

Turn Off the Tube, Turn on to Life

By Tom Hanlon

*Does screen time rule the life of you or your kids?
Learn how to break free of TV*

We've all seen that zoned-out, "lost to this world" look on a child planted in front of a television. In reality, says Robert Kesten, that child is losing something.

"There's a clear line between the amount of television, or screen time in general, that young people have and their ability to focus," says Kesten, executive director of TV-Turnoff Network, which is sponsoring TV-Turnoff Week in April. "It has a deep and lasting impact on their ability to learn."

Excessive time in front of a screen, Kesten explains, permanently alters the brain's synapse connections, which affect the way the brain communicates information. "The old saying about muscles—if you don't use it you lose it—it's the same for the brain as for any other part of the body."

An Overabundance of Hours

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no television viewing at all for youngsters 2 and under, and one to two hours of quality viewing at the most for older children. But the average child watches TV for nearly four hours a day, and the average American household has the TV on for nearly eight hours a day, according to Nielsen



The average child sees more than 40,000 commercials each year—many of which promote junk food and soft drinks.

Media Research. Kids spend more time watching TV than doing any other activity except for sleeping. They spend 900 hours per year in school—and 1,023 hours watching television, according to TV-Turnoff Network.

Parents should be concerned. "[Watching TV] interferes with opportunities to do other things with your children," says Dr. Kathleen Nelson, a fellow of the AAP and a senior associate dean at the University of Alabama School of Medicine. "We have some concerns that early television can lead to later behavioral problems. Recent research shows that children who are exposed to early television have more attention-deficit problems once they hit school age."

Beyond that, says Nelson, "It's very passive entertainment. You're neglecting the opportunity for imaginative physical as well as intellectual play."

Some would argue that intellectual play can take place through television, particularly through PBS and other educational channels. Nelson acknowledges the good that TV can bring to a child's life.

"There are opportunities to expose people to things they may not otherwise get exposed to," she says. "For example, city children who've never been in the country have an opportunity to see what life is like outside of cities, what life is like

in other countries; they get to see different races and different occupations than they've been exposed to at home."

But even educational TV is not without its detractors. "In many cases the generations that have grown up with 'Sesame Street' are not as creative and find other things that the previous generations did not find problematic," says Kesten. "They may read earlier and count earlier but they only do it in certain ways and they have problems thinking out of the box."

Obesity and Other Ill Effects

There are additional ill effects that come with too much television viewing as well. Of prime concern is the issue of childhood obesity.

Is there a link between watching TV and being overweight? You bet, says Dr. Mary L. Gavin, medical editor for KidsHealth, a Web site providing doctor-approved health information about children from before birth through adolescence.

According to KidsHealth, kids who watch more than four hours of TV per day are more likely to be overweight. One reason is kids use TV time as snack time. TV-Turnoff Network reports that the average child sees 40,000 commercials each year—many of which promote junk food and soft drinks.

"Those messages are the influence on the kids," Gavin says. "It's not just that they're sedentary; it's the message they get in terms of the food being advertised."

"Watching television is a major player in the epidemic that we have in this nation in obesity—especially in young people," Kesten says. "If you want a healthy mind and body you have to take care of it. The only way to take care of it is to do the things that are good for it and not do things that are bad for it."

Another concern is the effects of

(continued)



Control what your child can watch.

V-Chip: Block That Show!

AV-Chip electronically reads television programming ratings and allows parents to block programs that they deem unsuitable for their children to watch. Every 13-inch or larger television manufactured after January 2000 has a V-Chip in it.

With the V-Chip, parents can block programming based on its age-based category or content label. For example, if you want to block all TV-14 programs (programs deemed unsuitable for children under 14 years of age), you can do so by selecting TV-14 through your V-Chip. If you only want to block TV-14 programs that have excessive violence, you can select TV-14-V.

Once you have activated your V-Chip, it can be deactivated only by you, because it requires a password, which you set, to change any settings. —TH



Let your kids help make choices about what to watch, and co-view shows with them.

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"I'm not big into regulation but I just think that, especially for young children, you want to keep them innocent for as long as you can," says Nelson. Video games and music are often worse in regard to violence and sex and antisocial messages, she adds.

