

TV and Kids' Health: Why Parents Should Monitor 'Screen Time'

It's no secret that many children watch a lot of television — something experts say could be harmful to their health.

Excessive TV watching, along with prolonged computer use and video game playing, are easy habits for kids to fall into these days. And, many fear such activities can lead to behavioral problems and obesity.

Doctors have also examined the effects too much "screen time" has on early childhood development.

Dr. Michael Sonenblum, MD, FAAP, a physician at Pediatric Associates, a pediatric practice with offices located throughout South Florida, says screen time, which consists of TV, computer, tablet, and smartphones, isn't good for children under 2 years old, as it can contribute to language delay and can negatively affect memory.

"Children under (age) 2 learn a lot by facial expression, tone of voice, and body language — much of which doesn't translate well on a flat screen, especially in animated or cartoon form," Sonenblum says. "And if they're watching TV, infants and toddlers are *not* watching or interacting with their parent(s), causing them to miss out on significant learning opportunities."

When a child is over 2 years old, their brain has developed to the point they can begin to learn from well-designed programming with educational objectives, Sonenblum says.

He recommends interactive shows that inspire thinking, but warns that even these types of programs should be limited to two hours per day.

Behavior Problems and Health Risks

Psychologists have linked childhood exposure to violence through the media to aggressive behaviors in adults.

Sonenblum agrees that violence, suggestive themes, and strong language in TV programs and video games can have a lasting effect on children.

There have been positive aspects of television for children in recent years... matter of fact Dora taught all my children how to speak Spanish and my children also speak Italian from watching Sesamo Apriti, which is Sesame Street in Italian.

"Even programming designed for kids can send the message that fighting and destroying things is fun," he says. "Another problem is exposure to mature themes."

Dr. Jacquie Chinappi, a Psychology instructor at South University, Online Programs, adds that too much TV time can lead to behavioral problems such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and hyperactivity, as well as obesity.

"Obesity has been a big one in recent years as the weight gain in our children has been on the rise," she says. "Reading has also seen a deficit as the children are no longer picking up a book and diving into new chapters and using their imagination. Reading skills have decreased."

Sonenblum recommends that parents encourage their children to participate in activities that inspire creativity, instead of watching TV. He suggests activities such as arts and crafts, including drawing and painting.

<http://cmsdeploy.content.edmc.edu/assets/marketing/Insite/tv-health-issues-intext.jpg>

"Older children, of course, should be encouraged to do homework first," he says. "Little things like household chores, setting the table, helping with meal planning and preparation, etc., can hold a child's interest if presented in the right way."

He also mentions the importance of parents taking the time to engage in everyday conversation with their children to stimulate the child and strengthen the bond between them.

“And let's not forget a very important activity that all too often is pushed aside in favor of TV — physical activity,” Sonenblum says. “Children should be running around and playing for at least as much time as they spend in front of a screen each day.”

Chinappi says participating in physical activities can lead to better physical and mental health. She also says that although too much TV is bad for children, TV watching does have its benefits.

“There have been positive aspects of television for children in recent years. As a matter of fact, Dora taught all my children how to speak Spanish and my children also speak Italian from watching ‘Sesamo Apriti,’ which is ‘Sesame Street’ in Italian,” she says.

Monitoring TV Time

Sonenblum says it's a bad idea for parents to allow their children to have a TV in their bedroom. He says if a child has their old TV, parents can't really keep track of how much time is spent watching it or what programs they're watching.

“And the artificial light from the screen has been shown to significantly affect a child's sleep, which can then negatively affect health and learning,” Sonenblum says.

Chinappi doesn't necessarily agree. She says she's on the fence about whether children should be allowed to have a TV in their bedroom, as she allows her own children to have one.

“The question is not should the child be allowed to have a TV in their room but when and how long should they be allowed to watch it?” Chinappi says. “Whether it be in the living room or bedroom, children should follow their parents' rules.”

She suggests that parents use charts to determine how much TV time their children should have.

“For instance, for each chore the child can gain 15 minutes of television time,” Chinappi says. “There are also many parental tools within our own reach whether it be on television or a tablet/computer. The parent can use a parental code to program when tablet, TV, etc. can be used. I use this and all my kids have to come to me first to ask if they can watch TV or play a game — then if I say it is okay I will type in the private password.”

Sonenblum advises parents to be firm when monitoring their child's TV usage.

“When the time limit you've set is reached, shut it off,” Sonenblum says. “Use a DVR to record shows of which you approve, rather than leaving choices up to the kids or the TV networks.”

He advises parents to try to be nearby when the TV is on, to monitor the programs their child is watching.

“This way you can intervene and explain things when necessary, and ask questions that encourage problem-solving and interaction,” Sonenblum says. “Also, newer TVs have a ‘V-chip’ option. This device lets parents identify and stop programs with violence, sexual content, or other material not suitable for children.”

For more information about the V-chip, Sonenblum says parents can call 888-CALL-FCC (888-225-5322/voice) or 888-TELL-FCC (888-835-5322/TTY).