

Television

Parent easy guide 7



Parenting SA

Many parents are concerned about the amount of time their children spend watching television and the effect it might have on them. Can it do any harm?

On one hand the educational and entertainment value can greatly benefit children. On the other, there are concerns and questions about the impact of media on children, especially violence and advertising.

Television entertains us all, and for children it also provides a window on the world. That world influences their development. They take in messages about other lifestyles and behaviour. They can be overloaded with the violence and harsh realities of life and given messages that are harmful to their development. Television can also be positive and show responsible ways of acting in the world.

Children need the chance to see to a wide range of attitudes and behaviours at a pace they can manage. They also need to experience the world outside of television.

Children need to talk, play, daydream and to read, as well as watch television. As a parent you need to keep television in balance with other activities.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your child's sex.*

How does TV affect your child?

All children's reactions to television are different. Your child's age and stage of development will make a big difference.

- > New research tells us that ongoing experiences can become patterns that begin in childhood and extend into adolescence. These experiences affect skills such as thinking, talking, problem solving, holding attention and getting on with others.
- > Studies show that after watching fast-paced TV shows, children have difficulty sticking with tasks that take longer, like reading or doing puzzles.
- > Children can tend to get 'glued' to the set and are then more likely to keep watching, even during commercials. The longer your children watch TV, the less time there is to play, to socialise and to exercise – all of which are important to development and health.
- > Children need to practise – to 'actively learn' how to speak, write and think. While TV does hold children's attention, it does not always engage their minds in 'active learning'. Other activities like reading and playing do this.
- > Children under six years will have difficulty working out the difference between fantasy and reality on TV. They will not follow plots and they tend to focus on the exciting bits. They do not understand cause and effect. They can see cartoon characters as real and they are open to the appeal of advertising.
- > Children from six to nine years will still have some difficulty working out the difference between fantasy and reality, especially if it looks like real life. They tend to admire and want to be like the hero or heroine.
- > Older primary school age children are likely to be disturbed by material which is based on fact, as it could mean it could happen to them. They are curious about the teenage world, sex and fashion and can be misled by the way boy-girl relationships are shown in the soaps.
- > The extent to which your children's behaviour, beliefs and outlook on life will be influenced by what they watch depends on how real they believe the television program to be.



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Children judge whether a program is real in three ways.

1. They recognise things and people on TV which they have experienced, eg 'It is real because there is a dog in the program like mine'.
 2. They think programs are 'unreal' if they clash with their experiences, eg 'People don't really have special magic by wriggling their nose'.
 3. They understand how programs are made, eg 'I know how cartoons are made' or 'I know that the people are actors'.
Nine to ten year olds are much clearer about people playing a part, whereas six to seven year olds can believe TV families are real families or Sesame Street is a real street in the USA.
- > Some images may be frightening although this will be different for each child. Some children even enjoy being frightened a little, but only when they are secure. Knowing they are really safe allows them the freedom to have 'thrill' feelings. The more children are shown frightening programs, the more they believe the world is a frightening place. This can make them anxious and fearful.
 - > How your child thinks about herself (whether she feels really happy with the way she is or quite miserable) can also be influenced by popular figures she admires. Her ideas of what is good, what is worthwhile, how to behave, what to value can all be shaped by famous people she sees on the screen as well as what she learns from you.

Advertising

Advertising influences children. Most children under eight years believe what the adverts tell them. Children between eight to ten years are aware that adverts don't always tell the whole truth. They are not sure how to tell when they are not.

When well-known people sell products children are easily persuaded. With the advertising techniques that are used, children can be misled or tricked by the shape, speed, size and way a product works. They often want what is advertised and will pester with all sorts of reasons for parents to buy.

Children with little understanding of language can get the wrong meaning, such as thinking 'good to eat', or 'fruit flavoured' means 'good for me'.

You can help your child learn about advertising by talking about what he sees on TV. Also talk about how the ad may have been made and looking at the product in real life.

Violence

Most parents worry about the effects that watching violence has on children. Children will be affected differently, at different ages and stages of development and by different types of material.

Children of all ages will be disturbed when they see violence to other children and to animals and by violence in the home.

