



Parents Need to Take Charge of Television

Most of today's homes have at least one television and many of these sets are hooked to a commercial cable system that provides a seemingly limitless number of programs. Moreover, many television programs are pushing the limits of good taste and decency. Some parents, who worry that their children are being exposed to violence and other realities of adult life that they're too young to handle, tend to say that television is the culprit, but parents need to take charge of television.

Although parents might prefer that government exert more control or networks voluntarily regulate themselves, the bottom line is that it's the parent's job to set limits on children's television viewing.

But it's not a good idea to banish the television set to a dusty attic. In fact, doing so is actually a disservice to children because the content of television shows is so deeply imbedded in the popular culture. Not knowing about Barney and Big Bird or Michael Jordan and Madonna leaves a child the odd kid out. In school, when the talk is about a certain show, those who are denied television are left with nothing to contribute.

Rather than eliminating television altogether, take a two-stage approach to influencing children's viewing habits. It starts with firm limitations on both the program content and the amount of time young children are permitted to watch.

Limit television for preschoolers

Setting limits on television viewing is critical to your child's development. Young children are easily attracted to and seduced by the flashy colors, intense sounds and fast-moving images on the television screen. While a little of this may be O.K., if a toddler is spending a good part of his day watching television, he's not doing other things that are more beneficial and even necessary to his development.

Television can be such an exciting medium for learning, but children need to use it wisely, not waste their childhood by watching things that are inappropriate or unacceptable. At this stage, there is a tremendous amount of learning to be done and most of that learning occurs when the child is playing with his toys and exploring his surroundings.

Preschoolers may show a preference for certain programs. Unfortunately, watching a favorite show often leads to watching television for an extended period of time. Once children start watching one show, they tend to watch other shows. This reduces the time a child has left in her day to do other things. Children who watch excessive amounts of television, spend less time involved in creative activities and vigorous exercise, and develop an unhealthy pattern of passivity.

When programs designed specifically for young children go off, the television should go off. By the time shows with adult content come on, young children should be in bed. Special seasonal programs such as "The Nutcracker" may be exceptions to this rule.

Monitor television use by school-age children

As youngsters get older, they should gradually be given more discretion over program choice, as long as parents continue to monitor their viewing habits. It's important for parents to spend time with their children in front of the set, then talk about what they've seen.

Even if your children persist in choosing shows you don't wholly approve of, you'll be more effective in helping them develop discriminating taste if you go ahead and let them watch while continuing to make your opinion clear. Censoring television programs is largely ineffective with teenagers, because it makes the show exotic. Rationally evaluating the show is a more effective way to make your point.

Why parents should worry

There are several other concerns about children who watch a lot of television. For some children, television is their most important teacher. If so, what are the lessons being learned? That only glamorous people populate the world? That people on television don't get hurt or die even when they are shot or are involved in accidents? Those even serious problems can be solved in a half-hour? Do you want your children believing these ideas?

Recent study reports that today's preschoolers watch so much television that, by the time a child enters kindergarten, she expects the scene to change several times each minute. In order to make a classroom look like a television screen; the child constantly looks around the room to see a different scene every few seconds. This doesn't leave a lot of time to concentrate on the lesson. The next time you sit down to watch your favorite show; notice how frequently the scene changes. Is this real life?

Another concern is the amount of violence shown on television. Exposure to excessive or graphic violence may make children fearful and anxious. Some children begin to believe that violence is an acceptable way to deal with conflicts and problems. Some children are de-sensitized to violence, so that they can't feel empathy for someone who is hurt or suffering.

Children often believe everything they see and hear on television commercials. Many high priced, low nutrition snacks and cereals are advertised at times when children are watching. Candy and soft drinks are also heavily marketed on children's television programming. Children, who watch a lot of television not only lack exercises, but tend to eat more and what they usually eat is junk food. The result, too often, is a child who is overweight.

During the holidays, children are bombarded with ads for expensive toys. These ads can create desires in children that put them in conflict with their parents' values.

What can parents do?

What is the solution? Limit the amount of time your child watches television. Be certain the programs viewed are suitable for her age. Watch the shows and commercials with your children and talk together about what you've seen.

While parents need time for themselves, they should avoid using television to keep their children occupied while they relax and enjoy "downtime." It's better to be firm about setting reasonable bedtime hours than to let children watch any program to satisfy your own needs for peace and quiet.

Parents are so busy that they sometimes stop using plain old common sense. They may know their children shouldn't be watching a particular show -- that they should be in bed -- but lack the energy to enforce bedtime rules. Instead of letting it go, take charge. If your kids accuse you of being too strict or too concerned, consider it the ultimate compliment. Explain that you're only doing your job, which is, after all, the most important job in the world.