Bulletin #4100, Children, Television, and Screen Time

Children, Television, and Screen Time

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Many Maine parents, providers, and educators are concerned about the amount of television and the type of programming to which children are being exposed. Young children under the age of two spend, on average, two hours every day watching TV or other screen media. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that children under age two watch no television. Studies show that too much television viewing can have negative affects: children may have attention difficulties, they may have delays in language and develop smaller vocabularies, they may have more violent and aggressive play and behavior, and they are more likely to be obese.

The Parents as Teachers National Center says that young children need to “explore, move, manipulate, smell, touch and repeat as they learn.” Research tells us that watching television or sitting in front of a screen does not increase attention, promote social skills, or foster creative play. Children should engage in the activities they need to help them develop their bodies and brains instead of watching television.

Children over the age of eight spend on average more than seven hours a day consuming entertainment media. This can include DVDs, the Internet, and videogames, using the phone, texting, or doing combinations of these and multitasking! It is important for children to play, read, do homework without distraction, and have in person conversations with other children and adults. These experiences are important for healthy social, brain, and emotional development. Children who watch too much TV or are absorbed by screen time have less time for interactions and for free play, which are both important for healthy development.

Language Development and Television

Language skills are best developed through reading and interactions with others in conversation and play. Think of it like a tennis match, where one person serves the ball, and the other returns it. Children learn language when adults or others interact with them, returning their expressions and responding to noises and questions. Excessive television watching can impede this development. The television and computer do not talk back in a genuine way.

Children as Couch Potatoes
Childhood obesity is a national problem, and results from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey show that over 10% of Maine's youth are obese. Among young children under 5, those rates may be closer to 40%. Inactivity plays a huge role in weight gain, and television watching consumes only a few more calories than sleeping. Even active videogames where children stand and move do burn some calories, but not as many as playing the actual games like tennis or bowling. Although interactive video games burn minimal calories, parents should encourage playing the actual games, like going outside to play tennis or run. In order to burn calories with video games, you have to play as if you were really playing the real thing, and you have to try very hard. For example, playing tennis burns 8.1 calories per minute. Playing a video tennis game like Wii burns about 5/3 calories per minute.

Children who watch more television don’t get as much physical activity and don’t have time to explore new activities in the same way as children who spend less time in front of a screen.

Eating too much junk food and watching too much television are two major causes for obesity. And when children sit in front of the TV, they are more likely to snack and also to see advertisements for food products.

Advertising and Children

According to J. Van Evra, author of Television and Child Development, young children are particularly vulnerable to the influence of commercial advertising. They do not have the capacity to evaluate it critically, and as a result parents are pressured to buy products such as cereal and toys. Children who watch TV consume more soft drinks and snacks, which are heavily advertised on television.

What Are Children Watching?

Violence in the media, television programming, video games and movies are a growing concern. According to Carla Kalin, M. S., statistics indicate that the typical American child will be exposed to 12,000 violent acts on television a year. The American Psychological Association Help Center reveals that children's TV programming alone contains about 20 violent acts an hour.

Children are imitators and those who watch violent shows are more likely to display aggressive behavior. They are more likely to “strike out at playmates, argue, and disobey authority” according to the American Psychological Association Help Center. The Parents as Teachers National Center suggests that violent television programming teaches children that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems.

According to the Parents as Teachers National Center, the toddler and preschool years are an important time for emotional development, as well as a time when fears increase, and many children cannot distinguish reality from fantasy. Watching a violent act on TV may be very disturbing to a toddler. The American Psychological Association Help Center suggests that there are three types of harmful effects associated with viewing violence. They are:

- Learning aggressive behaviors and attitudes (like hitting in order to get a toy from a friend)
- Becoming desensitized to real world violence (thinking that it’s okay to tell people “I hate you” without talking about your feelings if you’re angry)
- Developing a fear of being victimized (feeling unsafe walking home from school)

The only way to know the impact of television or other programs on your child is to talk with them about what they see. The Parents as Teachers National Center notes that children who watch shows with violent content have more anxiety about the world around them. You can reduce this anxiety by reducing or eliminating exposure to violent programs and games. Some children will have anxiety because of overhearing programs on television, so it’s important to check in with them about where their fears might be coming from.

Is All Television or Media Bad for Kids?
Programs for infants can be harmful, and research suggests that children under 2 who watch programs designed to “teach” or help with “brain development” learn less than children who spend time playing and interacting with other children or adults. This is also true for toddlers, where each additional hour of TV has been found to relate to decreased classroom engagement and a higher body mass index.

