What do I need to know about children and television?
Television has its good side. It gives kids a chance to see educational shows, learn about different cultures, and be entertained. But let’s look at some statistics:

- In a typical American home, the TV set is on for over 7 hours each day.
- The average child spends more time watching TV than in school.
- On average, kids spend about 20 or more hours each week watching TV, which is more time than is spent in any other activity besides sleeping.
- An average person will have watched 7-10 years worth of television by age 70.
- Advertisers target children, and each year, an average kid sees tens of thousands of commercials on TV.
- Children see 1,000-2,000 TV ads for alcohol each year.
- TV viewing starts earlier than other forms of media, often beginning before 2 years old.
- A great deal is known about children and TV, because there have been hundreds of studies on the subject.
- More statistics on kids and TV from the TV-Turnoff Network.

As you can see, if your child is typical, TV is playing a very big role in their life. Here are some things to keep in mind as you decide what kind of role you want TV to play in your family:

- TV affects brain development.
- Most children’s programming does not teach kids what parents say they want their children to learn.
- TV viewing is probably replacing activities in your child’s life that you would rather have them do (things like playing with friends, physical activity, fresh air, reading, homework, chores, spending time with you).
- TV viewing can contribute to poor grades, sleep problems, behavior problems, and obesity.

What about TV violence?
Research shows that:

- Programs designed for children are five to six times more violent than adult TV.
  - In prime time shows there are three to five violent acts per hour
In Saturday morning kids shows there are 20-25 violent acts per hour.

- The average child will see about 8,000 murders depicted on TV before finishing grade school.
- Kids see about 10,000 television rapes, assaults, and murders each year.
- Children imitate the violence they see.
- Watching TV violence leads to more aggressive behavior.
- TV violence has the greatest effect on preschool children.
- TV glamorizes violence. TV often promotes violent acts as a fun and effective way to get what you want.
- Most violent acts go unpunished on TV and are often accompanied by humor.
- Even “good guys” beating up “bad guys” gives a message that violence is normal and okay.
- Many children will try to imitate their "good guy" heroes in their play.

A 17-year-long study found that teenaged boys who grew up watching more than an hour of TV each day are four times more likely to commit acts of violence than those who watched less than an hour a day.

A 22-year-long study found that watching lots of TV violence at age eight was linked to more aggressive behavior at ages 19 and 30 years.

Repeated exposure to TV violence makes children less sensitive toward its effects on victims and the human suffering it causes.

For more on TV violence and kids:

- A summary of some of the research on children and TV violence from 1993.
- Two online brochures from the American Psychological Association:
  - Violence on Television: What do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?
  - Family and Relationships: Children and Television Violence
- The National Television Violence Study
- A Checklist to evaluate TV violence—from the PTA.

Can TV scare or traumatize kids?
Absolutely. Here’s what some of the research has found:
Fears caused by TV can cause sleep problems in children.

In a random survey of grade school kids, 37% of the kids said they were frightened or upset by a TV story in the previous year. Their symptoms included bad dreams, anxious feelings, being afraid of being alone, withdrawing from friends, and missing school.

Scary-looking things like grotesque monsters especially frighten children aged two to seven. Telling them that the images aren’t real will not help because young kids can’t always tell the difference between fantasy and reality.

Many children exposed to scary movies such as Poltergeist, Jaws, and Halloween, regret that they watched because of the intensity of their fright reactions.

Children ages 8-12 years who view violence are often frightened that they may be a victim of violence or a natural disaster.

One study looked at kid’s self-reported worry after seeing a dramatized depiction of a house fire or drowning. Those who saw a depiction of a drowning were less willing to go canoeing. Those who saw the house fire were less eager to build a fire in fireplace.

Can TV influence children’s attitudes toward themselves and others?

Let’s take a look at what kids see on TV, and how it can affect their beliefs about race and gender:

- Non-whites are not shown much on TV—and when they are, they tend to be stereotyped.
- Children learn to accept the stereotypes represented on television. After all, they see them over and over.
- In a study that looked at 155 elementary school children, White kids who watched more violent TV programs believed that Black kids were less competent and less obedient.
- Women on TV tend to be dominated by men.
- A review of the research on gender bias shows that the gender biased and gender stereotyped behaviors and attitudes that kids see on television do affect how they see male and female roles in our society.
- Links to more articles on minorities and the television industry.

How are children portrayed on TV?
A group called Children NOW studied how kids were shown on children’s entertainment TV shows. They found that:

- Children on television are most often motivated by peer relationships and romance.
- Entertainment television rarely shows children dealing with important issues.
- Most child characters engage in anti-social behaviors that often give positive results.
- Children of color are under-represented on television.
- Girls and boys are almost equally represented but there are important differences in the way in which they are portrayed.

