



DELAWARE MODERN PEDIATRICS, P.A.

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Television Exposure and Children

American children watch, on average, over 25 hours of TV per week from preschool through high school. This may not be good for them; the average child sees more than 20,000 TV commercials per year. By the sixth grade, children witness an average of 8,000 murders and over 100,000 other acts of violence on television. Children's Saturday morning programming shows 30 violent acts per hour, compared to 5 violent acts per hour on prime time evening television. Childhood obesity rates are doubled for kids who watch over two hours per day; reading scores start to drop as kids watch over 3 hours per day.

Many parents do not realize how much television their children watch. You might try keeping a diary; record how many hours of TV (including video games and movies) your child watches in a 7 day period.

A large portion of most TV watching is wasted time, not spent getting exercise, reading, or practicing social skills. Certainly some shows are educational. But the benefit may be lost after about an hour of TV per day.

But for better or worse, television is here to stay. It's important to set limits, but you will also want to teach your children how to deal with what they are seeing and hearing.

Limit television to 10 hours per week. A nice way to do this is to allot a "TV allowance," just as a child might receive a monetary allowance each week. Try making paper slips with the phrase "1/2 hour TV time" written on them. A child might receive 20 such slips every Sunday night, then "pay" 1 slip for each show or half hour of video games they enjoy. This way, the total TV exposure is limited, while you do not have to haggle over each show.

No one should eat while the TV is on. Eating in front of TV is a prescription for obesity.

Watch the kids' shows with them. Talk about the content of each show with your kids:

- Ask for your children's thoughts about what they are seeing. ("Would you have done what that character did?" - "What looks fun about the toy in this advertisement?").
- Talk about how the TV characters solved their problems. See if you can come up with a better (or more realistic) solution.
- Discuss TV violence. Try to decide why it happened. See if your child can think of a nonviolent solution to the same situation.
- Vote on whether or not each show is worth watching again. Keep your family's

decisions on a wall chart, so everyone can refer to it.

Television is a business, and businesses exist to make money. From the start, **begin teaching your young children about commercials.**

- Talk about the product the commercial is selling: is it good for you? Will it last? Is it worth the price?
- Compare toys you have purchased, or toys and food you see on shopping trips, with the claims made in the advertisements. Have your children "redo" the commercial based on what they know about the product.
- Make children aware of the large amount of time devoted to commercials during their favorite shows. Time them, or count them, for fun.

Take control of the TV. Don't let television schedules run your schedule.

- Make a chart for each family member. Let him or her record what they watch, and how much time is spent. Add up the totals, over a week.
- Keep the TV out of kids' bedrooms. Don't put a TV in a playroom, to reduce the temptation to play with the TV on. Instead, keep it in the living room, or another room not normally used by the kids.
- Rent, borrow, buy, or make video tapes. "Time shift" using the video recorder, then plan a "family TV night" as a family activity. Try to avoid random TV watching.
- If no one is watching, turn it off.

Put TV violence in perspective for your children.

- Tell your child that the violence is "faked" for TV shows. Tell them how it is done.
- Help your child think of nonviolent solutions to TV situations.
- Reassure children that their world is basically safe. TV news and shows often leaves children feeling unsettled. Explain that "news" is chosen so that people will watch.
- With younger children, watch cartoons carefully. Point out when "real life won't work that way" ... like dropping an anvil on a cartoon character's head.

Use TV to learn.

- Ask your child to draw a picture, or write a story, about a show he has seen.
- Have your child list TV shows that have interested him. Then take trips to the library to find books that can tell you more. Try to visit sites he found interesting on TV. Many PBS shows have web sites that are highly informational.

Practice makes Perfect!

All of these suggestions assume that the parents are aware of what their children are watching on TV, and how much. The more you teach your children to be active TV viewers, the more natural these skills will become. Pretty soon, you'll be showing your kids a new way to think for themselves.