



AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION FOUNDATION

Television and Young Children

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Television is a part of many children's lives; entertaining, informing and educating them from a very early age. The recent publication of the *Children and the media: Advocating for the future* policy by the Royal College of Physicians is the latest report highlighting important issues about children's viewing. These issues and many others are discussed, with recommendations for parents and educators on the ACTF's website in Resource Centre- *Parents and Community* at www.actf.com.au.

We are frequently asked by early childhood educators and parents what television and other media preschool children should be viewing and what impact the media has on them. Young children should not be viewing more than 15-30 minutes per day of carefully chosen age appropriate television and it is preferable for parents or care givers to view with them.

Should young children be viewing TV?

All available research indicates that small amounts of viewing age appropriate programs can be valuable for young children. Just as children need to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities to enable them to read they also need to learn to read television to develop media literacy skills. This helps children to understand the difference between real and fantasy on TV, to understand the persuasion methods used in advertising and teaches them about media bias. Education about TV can help lessen the harmful effects of media violence.

Children form good viewing habits in the first 5 or 6 years. Modelling critical viewing in educational settings and discussing TV rules with parents has been shown to be effective in early years. As a child gets older parents and teachers tend to have less

influence over a child's TV selection. This suggests that educators and parents should become involved in a child's TV viewing early in their lives.

Television is an engaging media by which sensitive and controversial issues may be discussed with children, providing educators, caregivers and parents with a common point of reference to discuss issues that are often difficult to introduce in a vacuum.

The ACTF's teaching kits *I Think...* and *Chill Out!* are used and recommended by teachers across Australia for thinking and social skills development and bullying prevention for years K-4. The kits are based on segments from ACTF programs and have extensive lesson plans and activities in the accompanying book and CD Rom.

Children view television to have fun, to find out 'things' about the world and for social reasons. The educative power of television has long been recognised through programs such as the ABC's *Playschool* and *Johnson & Friends* and the ACTF's *Lift Off*, *Johnson and Friends* and *Kaboodle* can all be ordered from the ACTF. They have been specifically produced for young children to entertain and educate, encourage literacy, social skills and curiosity.

What do we know about the positive outcomes of children viewing well chosen television?

- A child who watches high quality programs with educational content is likely to spend more time reading and doing educational activities.
- Educational shows can increase a child's academic development. In a young child they can improve pre-reading skills.
- A preschooler who watches more educational TV is likely to watch more informative TV when older.
- Young children can show active engagement with a show by singing and dancing or involving it in pretend play later.
- Repeatedly watching the same educational show increases a preschooler's understanding of the show.

How do we encourage educational and positive television viewing?

- Help the children develop critical viewing skills. Viewing television is an active process involving perception, learning, thinking, and memory. Television can teach and encourage the imagination, creative play and social development if it is included in family life and school programs in a positive way. Listen to the children's interpretations of programs and discuss them. Discuss why cartoons are not real and how stories are created with actors and sets etc... *Johnson and Friends* is a series of stories about the toys who live in a little boy's bedroom. Johnson, the pink elephant and his friends (actors in large costumes) must learn all of the basic social and motor skills in order to make friends, learn and take risks. Originally screened on ABC TV, it creates opportunities for discussing how the toys are made for the series and it is a stimulus for values education, creative activities and story making.
- Build a video library of age appropriate quality videos for the children, in the same way that you build a book library. Research shows that children who view stimulating shows are likely to spend more time discussing them, reading and doing educational activities.

Television and Your Child



Most parents at some stage wonder what impact the TV is having on their child. You may have questions such as: How much TV should my child be allowed to watch? What should they be allowed to watch? How can I manage their TV viewing? and What effects will watching TV have on them? This guide aims to help you find some answers to these questions and gives some practical ideas on how to manage the TV in your home. First, we will briefly look at what the scientific research says about children's TV viewing habits and the effects of TV on children's development.

Children spend about 19 hours a week on average watching TV.

Given that children watch such a lot of TV, it is important to understand how this might affect them. Research shows that, like most things, there are positive and negative aspects to children's TV viewing.

Watching TV can have educational benefits.

TV viewing may look like a passive activity. In fact, it involves many processes used in learning—such as attention, thinking and memory. Here are some of the research findings about the educational benefits associated with watching TV.

- A child who watches educational programs is likely to spend more time reading and doing educational activities.
- Educational programs are found to improve a child's academic performance. In younger children, watching educational programs can lead to better pre-reading skills.
- Preschoolers who watch educational programs are likely to watch more informative TV when they are older.
- Young children's learning can be enhanced if they actively engage with programs. They can do this by singing and dancing along with the actors, or including what they have seen on the program in pretend play.

