

Managing Your Child's Television Viewing Time

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By Heleigh Bostwick



If you're like most busy parents, you've probably used the television set as a babysitter—or a sanity-saver—and wondered whether your children were spending too many hours in front of the television set. You're not alone. Children in the United States watch an average of four hours of television a day according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)—and that doesn't include video games or DVDs.

Studies show that children who spend a lot of time watching television tend to be more overweight than other children and that watching too much television can impact a child's emotional development and ability to learn as well as teach them aggressive behaviors. But is television all bad?

No, say some experts.

David Lowenstein, PhD, a psychologist in private practice in Columbus, OH explains that television is a great source of information for children and adults alike. "It increases vocabulary and exposes kids to things that are outside their own little

world, for example a child in Nebraska learning about sharks in the ocean.”

Lance Garrison, PhD, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Argosy University in Dallas, Texas agrees and adds, “Television provides many examples of both positive and negative behavior. There are many fine educational programs on television which are interesting and well-produced.”

High-quality programs such as those featured on PBS, The Learning Channel, Disney Channel, Discovery Channel, Nickelodeon, and even the Weather Channel are a parent's best bet for providing child-appropriate content. Even so, it's up to you as the parent to decide what role the television will play in your child's life. Both Lowenstein and Garrison emphasize that parents need to establish ground rules, set time limits, and more importantly taking an active role and watching television programs with their children.

Lowenstein is fond of using what he calls the “3 strike rule”. The first strike occurs when a parent overhears inappropriate language or behavior on a television program, the second strike is the parent mentioning that these words or behaviors are not okay, at which point the child either changes the channel or does nothing, and the third strike is the parent turning the television set off. “Using this method allows kids take responsibility for their own behaviors,” Lowenstein says. “It puts the ball in their court.”

As with most parenting skills there are no hard and fast rules, and setting limits on the amount of television time is no exception. While the AAP recommends less than two hours of TV viewing per day, each family needs to decide what role television plays in their family dynamics and take it from there. Some families simply watch more television than others do for whatever reason.

“What's important is that parents should play an active role in their children's television viewing habits and keep a tight reign over the television set, controlling when it gets turned on and when it gets turned off,” says Garrison. “Most children left to their own devices will spend an inordinate amount of time in front of the television.”

Take a look at your own television viewing habits as well. “Most of the habits our children develop can be traced back to habits they observe in our behavior as parents,” says Garrison. “The amount children learn through observing their parents' behavior cannot be overestimated.” If you watch television for hours on end your children are more likely to follow suit, whereas if they see you gardening,

reading a magazine, or exercising they are less likely to watch television themselves.

Don't turn the television on simply for the background noise it provides, and keep the television off during mealtimes advises Lowenstein. "If you want to have a family television hour do so after mealtime is over. Make television view an educational experience, whether it's a family movie night or an educational program."

If you do find that your family is watching more television than necessary, start by planning a television-free day or evening for the whole family. Likewise, if you are using the television as a babysitter more often than you realize, it may be time to re-evaluate your own behavior and find alternate activities for your kids to keep busy with such as craft projects.

Set up puzzles or board games such as Monopoly, Scrabble or Yahtzee for the whole family to play. Other ideas for activities during television-free evenings include a craft or cooking night, or a night where everyone reads. If you have budding actors in the family (and even if you don't) plan a theater night. Taking a walk after dinner can break the television habit as well.

While television rating systems and various devices such as V-chips are available to assist in screening television programs, there is no substitute for watching television programs with your children. Doing so ensures that you know exactly what they are watching and are available to discuss various aspects of the show such as aggressive behavior with your children either during the show or after. "Doing this helps your child develop a clear internal sense of right and wrong about television content," says Garrison.

Last but not least, how should parents deal with television commercials? The average child sees more than 20,000 commercials per year, the majority of them advertisements for toys or products that imply buying these things will make you happier or more popular in life. And, as every parent knows, commercials are extremely influential on young minds that are unable to distinguish between truth and hype.

"Talk to your children about the purpose of advertising and explain that commercials are not always truthful," says Garrison who also offers this final piece of advice, "The invention of the digital video recorder such as Tivo, has been a real gift because you can pre-record the programs you allow your child to watch and can

gnt because you can pre-record the programs you allow your child to watch and can simply fast-forward through the commercials. This not only avoids commercials but decreases the length of time it takes to get through a program and the time spent in front of the television."

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Sources:

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