

TV: Friend or Foe of Child Development

Television is such a regular part of our lives that parents may not think about its impact on child development. Maybe you have thought about it and you've decided that your children can watch certain programs – the ones that are family friendly and “educational.” But what, if anything, does the research say about early television viewing and child development? Before we get into that, let's look at some statistics on early childhood TV watching habits. 40% of children regularly watch TV, videos or DVDs by the time they are 3 months old. By 24 months of age this number jumps to 90%. On average, children are introduced to TV by the time they are 9 months old. Children under 12 months of age watch about an hour of TV a day. Children under 24 months watch an average of 1.5 hours. This is not to mention the other screens and gadgets used to keep little ones busy while we cook supper, run errands, or maybe just take a much needed break. With iPads, iPhones, laptops and tablets, TV is just one of many kinds of screens that children watch every day and for longer periods of time. Based on these statistics it's easy for us to say things like, it's normal, it's today's society, it's educational, and it's OK; but is it?

Let's look at what the research says.

In 1999 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) made this policy statement about media use in young children:

“The AAP discourages media use by children younger than 2 years”

This policy was stated again in 2011 with more points added:

- There is no evidence to support that TV watching in young children is helpful to their development
- There is potential for poor health and development in young children who watch TV
- There are negative effects of background TV in young children (e.g., when parents watch TV while children are present)
- There is a need for more research to look at the long term effects of early television viewing on child development

A Canadian research team in 2013 studied the long term effects of early television viewing in young children and whether they are ready for kindergarten. They looked at five areas of kindergarten readiness including word knowledge, number knowledge, attention-memory skills, social-emotional skills and movement skills. The researchers found that the more children watched TV at an early age the more their skills decreased in all five areas of school readiness. The area most affected negatively was word knowledge, which has been shown in other research to be linked with overall intelligence.

Don't be discouraged if your family's TV viewing habits are already well established and/or your children are older. Here are some changes you can make for any age that can make a difference:

- Know what your children are watching on TV.
- Set limits around screen time.

- Watch programs with your children so you can talk with them about what you're watching, which makes TV viewing interactive and social.
- Take TVs out of children's bedrooms.
- Avoid background TV as much as possible. For example, turn off the TV if no one is watching it, as well as during meals or when you are watching a program and children are present.

Above all, remember that children learn best from play. When children play with you, brothers and sisters, friends and even alone, they learn so much more about their world because they experience it with all of their senses. They get to explore, think, create, pretend, talk, sing, laugh and do all of the things that help little brains grow. Play is perfect for child development. As we celebrate Speech and Hearing Month this May 2014, let's turn off our screens, take out the toys, break out the books, and bring back play. Your children's development will thank you for it.

For more [TV Watching: Facts and Tips](http://www.westernhealth.nl.ca) visit our website at www.westernhealth.nl.ca

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TV Watching: FACTS AND TIPS

Researchers have found young children and their caregivers use fewer words and have less conversation when they're listening to the TV. Studies suggest that more TV watching equals: more language delay, more behavioral problems, less creative play, less sleep, more weight gain and increased exposure to negative effects of watching commercials, e.g., promoting junk food. Given this information, parents concerned about their child's communication skills and overall development are asked to consider these suggestions:

For babies

- Avoid TV for babies under age two. Choose activities to do with your child that promote language development and brain growth such as talking, playing, reading, singing and enjoying music.

For children over age two:

- If you allow TV time, choose age-appropriate programs, e.g., if your child is under 8, avoid programs in which the main characters are 9 or older.
- Involve older children in setting guidelines for what to watch, e.g., discuss and agree upon what programs are okay with the parents and also enjoyable for the children. Older children in the family may be asked to watch certain shows approved for them only by the parent at times when younger siblings are not present.
- Use guides and ratings to help, but watch out for unproven claims that programs or DVDs are educational. Even children's cartoons can be violent or overstimulating.
- Limit TV time to no more than two hours per day. **LESS IS BETTER.**
- Keep TV off during meals.
- Set "media-free" days and plan other fun things to do.
- Avoid using TV as a reward.
- Turn off TV when a chosen program is over and/or when no one is watching it. Don't leave TV on as background filler or while doing other things.
- When no one is actively watching, turn TV off.
- Watch TV with your child. Talk about what you see and engage with your child about the content.
- Keep TVs out of bedrooms.

Sources: Journal of Pediatric Research (2013), Pediatrics (2011, 2009, 2005), Seattle Children's Hospital, CBC News, June 1st, 2009, Science Daily (2006-2009), Med Page Today (2006), American Psychological Association (2004).