- Repeat viewings of the same program increase preschoolers' understanding of the content of TV programs.

Watching a lot of TV can have a negative effect on a child's learning.

Most positive effects associated with TV are found for moderate viewing of high quality educational programs. Research shows that children who watch a lot of entertainment TV, such as cartoons and adult programs, tend to spend less time in other activities that are good for learning, such as reading, exercise and playing. They can also experience delays in early reading and other academic skills. There are no known benefits of watching TV for a child younger than two years.

Watching a lot of TV is not good for children's health.

- A child who watches four or more hours of TV a day is more likely to be overweight. A child who watches an hour or less a day is least likely to be overweight.
- Watching TV advertisements can influence a child to make poor food choices (e.g. to prefer junk food).
- TV has been found to contribute to the development of unrealistic ideas about how our bodies should look.

There is a link between TV viewing and behavioural and emotional problems in children.

The TV itself is not damaging to a child's wellbeing, however its content can be. Younger children can be particularly at risk from exposure to unsuitable material because they have not yet developed the ability to discriminate between fantasy and reality.

- All ACTF videos are supported by extensive teacher notes or online lessons and activities in the Learning Centre at www.actf.com.au as well as books for some of the stories.
- Discuss television and other media use with parents and encourage all of the above activities in the home. We also recommend, *First Day*, an ACTF documentary widely used in Early Childhood settings to educate parents about the experiences of children and parents leading up to the first day of school.
- The ACTF's *Lift Off* and *Kaboodle* series have short animations and stories that help children develop reading, visual and critical literacy skills and provide many opportunities to engage children in discussing values, relationships and the world around them.
- There are many TV adaptations of popular children's books that can be viewed and discussed. The teacher should sit with the children and moderate the viewing so that questions can be dealt with and ensure that children understand the story or learning activity. Television adaptations of quality books have been shown to improve interest in beginning reading skills in young children and in encouraging older reluctant readers.
- Some of the *Kaboodle* stories such as "There's a Sea in my Bedroom" and "Thing" are adaptations of loved picture books. The *Worst Best Friends* series that was broadcast on the Ten network in 2003 is one of the ACTF's most popular educational resources. Based on Max Dann's book "Adventures with My Worst Best Friend", it was written by Dann and produced by Coxknight Productions, Deb Cox and Andrew Knight, well known for the popular television series *Sea Change*. Celebrating the absurdities of childhood, *Worst Best Friends* charts young Roger Thesaurus' course through the minefield of playground politics and family issues. As his parents marriage slowly disintegrates, Millicent and Dusting his best friends who don't get along with each other provide the inspiration for many hair brained schemes and desperate measures to save Thesaurus' sanity and win his friendship. The lesson plans for *Worst Best Friends* focus on bullying prevention, civic responsibility and family and multicultural issues.

The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) is a national non-profit organisation, established by the Australian Education Council in 1982. The ACTF's mission is to provide Australian children with entertaining media made especially for them, which makes an enduring contribution to their cultural and educational experience. Our newsletters, *Care for Kids* and *Education News* are sent to every Australian school library. The *Learning Centre* section of our website features teaching resources including over 200 free lesson plans covering all KLA's, topics and themes taught from K-12.

If you wish to receive our free publications *Care for Kids* and *Education News* or further information contact us at info@actf.com.au.

Children under the age of ten will often believe that most of what they see on TV is true to life. This is particularly true for violence viewed on television.

- You may be surprised to learn that over half of all TV programs contain violence. Violence is clearly more common on TV than in real life.
- TV violence affects viewers of all ages, abilities, educational backgrounds and gender—although often in different ways for each individual.
- There is a connection between viewing TV violence and real-life aggression. Children who watch TV violence tend to display aggressive attitudes and behaviours. A child can become desensitised to violence, and begin to see violence as a valid way of solving problems.
- Viewing violence on TV can cause a child to develop a fear of becoming a victim of violence.
- Media violence can be associated with anxiety, depression, nightmares and sleep disturbances in children.
- An aggressive child will prefer to watch more and more violent TV shows.
- Boys are more likely than girls to show signs of aggression and prefer aggressive TV programs.
- A child from a family that uses violence to resolve issues, and who also sees a lot of violence on TV, is more likely to accept violence as normal.
- Not all violence on the TV has the same risks. Violence is more likely to lead to aggressive behaviours in children if it: (a) is depicted in a realistic way; (b) is made to look glamorous or funny; (c) avoids showing harm to the victim; or (d) if the violent individual escapes a negative outcome or is rewarded in some way (e.g. the aggressive person is made out to be a hero).
- Educating children about TV can help reduce the harmful effects of media violence.

