

Kids and TV: Limit Screen Time for Young Children

Young children today spend an average of thirty-two hours a week watching television. Parents and caregivers need to recognize the potential consequences of that much TV.

Studies have linked media violence to increased aggression in both young and old viewers. Advertisers have long recognized media's power in shaping values and perceptions, often creating exaggerated wants and desires.

Approximately three-fourths of today's parents report having a television turned on at least half the time their children are playing. Even if a child isn't watching TV, when the TV is on in the background, the noise and rapidly changing lights become a familiar part of the child's environment.

The question then becomes, does this "background television" have any unintended consequences for children's behavior and development?

A recent study at Children's Hospital in Boston explored the effects of having a television on in the background while children were playing. Two groups of toddlers were observed in a playroom for one hour. "Jeopardy," an adult program of little interest to children, was turned on for half the playtime. In one group the program ran the first half hour of play; in the other group the TV played during the second half. Parents were in the same room but did not interact with their children. Videotapes of the children's behavior and play were analyzed to see if there was any difference while the television was on in the room.

In both groups of toddlers, playtime behavior was noticeably different while the TV was turned on, even though the children did not watch it directly. The toddlers were less focused on their play and played for shorter episodes. Their attention spans were shorter as well.

Researchers want to further study long-term effects of background television as it relates to the development of attention spans and concentration.

Play helps children acquire motor skills, begin to establish cause and effect, learn new concepts about the world and learn to solve problems. It helps develop their capacity to concentrate and focus attention, which is fundamental to learning later on. Background television may inadvertently undermine these capacities by distracting children.

Parents and caregivers are wise not only to limit television viewing during their children's early years, but also to turn off the TV when no one is watching.