depends on how you as parents guide TV viewing in your home.

There is no need to go to the extreme of forbidding any TV viewing in your home. You may decide, though, to cut down on the amount of time your children watch TV. Or you may want to be more selective about what they watch.

The other extreme—using TV as a babysitter—isn't a good idea either. Instead, make TV viewing an active experience for your children:

- Become aware of what your children are watching.
- Plan their viewing.
- Talk to them about what they watch.
- Follow up TV viewing with active experiences.

For better or worse—the choice is up to you. Television can be a rich learning and social experience for your children. With a little planning, you can change what might be a solitary experience into a chance for family members to learn and draw closer together. To add a healthy and human dimension to TV viewing in your home, try some of the following ideas.

Find out what your children are watching. Watch programs with your children whenever possible. If you can't join them, let them know you're there to talk about a program or answer questions.

Ask them what they think about different shows and encourage them to ask questions. Don't be afraid to express your own likes and dislikes.

Talk about issues that come up on programs, the difference between make-believe and real life, TV characters and how they are like or unlike people you know, and how violence can hurt people.

Plan their TV menu. On a daily or weekly basis, go over the TV Guide or a local program listing with your children and select programs for viewing. If they want to watch a show you think is inappropriate, explain what you don't like about it. Be gentle but firm in enforcing your limits.

Encourage them to watch a wide range of programs. Provide them with many other activities.

Follow TV viewing with active experiences. Encourage children to draw or act out what they saw. Have them make up a story about one of their favorite programs. Type it up and let them illustrate it.

- Help them write letters to stars, stations and sponsors, asking questions and expressing opinions.
- Play games to increase their language skills. For example, look for a new word each day, or think of programs and characters that begin with different letters.
- Follow new information and interests with books and field trips.
- Think up games like describing a TV character and having others guess who it is, or imagining what certain characters would do if they appeared on different programs.
- With older children, talk about how TV shows are made and produced. If possible, visit a TV studio or arrange for children to participate in a program.

Of course, even while building on the benefits of TV, you can't ignore its negative aspects. When you see something you don't like, write a letter to your local station, a TV network, the press, your Congressional representative, or a group working for better programming for children. Or start your own group. Many local groups, like Action for Children's Television, have been influential in causing better programming for children on both local and national levels.

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