



Au Pair Extraordinaire

For parents who care

268 Bryanston Drive
Bryanston
2191
South Africa
Tel: 011 463-4438
Fax: 086 619-5491
Cell: 082 603-3512

enquiries@aupair-extraordinaire.co.za
www.aupair-extraordinaire.co.za
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The Impact of Television on Children's Development – June 2010

By Justine Loewenthal

The ongoing debate about the impact of television on children's emotional, cognitive and social development tears parents between allowing their children to have their 'chill time' in front of the tv and banning television altogether. Most of the research done on this topic concludes that educational and intellectually stimulating programs in moderation is the answer.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children under two years old watch no television at all, and those over two have no more than one to two hours per day of television, video games, computer games and Playstation and the like COMBINED.

The first two years of life are a critical time for brain development and experts wonder about the impact of television on impressionable young minds. At this age, the child should be exploring his environment with all of his senses, playing and learning to interact with others to encourage healthy development. Sitting in front of a television doesn't allow for exploration. They need interactive learning opportunities. Children older than two should spend time doing physical exercise, expressing creativity, doing schoolwork and interacting with family and friends instead.

The first seven years of life are when the sensory and motor skills develop and mature. Through play, the child integrates movement and sensory experiences.

Excessive television can contribute to:

- children being overweight
- aggressive behavior
- poor attention
- reinforcement of gender-role and racial stereotypes

Children who spend many hours in front of a television are likely to eat unhealthy foods while watching and lack physical exercise. This results in the ever increasing problem of childhood obesity. Children don't understand that commercials advertising food are selling a product and they are easily persuaded to ask Mom to purchase that food, especially if their superhero is in the commercial.

Children who witness violence on television over a period of time (even in cartoons!) run the risk of becoming desensitized to the violence and portray more violent and aggressive behavior than children who are not exposed to violence on television. Violence is also portrayed by the hero in a program, and children will therefore see the aggression as acceptable and are more likely to imitate it in reality. Young children are particularly frightened by violent images because they cannot tell the difference between real and pretend. They may suffer from nightmares after exposure and may regress in their behavior to the extent that professional intervention may be needed.

Research has found a strong indication that excessive television and the wrong kinds of programs have a significant negative impact on attention. AAP spokeswoman Susan Buttross, MD, has the following to say: "Most children's TV programs require very short attention spans. In a classroom setting, you need to have sustained attention for a prolonged period of time. The more you're used to having something fast and furious going by you, the harder the classroom setting gets." A recent study by Dimitri Christakis, lead researcher and director of the Child Health Institute in Washington, came to the following frightening conclusion: For every hour watched at one and three years old, the children had almost a ten percent higher chance of developing attention problems by seven years old. A toddler, who watches three hours of television per day, was found to have almost a thirty percent higher chance of having attention problems at school.



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The brainwaves produced while watching television cause a trance-like state with limited conscious awareness. This can generalize to affect concentration.

Quality television in moderation can be helpful for preschoolers to learn about colours, shapes, numbers, wildlife, manners, and even early reading skills. Dorothy Singer, EdD, emphasizes that parents must control what and how much television their children watch. She points out that children are missing out on real life experiences.

Developmental psychologist, Deborah Linebarger's research indicates a connection between certain educational TV programs and enhanced learning skills in very young children, including vocabulary and expressive language. Because her study involved only 51 children, she stresses that more research needs to be done for it to be a conclusive finding.

Television provides opportunities for children to learn about a wide range of topics that they may not otherwise encounter, such as dinosaurs, science and outer space.

Ilze van der Merwe, Educational Psychologist for more than 20 years and CEO of Bella Vida Centre's conclude that television watching has positive and negative impact on children. The rule of thumb is balance and for parents to focus on the relationship with their children rather than trying to get them entertained.

Some suggestions

- Limit the number of tv hours per day – this must be non-negotiable. No tv during the week at all is a good idea.
- In the tv room, have books, puzzles, colouring books and crayons etc.
- Keep tv out of children's bedrooms
- Television should not be allowed during family mealtimes
- Parents should lead by example and also limit tv time
- Tv should be a privilege that needs to be earned through good behavior
- Whenever possible, watch with your children and talk to them about what they see on television. If there is a conflict with your own beliefs and values, discuss this with your child.
- SPEND QUALITY TIME WITH YOUR CHILDREN that doesn't include television
- Encourage reading and read to / with your children
- Only allow your children to watch programs that are developmentally appropriate.

Television is a good babysitter! It takes a strong will and creativity to find other options. People raised children for many centuries before television. We can do it too!