TV viewing can also be related to the development of fear and anxiety in children.

- Younger children (two to seven years of age) may be afraid of something on TV that looks scary, such as ugly monsters, creature transformations, and the dark.
- Between eight and ten years of age, children are more likely to be frightened by realistic or real stories (e.g. the news).
- Fearful reactions to violence on TV are more likely if the violence is directed towards an attractive victim, is unjustified, repeated, realistic and unpunished.
- Fear brought about by watching TV can be deep, long lasting, and associated with trauma reactions and stress in children.

The television industry is aware of the consumer power of children.

The television industry sets out deliberately to market products and services directly to children through advertising. Children are not always able to view the claims of advertisers with an appropriate level of skepticism. As parents you may not always approve of the products being promoted to your children. Here are some points for you to consider.

- A child younger than four or five will tend to believe advertisements and cannot always distinguish them from programs. By the age of eight, most children will understand the idea of an advertisement.
- Between 10 and 14 years of age, a child will be able to understand the persuasion methods used in advertisements.
- Most advertisements aimed at children are for toys, cereal, confectionery and fast food outlets.
- A child who watches more TV tends to ask for more products. These pleas have a high degree of success—it can be very difficult for parents to resist pressure from a child to buy something they have seen on TV.

Taken together, these research findings provide good reasons for parents to consider checking the content, and limiting the amount of TV their children watch.

Ideas

The following suggestions take into account the positive and negative aspects of TV. They give ideas about how you can deal with TV in your household. You might find it useful to consider how some of these ideas might help you to *protect* your child from inappropriate content on TV, *teach* your child good TV viewing habits, and *monitor* your child's use of the TV.

Protect

Two ways to protect your child from the negative effects of TV viewing are to make informed choices about suitable viewing, and to control what your child sees on TV.

Children form good viewing habits in the first five or six years of their lives. As children get older, parents tend to have less influence over their program selection. Thus parents can have the biggest impact by becoming involved in their child's TV viewing when their children are young.

- Make choices about TV viewing as important as choices about other aspects of your child's life.
- Obtain as much information as possible about a program before letting your child watch it. Watching programs beforehand can be helpful.
- Choose programs suitable for the age and development of your child. Such programs are non-violent in nature and encourage the development of language and social skills. Good programs teach children about things that are new or exciting.
- Collect educational and other suitable videotapes for your child to watch instead of what is available on TV. Borrow these from your local library or video store.
- If you like background noise in your home, consider playing music rather than leaving the TV on all day. This will reduce the chances of your child accidentally watching unsuitable material on TV.
- Finally, TV programs can become part of the daily routine and we can be lulled into a false sense of security. Consider the TV in a similar way to a stranger in your home—what effort would you make to check on what a stranger was saying to your children?

Teach

Parents can have a positive influence by encouraging healthy TV viewing habits.

- Suggest alternatives to watching TV. Teach and encourage other forms of entertainment.
- Teach your child about classification of programs.
- Encourage your child to watch programs that show helping, caring and cooperation.
- Be aware of what you watch when your child is present. Be a good role model by choosing carefully what your family watches.
- Talk to your child about what they are seeing and hearing on the TV. Encourage older children to think critically about the messages they are getting through TV.
- Find out why your child likes to watch certain programs and how those programs make them feel.
- Help your child to develop good consumer skills. Teach them about advertising techniques. Discuss the purpose of advertisements—to get you to buy things, and even to convince you to buy things that you might not need.
- Be aware of TV violence and its possible effects. Teaching your child what to think about violence on TV is as important as teaching them what to think about violence in the real world.
- If material on TV frightens a preschool child, comfort them with hugs and reassurance. A favourite toy or possession is a good comforter. A child may benefit from hiding their eyes when a frightening scene is about to happen. Think about ways of preventing exposure to similar material in the future. An older child can be reassured by reminding them that what they see on TV is not necessarily real. Discuss the fact that many dramatic and traumatic incidents shown in movies and other programs rarely occur in the real world.
- It is probably unrealistic to think that we could, or should, shield our children from all distressing material. Children may benefit from learning strategies to cope with TV content that upsets them. If your child shows an unusually high level of fear or anxiety

related to things they see on TV, it may be helpful to teach them to cope by gradual exposure to the types of material they find threatening. If anxiety reactions persist for long periods of time, you might consider seeking professional advice.

Monitor

The final matter to consider is how you will monitor or track your child's viewing habits. Here are some ideas.

