

TV & Children: Television, Health and Development

How does television affect the health of our children?

Children from birth to age five are actively growing, learning and developing habits that will shape their physical and emotional health. Because this time period is so crucial to the development of a child's body and brain, any negative influences can have lifelong health effects (1). Excessive television viewing among young children has been linked to negative impacts on early brain development, and lifelong physical health (1, 2).

Television and early brain development

Repeated exposure to television or related activity can affect a child's mental and emotional development (1). TV often takes the place of interactive experiences (e.g play) that promote healthy brain development (1, 2, 3, 4).

Too much TV during the early years has been linked to:

- **Poor performance in school**, especially in the areas of language and reading. If TV is substituted for reading and talking with others at a young age, children may have delayed language development (1, 2, 3, 5, 26).
- **Being less able to use imagination**. Too much TV can lead to an overload on the visual part of the brain, while depriving other parts of the brain. Areas of the brain responsible for creative thought and imagination are under used because watching television doesn't require these skills (2).
- **Not being able to tell apart television from the real world**. (3).
- **Problems focusing**. Too many fast paced images from TV watching keeps the brain from learning how to pay attention and also the instant stimulus of TV can cause a children to become impatient in complex situations (1).
- **Poor skills in planning and judging**. The areas of the brain responsible for these skills are under used and not fully developed if a young child watches too much television and plays too many video games (1).
- **More likely to be violent when problems occur**. Television and video game violence is thought to be responsible for 10% to 20% of all real-life violence (3, 23).

The negative impacts of television on child and lifelong physical health include:

- **Replacing physical activity with inactivity (sedentary behavior).** A decrease in physical activity is linked to an increased risk for obesity and some chronic diseases (6, 7, 8,15).
- **Promotion of poor dietary habits.** Increased exposure to advertisements for high fat and sugar containing foods leading to poor food choices (9, 21, 22).
 - The average child views about 20,000 commercials each year (12).
 - Sugary cereals are strongly marketed to children; making up 34% of all commercials during children's programming (22).
 - Children often ask for these foods by name and parents buy them (21).
 - A recent study found that increased television viewing during meals is associated with an increased consumption of foods high in fat and sugar and a decreased consumption of fruits, vegetables and milk (9).
- **More snacking while watching TV.** Television viewing is associated with increased consumption of snacks (6, 9).
 - Children with a television in their bedroom snack more than children without (6).
- **More likely to become overweight.** The more time a child, adolescent or adult spends watching television, the greater chance he or she has of becoming overweight (6, 13). Overweight children have a higher risk of developing diabetes.
 - Childhood obesity in the US has tripled over the last 25 years (24, 25).
 - Children who are overweight by the age of two have a 10% chance of overweight in adulthood. Those who are still overweight by age ten have a 79% chance of overweight in adulthood (14, 20).
 - A recent study found that 10 % of preschool children ages 2-4 are overweight, and 16 % of low income preschool children are overweight (6).

Strategies for reducing the impact of television on child development include:

- LIMIT VIEWING TIME: At home, school, and childcare
- KEEP TV OUT OF CHILD'S ROOM: Children with a television in their room spend more time watching TV than those without a television in their room (6, 27).
- ADULTS CAN HELP CHILDREN UNDERSTAND TV CONTENT by choosing appropriate programs, watching with their children, and discussing what they see together.
- PROVIDE ROLE MODELS: The amount of time a child spends watching TV is closely related to the amount of time that his or her parents spend watching TV (16).

How much television do children watch?

The average American child watches 20 to 30 hours of television per week, not including time spent watching movies, playing video games, or using the computer (3, 4).

- A national survey of television use found that preschoolers watch about 2.6 hours per day, and 31% of preschoolers have a television in their bedroom (17).
- A child who watches more than two hours of television per day by the age of two, is more likely to increase television viewing hours by the age of six (18).

How much TV is too much?

Children who watch television for 10 hours or more per week are less skilled at reading and are less successful in school than children who watch less than 10 hours per week (5, 26).

The American Academy of Pediatrics makes the following recommendations regarding television: (See additional materials for the full AAP Policy Statement on Children, Adolescents, and Television) (3)

- Television viewing should not exceed one to two hours of quality programming daily.
- Children younger than two years old should not watch television.

Why do children watch so much TV?

The television viewing habits of parents and siblings influences a child's TV viewing habits more than any other factor (16). Children may also watch more TV due to a:

- Lack of other activities offered in the community (8)

- Lack of safety outside the home (8)
- Lack of interaction with their parents (8)
- More programs geared towards children (21, 22)
- A television in their bedroom (6, 27)

How can we reduce television viewing?

Fortunately, classroom programs aimed at reducing television viewing have been successful (11, 19). Also, parents are motivated to protect the health of their children, and are motivated by a child's enthusiasm. Early childhood educators can:

- Get children interested in activities other than television.
- Educate children and their families on why reducing television time may be healthier.
- Provide ideas for replacing television with more active and interactive alternatives.
- Provide information about healthy eating habits.
- Provide support and resources to families as they make decisions about the use of television in their homes.

How will the ClickKit! help to reduce television use in families?

The ClickKit! materials are a resource for your program to introduce television reduction to children and their families. The materials in this teaching kit provide:

- Lesson plans and program action goals.
- Materials on reducing television and increasing physical activity for posting at program sites, sending home with families, and incorporating into educational activities with children and parents.
- Ideas for alternative activities to replace TV.
- A website with additional resources for staff and parents.

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