Young children (under eight years) may take from cartoons the message that 'violence works and wins' even if they laugh or even if they can tell that it is fantasy. Older children are more likely to be influenced by reality-based material, such as action

movies and series. They will absorb the messages from violent heroes about the success of using violence.

Older children have the ability to imagine that the events could happen to them. They may be made anxious by news or dramas that they see as real and could occur in their life.

While there are different views about how much violence on TV is harmful to children, we do know the evidence says that seeing violence repeatedly on TV has an impact:

- > children are more likely to use aggressive means to solve problems
- > children are made anxious about the 'mean and scary' world in which they appear to live
- > children become less sensitive to violence in real life.

Children who are heavy viewers (over three hours each day), younger children, boys, children from violent homes and those who are insecure are the ones who will be most affected by exposure to television violence.

What is scary to children

Exposure to scary content can have quite a powerful and lasting impact on children.

This can include short term effects such as intense fear or crying. Long term effects can include sleep problems, refusal to be alone, concern about being hurt or killed, and needing unusual bedtime rituals. Sometimes long term disabling fears, eg of dogs, cats or spiders can emerge.

Early childhood (under 7 or 8 years)

- > scary visual images such as vicious animals, monsters, or grotesque characters
- > when a normal character becomes abnormal or grotesque, eg 'The Incredible Hulk'
- > stories involving the death of a parent
- > stories showing natural disasters vividly.

Primary years (7 – 12 years)

- > more realistic threats and dangers, especially those that could really happen to a child
- > violence, or the threat of violence
- > stories in which children are hurt or threatened.

Early adolescence (13 years and up)

- > realistic physical harm or threats of intense harm
- > sexual assault
- > threats from aliens or the occult.

Understanding others

Children need to understand and enjoy the many lifestyles and traditions that make up our country and our world. Children are not born intolerant or prejudiced. They learn it from others around them. As early as six months of age, babies notice skin differences and by their second year, they start to question how people are the same and different.

Between two and a half and three and a half years, children begin to absorb the attitudes from others, parents, friends, books and television about people from other races. Television can teach children stories, traditions, and songs from their own culture, and help them learn about others. Sometimes the messages they get from TV will affect how they think of others, eg that women are weaker or that men are tough.

What parents can do

Managing TV at home

TV can effect the routine in your home, such as getting ready for school, bedtimes and mealtimes, visitors and homework.

- > Use the TV classifications to help you and your children know what is suitable for different age groups. The classifications are:
 - Children (C) (only available on commercial TV)
 - Pre-school Children (P) (only on commercial TV)
 - General (G)
 - Parental Guidance Recommended (PG)
 - Mature (M)
 - Mature Adult (MA)
 - Adult Violent (AV)
- > Help your children at an early age how to decide what they watch on TV. Help them to make their own ratings and become choosy, such as - C (can't be missed), S (so-so), W (waste of time). Encourage them to first stop watching W and later W and S.
- > Make a rule that TV is not switched on until all jobs and homework have been done. Have a list of things to do and help children manage their time. Be firm and clear, such as, 'You haven't finished what you have to do. If you do things differently you'll have time to watch TV'.
- > Move the TV out of the main living area (if you have space) so that it has to be a conscious decision to watch.
- > You are likely to have less control over television and what is watched if you have more than one set.
- > If programs are important to your child plan to record them so that they can be watched at a time that works best for your family.
- > Avoid morning television for children going to school. It can affect the rest of their day and create pressure to be ready on time for school.
- > Decide on the bedtime for your child's age, rather than around the TV program. Select a program that finishes well before bedtime and is not scary. Children need to wind down between TV and sleep. Turn the volume down or off before bedtime.
- > Try to keep mealtimes TV-free so that there is time for people to talk to each other. This helps children to know their family and have a sense of belonging.
- > Have a list on the fridge for other things to do – take time to kick a ball, see friends, catch a train somewhere, do something completely different.

