

Parents, Children and Television

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Television is the major home entertainment medium. Children spend many hours watching television with or without their parents supervision. Because of its powerful impact, TV can influence what a child thinks about family roles and values. Present in almost 99 percent of Oklahoma homes, television certainly influences current child-rearing practices.

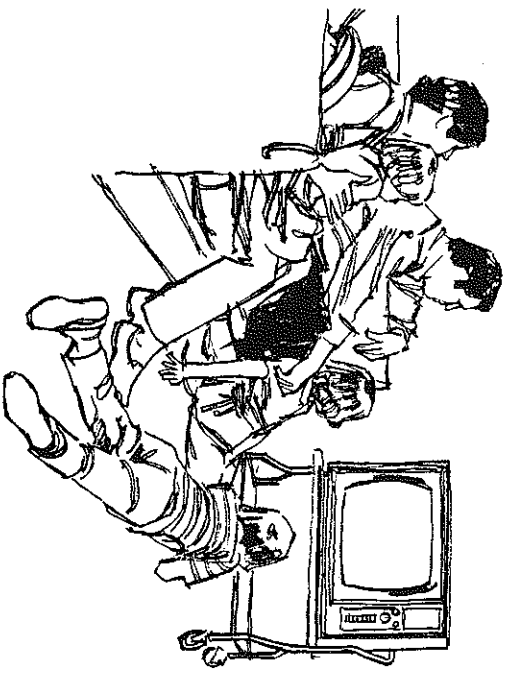
Child Development and Television

Children's use of television changes as they grow. At 18 months, most children are able to turn the set on and off and change the channels. However, they have no real understanding of what is on television. At age 2, children have little experience. Their attention span is short. They are happy to sit in front of the set without paying much attention to it. Television content does not usually interest them. Instead, television stimulates their senses. Its bright colors, loud noises, and changing patterns capture their attention.

By age 3, children probably are making considerable use of television. They do not yet understand the complex relationships depicted in television plots. What they see may confuse or frighten them. Their perceptions are often wrong. A young child lacks understanding of what is real and what is make believe. It is not until age 6 or 7 that children begin to understand the personal relationships depicted on television. Children of elementary school age enjoy slap-stick humor without caring about relationships. Children usually miss the point and symbols in most of the programs they watch.

How Television Affects Parent-Child Communications

Television becomes more important than people. How many times have you told your child not to bother you because you are watching television? How often do you tell your children that what they have to say can wait until the commercial? Are you making television a consistent priority? Are you



teaching your child that TV is more important than people?

Multiple sets discourage communication. Conflicts over which programs to watch also hinder parent-child relationships. In an Oklahoma survey, 70 percent of the families owned at least two television sets. These families may resolve such conflicts by using the additional set. This reduces parent-child communication even more.

Parents and children may use television as a way to escape from each other and personal roles. They may avoid interacting with each other by watching television. Thus, television watching becomes a way to isolate themselves from others. Television may be a way of escaping from reality. Family members may abuse television as others abuse drugs or alcohol. Some live their lives through the characters on the screen rather than building strong parent-child relationships.

Suggestions for Improving Family Communications Related to Television

- Discuss the programs your family watches.
- Do not hesitate to say what you like or dislike about a program.

- Plan to watch programs on a wide range of topics. Talk about issues that come up. Share ideas and impressions of what you have seen and heard.

- Holding or patting a child while watching television is a valuable communication technique.

Television Viewing Patterns

On the average, the television set is on 21 hours per week during the winter in Oklahoma homes. The average time decreases to 15 hours per week during the summer. Children spend 21 hours per week watching television during the winter and 18 hours per week during the summer. Why do children spend so much time watching television? **Their parents spend a lot of time watching television.** Research has shown that children who are heavy viewers usually have parents who spend a lot of time watching television.

It is easy for a parent to let television entertain your child. Healthy and age-appropriate activities require the parent's guidance. Many parents use television to avoid the work of interacting with their children and supervising their activities and clean-up. Active learning children need your leadership, not television.

Only about one-third of the parents attempt to control the amount of time their children watch television. Television programs come into the home at the touch of a button. Television requires parents to make a conscious effort to regulate what their children watch. Additionally, movies and other programs usually restricted to adults and older teens may be accessible to young children through television. This makes the parent's role even more crucial.

Suggestions for Getting Control of Family Use of Television

- Keep records on the programs and number of hours your family watches television. See the Family Viewing Chart.
- Decide on a reasonable amount of time for television viewing.
- Discuss with your family which programs are worth watching. Refer to Program Rating Chart.
- Plan your television schedule for the week.
- Remember that the best thing you can give your child is your good example.

