

TV and Kids: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

How often have you heard your child mimic a song, words, or idea that he or she saw on television? Most children spend more time watching TV than in school -- and it teaches them many lessons - some good, and some bad.

TV is a convenient babysitter or entertainment, it's inexpensive, and kids like it! So, many working moms rely on it. But like most things that are "free" there can be hidden costs that you need to know about.

TV can directly influence children and teens by what they see and hear, or indirectly because they are watching TV instead of spending time playing with friends, talking to family members, reading, or other activities.

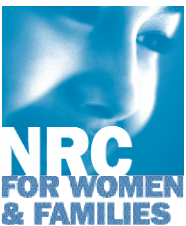
What does TV teach your children?

Would you let a stranger come into your house and spend a few hours a day with your children without supervision? Wouldn't you want to carefully check them out first?

Like a stranger, TV programs you've never watched shape children's ideas, values, opinions about other people and activities, as well as their words and behavior. Hundreds of studies conclude that kids who watch TV:

- Imitate the words, violence, sexy ideas, and taunts that they see on TV,
- Learn that violence is a way to solve problems and become numb to it,
- Identify with certain characters, some of which parents like and some of which they don't.

You might wonder how studies can prove that TV influences kids. Some researchers show kids a TV program featuring a particular behavior and then watch them in daycare or school to see if they imitate it (they do!). Other researchers ask kids to keep a diary of all the programs they watch on TV, and then ask their teachers (who don't see the diaries) which kids are bullies, which ones have behavior problems, and which ones help others. The researchers



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A Few More TV Tips

1. Even educational TV is not as good as talking and playing with children. Avoid TV for children under 2 – TV should be a last resort for babies and toddlers, not a frequent daily activity.
2. Set consistent limits on TV when your children are small and remember you're still the boss as they get older! Plan your child's TV viewing for specific programs, not merely "anything that is on." If children have a limited number of hours that they can watch TV, with some choice over which programs they can watch as they get older, they will become more selective consumers of television.
3. Watch at least one episode of a new program that your child wants to watch before you let them watch it.
4. TV should not substitute for reading or playing with friends or family.
5. Watch TV with your child and talk about the programs. Help your child to think about the characters and the content of the programs and commercials, and explain your own feelings and ideas. Discuss alternatives to violence as a way to solve problems. Point out positive examples and role models for your children and help them be comfortable with people who are different.
6. Encourage your child to watch programs that demonstrate helping, caring, and cooperation. Studies show these types of programs can teach your child to be more helpful and caring.
7. Tie TV with reading. Kids can follow-up interesting TV programs by reading a book on the same topic or by the same authors.

then find out which TV habits seem to go along with better or worse behaviors, and if watching certain programs tends to be followed by certain behaviors. They find that kids who watch more TV, and more violent programs are more likely to have problems, according to their teachers.

When parents supervise their children's TV viewing, they can increase the good things kids learn and decrease the bad things they learn. That is one reason why you should watch TV with your kids when possible, and why kids should watch TV in a room that you or other adults spend a lot of time in. All parents should care what their kids watch on TV and how much they watch – and if you do, TVs do not belong in children's bedrooms -- no matter how old your kids are.

Watching TV with your children can be a good time to talk about what they are seeing and learning, and to cuddle while watching a favorite program. You can ask questions while you're watching TV or afterwards, and find out what their impressions are of the characters and ideas that they see.



Would you let a stranger come into your house to entertain your children without supervision?

What are the indirect effects of watching TV?

When our children watch hours of TV, they have less time for other important activities like reading, spending time with their friends and family, getting exercise, playing games, playing outdoors, or getting enough sleep. That's why kids who watch a lot of TV tend to have lower reading scores, are more overweight, and don't do as well in school. Even if your children are very smart, they might be even smarter (or more physically fit, or more relaxed) if they watched less TV. So, limit the amount of time your child spends watching TV.

Why do kids who watch TV tend to be overweight? Children who watch two hours of TV or more on week nights have more body fat than children who watch less TV. Maybe they are eating more of the sodas and fattening foods that they see advertised on TV, or maybe they are getting less exercise. Some kids like to eat snacks or meals while watching TV, which is a habit that is hard to break (so make it a rule: no eating while watching TV!). And perhaps parents who give in to their children's demands to watch more TV are also more likely to give in to their children's demands for fast food and candy. Whatever the reason, if you care about your child's health, limit the number of hours they spend watching TV everyday.



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