Watching TV

- > Plan what you watch. Limit your child to the amount watched each day. Decide together what programs will be watched. Only have the TV on then, rather than on all the time. This teaches children to think, plan, make choices and allows time for them to do other things important for their development.
- > Know what programs your children watch and know the characters.
- > Give your children a chance to ask questions, describe their feelings, and make sense of what is taking place. Let them know what you think. Tell your child what you think about violence.
- > Talk about programs - discuss characters, stories and themes. Describe likes and dislikes. Ask questions, such as 'What do you think would happen if you did that?'
- > Talk about how programs can affect our moods after watching them. Get children to come up with words that describe how they feel, such as bored, happy, scared, sad, excited, grumpy, wound up, restless or worried.
- > If your child becomes quite upset after a program, allow him to talk about what he saw, what he is feeling and why. Maybe there are links with something that is happening in his life or he is fearful that what he saw could happen to him. Talk calmly, give a cuddle and follow up with some fun activity.
- > Make your views known to television stations or broadcasting authorities when you are concerned about a program. It is important to have your say soon after the event. Be exact with the time, date, place, program, the channel on which you saw it, and why you are concerned. (Young Media Australia can advise you how to do this).

Watching the TV news

When we talk about 'the news', this is often the most violent, unusual and worst things that have happened in the world today. While children should not be shielded from the realities of the world, 'the news' is only a part of what happens in the world in one day. For example, it is unlikely the news will focus on the thousands of planes that take off and land safely on any day, but will headline when one is involved in a crash. Children:

- lack grown-ups' experiences and are unable to tell the difference between what they see and the chance of these events occurring in their own lives
- can find it difficult to understand that the news story is focused on the unusual or one-off event
- may think that when they see the same event over and over again (such as the repeated images of the planes hitting World Trade Centre in New York) that the event is happening over and over again
- at a young age, are unable to understand 'probability'. They may not be reassured if you tell them 'it isn't likely to happen to us'. They may become fearful if violence is shown in familiar settings, eg homes, families, schools, or to other children or animals.
- > Understand yourself how 'the news' works.
- > Know when, where and what kind of news your child is exposed to.

- > Talk with your child early and often about the images he sees in 'the news'. You can help him better understand the world around him. Many adults do not realise how often children see 'the news' eg 'newsflash' during their favourite TV show, radio, newspapers and at school.
- > Balance your child's 'news diet' by setting clear limits, watching the news with him and talking about what he sees.

How much time is okay?

Screen-based media, that is, TV, videos and computers can be a 'time thief'.

Young Media Australia recommends:

- > children under 2 years – very little time
- > preschoolers – an hour a day is plenty (of programs made for preschool children). (A strong view held by The Alliance for Childhood is that computers should not play a significant part in preschool children's lives.)
- > children 5 – 7 or 8 years – an hour a day is plenty
- > children over 8 years – an hour and a half-hour to two hours a day is plenty.

While there are many entertaining experiences for children to be had on TV, videos and computers, it is important to keep in mind what children need at different ages for their healthy development. Children need time to build strong bonds with real and caring people, time for active physical play and 'hands-on' activities.

Reminders

- > Lead by example - your child's viewing habits may be copied from yours.
- > Control the TV - don't let it control you.
- > It's a good idea to not have a TV in your child's bedroom.
- > TV viewing for a very young child should be in your company.

- > Choose programs and turn the TV on only then (avoid it as background noise).
- > Record programs so they can be played at a time that suits best.
- > Encourage children to talk about how they feel after watching a program.
- > Play 'spot the gimmicks and trickery' in TV commercials.
- > Choose a family area which can be a TV free space.
- > Children need to learn skills which help them for school and getting on with others. These can be best learnt and practised by doing things.
- > Make TV one of a lot of activities your children do.

Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100

24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606

9am - 4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

Young Media Australia (YMA) Helpline:

Tel 1800 700 357 For support or information about the impact of the media on children

Websites

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

For other Parent Easy Guides including:
The Internet, Nightmares

www.cyh.com

For parenting and child health information

www.youngmedia.org.au

For information about media and young people

www.acma.gov.au

For regulation of broadcasting, the internet, radio and telecommunications

For more information

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Parenting SA

Children, Youth and Women's Health Service

Telephone (08) 8303 1660

Internet: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

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Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia

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