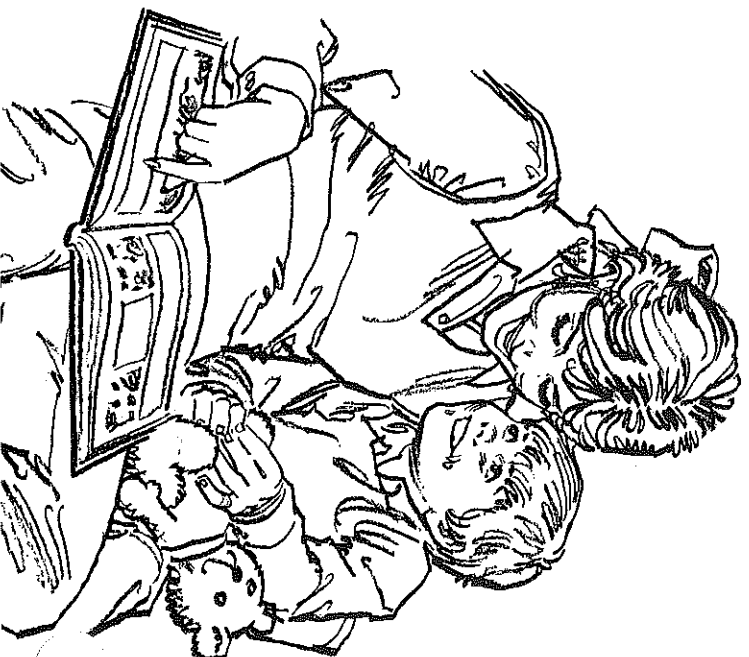
- Provide family members with many things to do besides watching TV.

Passive Effects of Television Viewing

Some emphasize the passive nature of television viewing. Passive behavior is harmful to a child's learning processes. We all learn by doing, and children are no exception. They need plenty of time for talking with friends, reading and enjoying physical activities. Television has made today's children more knowledgeable and sophisticated than previous generations; However, educators report that children's play is less imaginative than in the past. Today's children quickly grow tired with the frustrations of learning. Some children expect all learning to be entertaining as the programs on television. Many expect a solution in 30 to 90 minutes.

Suggestions for Reducing Passive Viewing

- Read to children when they are small. Continue to read to them when they are older. Encourage them to read to themselves and others as soon as they are able.
- Plan opportunities for children to explore the world around them.
- Plan activities related to television programs. For example, a trip to a zoo might follow a program on animals.



Effects of Television Fighting and Values

Television fighting can effect children, and is probably the most questioned and frequently studied of all of the issues involving television. Fighting behavior in both children and adults relates to the amount of fighting they see. Excessive exposure to violent acts on television may lead to an acceptance of fighting in real life. Heavy viewers of violent television may have an exaggerated sense of danger and cannot trust others. They are likely to fear new and different situations.

Children are unable to determine if television is reality or fiction. They assume that everything they see is true and approved. As they watch television, they learn what the world is like and how to act. Children copy the behavior they see. Their language, play, dress, toys and conversations reflect television viewing, which may not agree with your values.

Thus, unless parents help, television becomes the major teacher of values. Children copy their favorite TV characters. Most parents do not like the values, behavior and family life depicted on television. If this is not the behavior you want your children to adopt, learn to manage television.

Suggestions for Managing Television Fighting and Values

- Limit the number of violent programs your children watch.
- When there is questionable behavior on a program, discuss alternative actions and values.
- Make your values clear to your child through your example, explanations and the experiences you provide.
- Teach your children to evaluate what they see as real or make believe and right or wrong.
- Complain to local stations, cable companies and advertisers if you feel that a program's content is bad.

Advertising on Television

Seventy percent of advertising aimed at children is for highly sugared snacks, candies and breakfast foods. Fewer than two percent of television commercials advertise foods that promote

good health, such as fruits, milk, vegetables or cheese. Children believe ads. They learn from them. Repeated exposure to these types of ads increases their demands for junk food.

Children's demand for advertised toys creates parent-child conflict. Parents experience this problem particularly around holiday promotion time. Many of the toys depict television characters, thus extending the program into full-time advertising. Children have trouble resisting.

Suggestions for Coping with TV Advertising

- Help young children recognize the differences between commercial advertising and regular programming.
- Do not buy items with tricks or false advertising.
- Complain to local television stations and the sponsors about tricky or false advertisements.

Positive Effects of Television

Clearly, not all the effects of television are negative. Television provides opportunities to explore foreign cultures. Television lets us observe important political events. We can view exciting sports events. Through television we see and learn about a variety of subjects. Television makes these experiences inexpensive and convenient. Parents and children can share in the benefits from all programs. Those that deal with human feelings and relationships build parent-child communication. Such programs introduce important topics.

Suggestions for Enhancing the Positive Effects of Television

- Encourage children to watch programs that provide positive learning experiences.
- Watch educational program with children and talk about what is being shown. Then explain the information in a way the child can understand.
- Write stations, networks, and sponsors to thank them for programs that are of value to the family.

Much of the information provided came from "Children and Television," a publication of the University of Wisconsin Extension and "Television and Families," a publication of Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service by Michael Martin, Human Development Specialist.

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