



DELAWARE MODERN PEDIATRICS, P. A.

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Television and Screen Time

American children watch, on average, over 35 hours of TV and screen time per week, from preschool through high school. This is not good for them. 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. And excessive screen exposure clearly affects behavior.

The negative impact comes from TV, cell phone apps, tablet programs, video games, YouTube, or any other “screen time.” They all promote inactivity, non-critical thinking skills, and social isolation.

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

And all of the programs and apps are designed to monopolize the viewer’s attention. Screen time is known to be addictive; personally, I suspect that screen time eventually will be found to be as addictive as heroin!

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.

You can control the mechanics of your kids’ screen exposure.

Don’t have the TV playing “just for company” while no one is actively watching. Many families allow the TV to play all day in their house; this is actively bad, even if the kids appear to ignore it.

An infant or child can have only two responses to the TV playing:

- They can **pay attention** to it: so they are watching too much TV; or
- They can **ignore** it: so that they are learning to ignore their environment, which is an unhealthy trait also.

In both cases, the TV playing in the room is bad for the kids. Of course, if someone chooses to watch a particular show that they have an interest in, that’s perfectly fine; but they should maintain the self-discipline to turn the TV off as soon as the show is over.

Limit television and screen time 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. Look for the handout on our website called "TV Allowance"; you can cut paper slips with the phrase "1/2 hour TV time" written on them. A child might receive 15 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.

School assignments on the computer are "free." And chatting with a live person at the other end of the phone, such as video-chat or even texting, is also "free." (My own opinion is that televised sports games are also not harmful: many times they're a social activity!) But the solitary absorption with video games, YouTube, streaming services etc. should be limited to 7-10 hours per week.

TV and cellphones should be banned from the bedroom. If there is a TV in your child's bedroom, move it to a public area of the house. Keep the cellphone charger in the kitchen, not the bedroom. If your child needs an alarm for the morning, a clock radio can be obtained inexpensively.

No one should eat while the TV is on. Eating in front of TV is a prescription for obesity. Kids will pay attention to the show, instead of their hunger cues.

On YouTube, turn off the "AutoPlay" button. Google uses algorithms to decide what video to play next ("Up Next"), instead of the viewer controlling what to watch. Leaving the "AutoPlay" button on is your permission for Google to decide what you and your kids watch (and keeps you mindlessly watching!). Look for the button on the right side of the screen, and slide it "off".

Infants and toddlers should not be shown videos at all. (But photos of family, and video chat with a live person at the other end, are perfectly fine.)

You can also impact how your kids respond and process what they're watching.

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. You might help your children act out and "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.

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 and other 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.