Some television watching or screen time with parent discretion is beneficial for school age children. Parent discretion means helping your child make a wise choice about the content of a program. You can use the rating system (see details below), see if it is age appropriate or if it has educational benefit. Some programs for children can be educational and promote prosocial behavior. When parents watch the programs with children and talk about them, helping them to think about what they’ve been watching, the effects of TV are less negative. There are ways to watch TV effectively with your child to support moderate use that can stimulate a child’s education and creativity. Some ideas are:

- Ask questions about shows that ask your child to predict what’s going to happen
- Turn down the volume on commercials and explain to your child that advertisements are not part of the program
- Take the characters from shows and create stories about them at a later time using paper and crayons or have your child talk while you type what she is saying
- If there is an upsetting or violent scene in a program, ask her what she thinks of what she saw (did it scare her? What does she think is a good way to solve problems?)
- Question what you see. TV characters don’t always make good decisions—does your child have other ideas that might be examples of better decision making?
- Talk about your favorite characters in the show

Being willing to take small risks is an important part of development, especially in social situations. TV can be a distraction from necessary risk taking and can interfere with trying new things or meeting new people and developing social relationships.

What You Can Do

How can you guide your child’s television viewing? The government, in cooperation with the television industry, has implemented a rating system for television programming. This system is to help guide parents and assist them in establishing guidelines for their children’s TV viewing. However, the American Psychological Association Help Center reminds us that television networks rate their own programs, unlike the motion picture association.

In 1996, the Telecommunications Act was passed in an attempt to help parents restrict the viewing habits of their children. A device inside of the television called the “v-chip” can be programmed from a remote control. All new TVs made after 2000 were required by law to have the v-chip, but a 2004 study revealed that only 15% of parents actually use the v-chip. Instructions for using the v-chip are included with your television instruction manual.

Even with the rating system and the v-chip in place, parents still need to take an active interest in what their children are watching on television. The American Academy of Pediatrics started the Media Matters campaign to inform parents about types of media and kids.

Here are some suggestions from the organizations Zero to Three and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

- **Set Limits.** Children under age two should watch no television. Children under 8 should consume no more than 1-2 hours. Know how much TV your child is watching. Set some basic rules such as no television before homework or chores are done or during meals. Keep TV out of your child’s bedroom.
- **Caregivers and Babysitters.** Talk with your family or child care provider about what to do when they care for your child. If you have a “no TV” policy, that includes time your child spends with them. Ask them to leave the TV off and suggest games that your child likes to play.

- **Participate.** Watch TV with your child and discuss the program. Ask them questions and express your views. This will also let you know what your children are watching.

- **Monitor.** Avoid shows, movies, or video games that have violent or sexual content. Encourage children to watch programs about characters who show cooperation and caring.

- **Analyze Commercials.** Help children to critically evaluate advertisements. Explain to your child the different between a “want” versus a “need” and that advertisements are designed to sell us things we don’t need.

- **Be a Good Role Model.** This suggestion comes from the Parents as Teachers National Center. Because children model behavior, set a good example with your own television viewing habits. Avoid watching programs containing adult content when your child is in the room or nearby.

- **Background Noise.** Turning off the TV even if you’re not watching it is important. Research shows that young children are distracted when a TV is on. It interrupts their play, and can reduce the interactions between parent and child. Don’t go to restaurants that have televisions that can cause distractions for customers.

### Ten Things Toddlers Can Do Besides Watch TV

Interaction, reading, and play activities are important to a child’s brain development and learning. These types of activities are preferred to passively watching television. They matter in the healthy development of social, emotional, and intellectual skills. Here are some ideas from the Parents as Teachers National Center for activities to do with your child instead of watching TV:

1. **Explore.** Baby-proof an entire room and put an assortment of toys and safe household objects in the room to play with.

2. **Watch.** Hang a bird feeder outside a window where the child can see the birds and squirrels.

3. **Listen.** Play music at a moderate volume and encourage your child to sing and dance.

4. **Touch.** Toddlers like to dig, scoop, and mold, exercising their emerging fine motor skills. Provide some play dough or a bowl half filled with beans, and cups for scooping.

5. **Splash.** Let your child play in the bathtub. However, never leave you child alone even for a minute when he or she is in the tub.

6. **Look at Books.** Read a book or just look at the pictures with your child. Try to have some books that are unfamiliar so they will hold your child’s attention.

7. **Bag it.** Let your child unpack and repack a suitcase or tote bag with toys or safe household items.

8. **Sleep.** Help your child develop a good sense of naptime and bedtime habits.

9. **Help.** Since toddlers like to be where the action is, let them play alongside you while you work. Think creatively about how your child can help you with a task.

10. **Find a Friend.** Trade babysitting time with other parents of toddlers so your child can experience being with other children. This interaction will contribute to healthy development.

### Families and screen time — a summary
For many children, over 30% of their time will be spent in front of a TV and/or computer. Fortunately, most parents pay attention to what children are watching, talk with them about it, and place some limits on screen time. Infants do not need screen time at all, young children should be exposed to as little as possible, and all screen time should be a shared experience with adults, who can talk with children about what they see.

Having family movie nights can be lots of fun when everyone is interested in the movie, and these should be special occasions. These hours in front of the screen add up, and mean that less time has been spent interacting, talking, and playing imaginative games.

The most entertaining experiences are in real conversations, story telling, sharing, and laughter. Spend as much time as you can with these activities, and save the TV for a rainy day.

**Resources**


Ravichandran, P. & deBravo, B.F., (June, 2010). *Young Children and Screen Time(Television, DVDs, Computer)*. National Research Center for Women and Families.

