

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **THE IMPACT OF MEDIA AND TELEVISION ON CHILDREN**

Many parents are concerned about the impact of media on their children. On the one hand, it provides education and entertainment that can greatly benefit children. Technology can open up a world of information and access to different points of view about lifestyles and behavior. However, children also need opportunities to experience the world outside of television. Children need to talk, play, daydream, and read, in addition to watching TV or playing on the computer. Children especially need time to build strong bonds with real and caring people, time for active physical play, and to participate in creative and 'hands-on' activities of all kinds. As a parent, you need to help your child keep television, videogames, and computer usage in balance with other activities.

### **Effects of TV**

Children's reactions differ, and your child's age and stage of development make a big difference on the effects of television viewing. Studies show that watching fast-paced TV shows affects children's behavior. They have difficulty sticking with tasks that take longer, like reading or doing puzzles. Children can get 'glued' to the set and are more likely to keep watching, even during commercials. The longer children watch TV, the less time they have to play, to socialize, and to exercise - all of which are important to development and health.

Children's learning is optimized when it is associated with active participation and when it is put into context, or generalized to the "real world." While TV definitely grabs and holds children's attention, it does not always engage their minds in active learning. Other activities like reading and playing creatively do this.

### **Youth Exposure To Ads On TV**

Madison Avenue spends millions of dollars creating marketing campaigns aimed at our nations' youth. Children see an average of 21 food ads a day - more than 7,600 a year - most of which are for candy and snacks (34%), cereal (28%), and fast food (10%). The troubling reality is that most children under 8 years of age believe what the advertisements tell them. When well-known people or popular characters sell products, children are more 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 their parents with all sorts of reasons to buy them. Children with unsophisticated understanding of language can get the wrong meaning, such as thinking "good to eat" or "fruit flavored" means "healthy for me." Transmitting a marketing message in 30 seconds often requires advertisements to employ stereotypes, further distorting the young child's emerging views of reality.

### **Media Use by Preschool Children**

According to a new study, one-fifth of infants and toddlers under age 3 have a TV set in their bedrooms. Forty-three percent of 3- to 4-year-olds have TVs in their rooms. Having a TV on most of the time in the house means increased time watching and is associated with increased rates of obesity.

### **Prevalence of Media Multitasking**

Kids between the ages of 2 and 12 years old spend more than a quarter of their leisure time doing two or more activities at the same time, such as simultaneously reading, using the computer, spending time with friends, listening to music, and watching TV. Multitasking, in contrast to popular belief, does not lead to greater efficiency. Conversely, accuracy, speed, and performance on tasks performed concurrently with other activities is reduced. Parents should insist that children turn off the TV when doing homework and to resist the urge to text message during biology class.

### **Household Patterns of Media Use**

Over 50% of children report that there are no rules in their household governing use of electronic media. Unfortunately, only 50% of families that do have rules about TV and computer use regularly enforced these rules. Two-thirds of families usually have the TV on during meals, and half of households with TV tend to have it on constantly, even when no one is watching.

## **Impact of Television Violence on Young Children**

Most parents worry about the effects that watching violence has on children. Studies have shown that children's television contains about 20 violent acts each hour and that children who watch a lot of violent television are more likely to have altered attitudes and behavior. Young children may take from aggressive cartoons the message that "aggression works and wins" even though they also laugh or can tell that it is fantasy. While there are different views about how much violence on TV is harmful to children, we do know that seeing violence repeatedly on TV has a real impact. Heavy viewers (over 3 hours daily), younger children, boys, children from violent homes, and those who are insecure appear to be most affected by exposure to TV violence.

Children often behave differently after they've been watching violent programs on television. In one study, preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had many aggressive and violent acts; others watched shows that didn't have any kind of violence. Children who watched the violent shows were more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority, and were less willing to wait for things than those children who watched nonviolent programs. Other research, however, suggests that the effect of watching violent TV content is only short-lasting and studies linking excessive TV watching and disruptive behavior in children are not always able to account for the influence of family and genetic factors underlying this association.

## **What Parents Can Do**

- Use the media ratings to help you and your children know what is suitable for different age groups. Teach your children at an early age to have some responsibility for deciding what they watch. Help them to make their own ratings and become critical viewers, such as - M (Must see!), A (Average), W (Waste of time).
- Make a rule that TV is not switched on until all tasks have been done and help children manage their time. Be firm and clear, such as, "You haven't finished what you have to do this evening. Maybe tomorrow you'll do it differently and 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.
- Choose a TV free space - make it comfortable and friendly and use it.
- Children need to wind down between TV and sleep, so keep the bedroom a TV-free zone.
- Try to keep a mealtime TV-free so that there is time for people to talk to each other.
- Make a family media plan - decide what your child will watch and limit the amount watched each day. This teaches children to think, plan, and 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, especially about violence, but also about the good things you see.
- Talk about programs - discuss characters, stories, and themes. Describe likes and dislikes. Ask questions, such as "What would happen if you did what that person did?"
- Talk about moods after watching programs and get children to come up with words that describe how they feel, such as bored, happy, scared, sad, excited, grumpy, wound-up, restless, miserable, or worried.

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.

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## **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a number of treatment studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit [www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html).

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**  
Giving Children Back Their Childhood  
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