Being an Educated Viewer

So what can you and your children do to be critical and savvy viewers? Here are five keys.

1. Co-view the Show "Look at TV schedules together and make choices together, particularly if you're not watching it with them," says Gavin. "Be aware not only of what your child is watching, but the effect on the child. One important technique is to co-view—to sit and watch for a while, to get a sense for what they're watching."

2. Preview the Show In many cases, says Nelson, you can not only co-view but preview. "Especially with some of the cable networks that have something on repeatedly, you can preview it before the kids watch it," she says.

3. Use Available Tools The TV rating system, generated by the broadcast and cable networks to alert viewers to the type of audience for which the show is suited, is a useful tool for parents. Similar systems are used

for games, Web sites and other media. Likewise, the V-Chip (see page 23) is another useful tool.

Even with these tools, however, you can't control what commercials and previews for shows or movies are shown. Ultimately, says Kesten, "It's vital that parents be involved in what their kids watch and don't watch. It would be nice if there were an easy way to do it, but there's not an easy way to be a parent. For every minute your child is watching TV, it will always be best if the parent joins in. There is no escape for the parent in determining how much a kid should watch, what they should watch, where they should watch."

4. Become Media Literate "Talk about the reality of the shows," Gavin says. "A lot of the violence has no consequences on TV. In real life, would that violent person be a hero? Talk about the violence with your child."

"The key element in media literacy is to be informed. You cannot be informed if television is your only source of entertainment and information. Television is a headline type of distribution system. It is not an in-depth look at anything, and it is controlled by huge interests that have other interests in mind such as selling advertising." Kesten advocates that parents read more about programming to be informed.

5. Limit Screen Time "It's very important for parents to understand that screen time in essence is no different than how much candy you allow your child to eat," Kesten says. "Both are addictive, both are unhealthy in excess. You wouldn't put a cake in front of your kid and say okay, just eat as much as you want. Well, it's the same thing with television and other screens. There have to be limits." ▼

For more information:
www.tvturnoff.org
www.parentstv.org
www.kidshealth.org
www.tvguidelines.org
<http://kff.org>
<http://medialit.med.sc.edu>

Tom Hanlon writes about a variety of topics concerning health and vacations in a cottage in Michigan—with no TV.

By the NUMBERS: TV and Other Media

7 hrs 40 min	The time per day that TV is on in the average American home
3 hrs 40 min	The amount of time children ages 2 to 7 spend each day using media
6 hrs 43 min	The amount of time children 8 and older spend each day using media
27	The percent of high school seniors who watch more than 4 hours of TV per day and achieve proficiency on reading tests
5	The percent of American children who were seriously overweight in 1964
16	The percent of American children who were seriously overweight in 2003
#1	ABC's "Desperate Housewives" is the most popular broadcast network show with kids ages 9 to 12, according to Nielsen stats in January 2005

Sources: TV-Turnoff Network; Parents Television Council

viewing violence on television. "There's such an incredible preponderance of evidence that shows that seeing aggressive or violent acts on television influences a child's level of violence or aggres-

ive type of behavior," says Gavin. "That's pretty much undisputed. That's not to say every kid who watches a violent show will go on to be violent—but kids watching violence at younger ages will be more likely to show bullying behavior or be more aggressive toward peers." "Another thing that's coming out is the desensitization," Kesten adds. "In one moment you're see-

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ing 'Lost' where you've got a bunch of people stranded on an island going through a terrible situation, and on the other you have a real hurricane that hits the southern part of this country. Because of

what the media has done, it's very hard to separate one from the other. This desensitization, this lack of realizing what is actually happening to people versus what is on for amusement or entertainment, is creating a very serious problem." Desensitization occurs in sexual matters as well. A study released by the Kaiser Family Foundation in November 2005 shows that the number of sexual scenes on TV has nearly doubled since 1998. The study found that 70 percent of all shows include some sexual content, compared to 56 percent in 1998 and 64 percent in 2002. According to a study by the RAND Corporation, kids with higher exposure to sex on TV were almost twice as likely as kids with lower exposure to initiate sexual intercourse.

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