- If possible, avoid putting a TV in your child's bedroom. Placing the TV in a family area of the home allows you to see what your child is watching and how long they are watching.
- Try to avoid using TV as an electronic babysitter.
- Ban programs you consider too violent or offensive. Explain why you find such programs unacceptable.
- Think about a few clear, fair rules about TV use in your home. Consider setting TV time limits, no TV times or 'TV free' days. The Australian Council for Children's Film and Television suggests that up to an hour a day is enough screen time (TV, computer, and electronic games) for children under seven or eight. One and a half to two hours is sufficient for older children. You might find it helpful to use a timer to help children remember when to turn off the TV. An example of a rule that some families find helpful is: Meal times are TV free times.
- Another important aspect of monitoring is to notice when your child follows the TV rules—or demonstrates responsible and healthy TV habits—and then praise them. An example of praise is: 'Sam, I really liked it when you turned the television off straight after your program'. Praise and positive feedback motivates children to keep doing the right thing.



Pitfalls

Things might not always go smoothly, despite your good intentions and planning. Here are some problems you might encounter.

Are the ratings a good guide to what is suitable for your child? The popularity of a program as shown by high television ratings does not always mean that it is appropriate for your child.

Are classifications a good guide to what is suitable for your child? Classifications are good guidelines. However, every child is different and will be ready to watch different types of material at different stages. For example, some five-year-olds may be quite frightened by some programs with C classifications designed for their age group.

What if your child does not follow the rules for television viewing? If possible, consult with all members of the family when setting up rules. This way family members may feel that they have some 'ownership' of the rules. If the rules are not working, have a family meeting to discuss this. Think about how you can teach your child to follow the rules. The most effective way to do this is to provide praise and encouragement when rules are followed. When a rule is broken, a simple reminder might be the place to start. If rules are broken consistently, think about implementing a logical consequence. An example of a logical consequence for breaking a TV rule is the TV being turned off for a period of time. Calmly say something like, 'Sally, that program is banned in our house and I have asked you not to watch it. You have not done what I have asked, so the TV will now be turned off for the rest of the day. We can try again tomorrow.'



Help

There is a lot of useful and free information on the Internet if you have further questions. If you do not have access to the Internet at home, you may find that your child's school, your local library or neighbourhood house provide public access and assistance to get hold of this material. Here are some good places to start.

- **Australian Children's Television Foundation:** <http://www.actf.com.au>. This is a non-profit organisation that aims to promote high quality TV and other audio-visual material for children. The site has an extensive library of material on the effects of TV on children.
- **Young Media Australia:** www.youngmedia.org.au. (Australian Council for Children's Film and Television). This Australian site contains information about the media and children, including classification codes, articles and brief publications for parents. It has a range of useful references and links. Young Media Australia also has a national Helpline for parents: 1800 700 357.
- **Media Awareness Network:** www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/home. This is a non-profit organisation that aims to promote and support media education in Canada. It provides information for parents and educators on media education and violence.
- **Guidelines for Choosing Children's Television Entertainment:** www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/home. Produced by the Canadian Cable Television Association. These guidelines are produced in partnership with member companies and the Department of Canadian Heritage.
- **The National Institute on Media and the Family:** www.mediaandthefamily.org. is a non-profit US organisation that provides resources for research, education and information about the impact of the media on children and families.
- **Kidsfirst website:** www.kidsfirstinternet.org. This is a non-profit US organisation committed to quality children's programming. The site contains guidelines for parents, reviews of videos, programs, movies, expert articles and more.

- **Victorian Parenting Centre:** www.vicparenting.com.au. See our website for ideas on inexpensive activities for children that do not involve the TV, the Internet, or electronic games.

If you are looking for more detailed information, here are some useful references and sources of information on television and children.

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- For confidential advice call **Parentline 13 22 89**.



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Fact Box: Child Development and TV

Children and adults watch, think about and understand television very differently.

Age 2 to 5

Interest in tv growing
Has trouble following and remembering story
May know tv isn't always real; Looks at tv when a commercial starts
Pays a lot of attention to commercials
Doesn't know that there is a difference between commercials and programs
Trusts commercials.
Likely to imitate things seen on tv.

Age 6 to 8

Interest in tv growing
Remembers and understands the stories
Knows that tv isn't always real
Looks at tv when commercials start.
Pays a lot of attention to commercials
Can tell the difference between a commercial and the program
Begins to recognize that the purpose of a commercial is to persuade.

Age 10 to 14

Interest in tv levels off and starts to decline
Understands and remembers content and stories well
Looks away when commercials start
Less interested in commercial: Knows the difference between programs and commercials
Knows that the intent of the commercials is to persuade and understands some persuasion techniques.