A study by the same group of how children are shown on local TV news, found that:

- Almost half of all stories about children focus on crime (45%).
- Children account for over a quarter of the U.S. population but only 10% of all local news stories.
- African American children account for more than half of all stories (61%) involving children of color, followed by Latino children (32%). Asian Pacific American and Native American children are virtually invisible on local news.
- African American boys are more likely than any other group to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime and violence whereas Caucasian girls are most likely to be shown as victims.

**Can TV affect my child’s health?**

Yes, in several different ways. First of all, kids get lots of information about health from TV, much of it from ads. Ads do not generally give true or balanced information about healthy lifestyles and food choices. The majority of children who watch health related commercials believe what the ads say. Second, watching lots of television can lead to childhood obesity and overweight. Finally, TV promotes risky behavior, such as trying dangerous stunts, substance use and abuse, and irresponsible sexual behavior.

**Children who watch more TV are more likely to be overweight**

Research has shown children who consistently spend more than 10 hours per week watching TV are more likely to be overweight. Children who watch TV are more likely to be inactive and tend to snack while watching TV.
Many TV ads encourage unhealthy eating habits. Two-thirds of the 20,000 TV ads an average child sees each year are for food and most are for high-sugar foods.

All television shows, even educational non-commercial shows, replace physical activity in your child’s life.

While watching TV, the metabolic rate seems to go even lower than during rest. This means that a person would burn fewer calories while watching TV than when just sitting quietly, doing nothing.

Children may attempt to mimic stunts seen on TV

Kids have been injured trying to repeat dangerous stunts they have seen on television shows.

Promotes high-risk behavior in adolescents

Alcohol use and other substances: TV programs often show or talk about alcohol use. The presence of alcohol on TV runs the gamut from drinking on prime-time shows, to beer ads, to logos displayed at sporting events. Many studies have shown that alcoholic drinks are the most common beverage portrayed on TV, and that they are almost never shown in a negative light. Ads for alcohol portray people as being happier, sexier, and more successful when they drink. A long-term study has found a link between television, MTV, and alcohol consumption among teens. Research has shown that those who watch more TV are also more likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana.

Sexual behavior and attitudes: Most parents don't talk to their kids about sex, birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Most schools do not offer complete sex education programs. So kids get most of their information about sex from TV.

The amount of sexual material on TV has increased over past decade. The Kaiser Foundation reported that "family hour" television contains more than eight sexual incidents per hour. Most of those events didn't address issues such as birth control, protection, or safer sex. These shows also didn't talk about risks and consequences of having sex—such as STDs and pregnancy. One survey revealed that 76% of teenagers indicated that one reason young people have sex is because TV shows and movies make it seem more normal for their age group.
More on TV and health:

- Turn off TV, Turn on a Healthier Lifestyle
- Television as a Public Health Issue

If my kids behave well and aren’t overweight, why shouldn’t they just watch as much TV as they want?

Because time spent watching TV takes time away from other activities.

- TV time decreases time spent in social interactions with family and peers.
- TV time takes away from participating in sports, music, art or other activities that require practice to become skillful.
- TV discoursages and replaces reading. Reading requires much more thinking than television, and is better for your child’s brain development.
- TV promotes a sedentary lifestyle and discourages exercise. An inactive lifestyle sets bad habits and leads to poor physical fitness now and down the road.
- Children who watch more TV do worse in school.
- Children who watch a lot of TV tend to have limited creativity development.

What are some tips and ideas for managing television in our family?

Set limits on the amount of time spent watching TV.

- Make very specific rules about when children can and cannot watch television. For example, do not allow TV during meals, homework or when parents are not around.
- AAP guidelines recommend that parents limit their children’s viewing to one to two hours per day at most.
- An alternative is to limit TV to one hour on school nights and two to three hours a day on weekends.
- You may want to allow a little extra viewing time for special educational programs.
- If your child is doing poorly in school limit TV time to half an hour each day, or eliminate TV entirely, except for limited time on the weekends.
- Make it a rule that children must finish homework and chores before watching television. If your child’s favorite show is on before the work can be done, then record the show to watch later.
The best rule is no TV during the week, and limited weekend TV. This ensures that kids are not rushing to finish their homework so they can watch a favorite show. It also frees up more time for family interaction during the busy weekdays. For example, instead of parking the kids in front of the TV while you fix dinner, have them help you cook.

Minimize the influence of TV in your home.

