

Is TV Really So Bad for Kids?

By Richard Trubo

WebMD Feature

Reviewed By Michael Smith, MD

In the days when television screens were brimming with images of "*Father Knows Best*" and "*Ozzie & Harriet*," parents barely gave a second thought when their youngsters spent a couple hours in front of the tube. But TV isn't what it used to be. There are more than 100 channels available via cable in most American communities, and much of the programming might send shock waves through parents raised on Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Rogers.

Violence and sexual images are as much a part of today's television fare as peanut butter ads and infomercials. A Surgeon General's report last year concluded that 61% of all TV programming contains violence. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a child who watches three to four hours a day of noneducational TV will see about 8,000 small-screen murders by the time he or she completes grade school.

That's unsettling news for parents and pediatricians alike. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more than four out of five parents are concerned that their children are exposed to too much televised sex and violence -- yet millions of youngsters are still enthusiastically watching hours of TV daily, with little or no supervision.

Kids' Viewing Habits

American children spend an average of 6 hours, 32 minutes each day watching TV or using other media (including the Internet, videotapes, video games, and radio). That's more time than they devote to any other activity except sleep, according to the AAP.

"Most parents don't spend the same amount of time -- about six hours a day -- with their children," says child psychiatrist Michael Brody, MD, chair of the television and media committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. "Television has a very big influence, and a lot of it is negative. There are hundreds of studies showing a connection between violence on TV and its impact on children -- from aggressive behavior to sleep disturbances."

While experts concur that television can entertain and inform, many programs may have an undeniably negative influence on childhood behavior and values. Youngsters may become less sensitive to the terror of violence, accept violence as a way to resolve life's difficulties, or even imitate the violence they've seen.

A recent study by New York University School of Medicine researchers concluded that preschool children who frequently watch violent TV programs or play violent video games are 11 times more likely to engage in aggressive and antisocial behavior than children not frequently exposed. A study at the National Institute on Media and the Family, published in 2002, found that third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade children who watch media violence are more likely to treat their peers with rudeness and mean behavior.

In a study of more than 700 children, Columbia University researchers found that adolescents who watch more than an hour a day of TV are more prone to aggression and violence once they reach their late teens and early 20s.

"It certainly isn't true that every child who watches a lot of violence will become a school shooter," says Joanne Cantor, PhD, professor emerita of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and author of *Mommy, I'm Scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*. "Only a very tiny fraction of kids actually commit criminal violence. But even among those children who don't, they may become more hostile, more desensitized, and more frightened."

Here's how the AAP puts it: "Watching a lot of violence on television can lead to hostility, fear, anxiety, depression, nightmares, sleep disturbances, and posttraumatic stress disorder. It is best not to let your child watch violent programs and cartoons."

As for sexual content on TV -- whether in dramatic programs, music videos, or commercials -- experts caution that TV often doesn't depict the negative outcomes of sexual behavior, such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, and that children may imitate what they see in order to feel older.

"Kids don't learn that much about sex from their parents, and there's not a lot of very good sex education in the schools," says Cantor. "So what they learn about sex from TV comes in a vacuum."

By watching television, adds Cantor, children often learn that sex is very casual, that it has no negative consequences, and that it's "cool" to have sex.

Parental Monitoring

For many parents, the hectic pace and non-stop demands of day-to-day living have made monitoring their family's television habits a low priority. Even some of the tools available to help them -- from the TV ratings system to the V-chip -- are widely underutilized.

"Many parents simply don't understand the ratings," says developmental psychologist Douglas Gentile, PhD, director of research at the National Institute on Media and the Family. Not only is there an alphabet soup of rating codes that can be difficult to decipher, but, adds Gentile, "Every network rates its own programs, and very often, the ratings are more lenient than the parents themselves would be."

The V-chip (for viewer-controlled) appears to be underused as well. Since January 2000, all new television sets with 13-inch or larger screens include a device that allows parents to block programs they don't want their children to watch.

But a recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 53% of parents who had bought TVs since early 2000 knew nothing about the V-chip; only 17% of parents whose TV was equipped with the chip used the device to filter out undesirable programs.

"To me, the 'V' in V-chip stands for 'vanished,'" says Brody. "I hear nothing about it. There appears to be a much lower level of advocacy regarding TV violence than there was two or three years ago."

Cantor concurs, noting that although the V-chip is a step in the right direction, "it has lots of strikes against it. Because publicity for it has been very poor, many parents don't realize that they have a V-chip in their TV set, or they're not informed on how to use it. The V-chip is not that easy to program, and many parents get frustrated trying to use it."

Risks and Benefits

Even if you're conscientious about using the TV ratings system as a guide, keep in mind that news programs remain unrated, although they report on plenty of events -- from crime to natural disasters -- that can cause anxiety and fear in children.

"Many parents don't understand that the news is very powerful," says Cantor. "They need to think twice about having on the TV news when their children are around, even if the kids don't seem to be paying attention to it. A lot of parents think, 'This is educational, and kids need to know what's going on in the world.' But TV doesn't give the news in an age-appropriate fashion for kids."

"I tell parents to get a lot of their own news from newspapers, and then if they want, turn on the TV news briefly, after their child has gone to sleep," says Cantor.

When it comes to choosing the best programs for your child, an AAP policy statement issued in 2001 notes that by watching certain carefully selected shows, children can, in fact, learn positive social behaviors, including cooperation, sharing, and good manners. "Children in the over-3 age group can learn songs, learn to count, and increase their vocabulary if they already have a good language base," says Miriam Bar-on, professor of pediatrics at Chicago's Loyola University Health System and chair of the organization's committee on public education.

But, adds Bar-on, the AAP believes that parents should discourage children under the age of 2 from watching TV. According to AAP policy, "Research on early brain development shows that babies and toddlers have a critical need for direct interaction with parents and other significant caregivers for healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive skills."

Television Tips

The AAP offers these TV-viewing guidelines for parents:

- Set limits on your youngsters' television watching. Keep their use of TV, movies, videos, and computer games to no more than one to two hours a day.
- Use a program guide and TV ratings to choose appropriate programs for your child.

- Watch TV with your youngster whenever possible, and talk about what you've watched. For example, counteract the stereotypes of women and the elderly on TV by discussing their real-life roles in an accurate way.
- Limit the commercials your child sees by having him or her watch public television (PBS). Explain to your youngster that TV commercials are designed to make people want products they may not need.