- Keep the TV off during family mealtimes.
- Eating in front of the TV starts a bad habit and reinforces kid’s dependence on television.
- Research shows that eating while watching TV has an even worse effect of “hooking” children to TV.
- Make conversation a priority in you home.
  - See YourChild: Parenting Resources on for more on communication and how to talk with your kids.
  - Interacting more will help your children improve their conversational skills.
  - It will improve your relationship with your kids, and keep the lines of communication open.
- Read to your children.
  - Begin reading to your children by the time they are age one.
  - Encourage older kids to read on their own.
  - Show your kids that you enjoy reading. Let them see you reading rather than watching TV to relax.
- Don’t use TV as a reward or punishment.
  - This gives the TV too much importance.
  - For positive discipline ideas and resources, see Parenting Resources on YourChild.
- Encourage active recreation.
  - Encourage your kids to take part in sports, games, hobbies, and music. For example you may turn off the TV and take a walk or do a project with your child.
  - Designate certain evenings for special family activities, like a family bike ride or a game night.
- Don’t use the TV as a distraction or baby-sitter for preschool children.
  - Alternatives to TV include jigsaw puzzles, play dough, board games, crayons, magazines, cutting and pasting, dress-up, reading, and making forts out of chairs and blankets or large cardboard boxes.
- Get the TV sets out of your children’s bedrooms.
Placing a TV in your child’s room keeps you from monitoring the amount of TV and the types of shows that they watch.

For kids, having a TV in the bedroom is linked to doing worse in school and **sleep problems**.

Unfortunately, a third of kids aged two to seven, and two-thirds of kids aged eight and up do have TVs in their bedrooms.

If your child complains that all their friends have their own TV sets in their rooms, remind them that you are going to do what you feel is best for them, because you care.

**Watch television with your children and talk about what you are watching.**

- Discuss the consequences of violence (if you allow older children to watch violent programs) and other ways the conflict could have been resolved.
- Talk about stereotyping and prejudice in TV programs.
- Discuss commercials with children. You can help your child recognize sales pitches given by commercials, and evaluate whether the messages in ads are realistic.
- Discuss the differences between reality and make-believe. Children interpret what they see differently than adults. They may not be able to distinguish fact from fiction. What you think may be funny but to a child is terrifying. Explain differences between news and entertainment, and reality and make-believe.
- Share your own beliefs and values
  - **How to talk to your child about the news**

**Pay attention to what is in the TV shows your child watches.**

- Encourage educational shows.
  - These include *Sesame Street*, other PBS kids’ shows, concerts, plays, sports events, nature and wildlife shows, documentaries, and real-life drama.
- Forbid violent shows—keeping in mind that shows targeted to kids tend to be more violent than adult shows—especially cartoons.
- Consider installing and using a **V-chip**.
  - ‘V’ is for violence. This chip lets you to block programs and movies that you don’t want your child to see. All new TV sets have internal V-chips, but you can get set-top boxes for TVs made before the year 2000.
- One drawback: News, sports, and ads are not rated—so they will not be screened out—but they often show violence.

- Use the TV Parental Guidelines rating system to help you determine which shows may be appropriate for your child.
  - The TV Parental Guidelines are an age-group rating system (based on the familiar movie rating system) for TV programs.
  - One drawback: the Guidelines don’t really give enough information about a program’s content to allow parents to make well-informed decisions about whether show is appropriate or not.

- Limit late night television. Kids need to get to bed at a reasonable time, anyway. (See Sleep Problems on YourChild, for more on the widespread problem of sleep deprivation among kids.)

**Set a good example**

- Don’t leave the TV on all the time for background noise.
- Don’t expect your child to have self-discipline when it comes to TV viewing if you don’t.
- Don’t watch adult programs while your child is present.
- Spend your free time reading, exercising, and playing or talking with your child.
- Here are more good TV habits you should try to acquire, and share with your kids:

**Plan a weekly TV schedule and teach your child to turn off the TV set at the end of their show.**

- Do not allow channel surfing—only planned viewing.
  - Use a TV guide or newspaper to decide which shows to watch instead of channel surfing until something gets your interest.
  - Sit down each week with your child and choose suitable children’s and family programs from the weekly TV listings.
  - Turn the TV on for these programs only. Turn it off and discuss the programs when they’re over.
  - If the TV stays on your child will probably become interested in the next show and then it will be harder to stop watching.
Avoid letting *children younger than 2 years old* watch television.

? Instead, do interactive activities that will promote proper **brain development** such as talking, playing, singing, and reading together.

? **Need to get stuff done?** Have your little one “help” with your chores around the house (like matching clean socks on laundry day), or wear your child in a backpack so they can ride along and see what you are up to (especially safe and handy—and fun for them—when you are cooking).
  o As you go about your chores, talk to your child about what you are doing. This will get your little one off to a great start!

**Teach your child how to use TV to their benefit and find good programs.**

? **TV can offer benefits** to kids and families. It is a part of popular culture, and cannot be easily ignored, so learning how to use it wisely is an important skill which takes guidance and practice.

? The **Ready to Learn** Service on PBS offers quality educational kid’s programs without commercials, plus information for parents and caregivers on how to use television as a learning tool. Contact your local PBS station for information about children’s programming or visit [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

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