



Kids, Food, and Electronic Media

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Introduction

Television and other electronic media are major forms of entertainment for children. Researchers found that the total time spent with electronic media by children ages 2 to 18 was five and a half hours each day (three and a half hours with television). Electronic media includes television, music, computer use, movies, and video games. In one study 75 percent of children 12 to 19 years old spent 6 hours a week watching music videos.

The average American child between the ages of 2 and 17 spends 25 hours per week watching television (approximately 20 percent to 30 percent of their waking hours). One study showed that 19 percent of children between the ages of 2 and 17 watch more than 35 hours of television per week. Most children will have spent more time in front of a television than a teacher. It is estimated that kids will have seen at least 360,000 commercials before they graduate from high school.

More than one-third of children have televisions in their bedrooms. This percentage is higher for older children but even children as young as 2 years old have televisions in their bedrooms (for 13 to 17 year olds the average was 56 percent, for 2 to 7 year olds, 20 percent). Children with televisions in their bedrooms watch an average of five and a half hours more television each week than those without a television.

So, what consequences can electronic media use have on children? The consequences are wide-ranging and can be both positive and negative.

Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is a growing epidemic in this country. Studies have shown that, for many reasons, risk of overweight increases as time watching television increases. Children are inactive while watching TV. Advertisements encourage consumption of high-calorie snacks and beverages. Many kids snack while they watch TV. Some researchers have found that metabolic rates of those viewing television are the same or lower than when sleeping.

Just because a food product is advertised on television or in other media does not necessarily mean it is a healthy choice. And just because a person is promoting a food doesn't necessarily mean that they eat it themselves either. Consult your health professional, a Registered Dietitian, or Food, Nutrition, and Health Extension Agent for information on eating healthfully and being active – two important keys to preventing childhood obesity.

Food Marketing to Kids

Food is the most often advertised item on children's television. Most of these ads are for products high in fat, sugar, or salt. Fast foods are also very heavily marketed to kids. Children who spend more time watching TV tend to eat more calories; fat, sweet, and salty snacks; and drink more soda. They also eat fewer fruits and vegetables.

Many parents report that their children sometimes want to buy products they have seen on TV or the Internet. Research has shown that one to two exposures to a commercial is enough to influence kids as young as 2 to 6 years old. More time watching television leads to

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more requests for specific products. Plus, food marketers often use entertainment (movies, pop stars, sports personalities) and toys to attract kids to their products.

For preschoolers, it is really difficult to distinguish “fact” from “fiction” in advertised products. Smiles, active characters, and lots of friends support hidden messages, which suggest that the product promotes a healthy lifestyle. Fun, health, love, happiness, belonging, and excitement are some other hidden messages.

Advertising isn’t found just in commercials, though. Be alert to advertising messages embedded in TV programs. It is no coincidence that certain soft drinks are shown, that particular cars are driven, or that specific airlines are traveled. In shows targeting youth, advertisements may include toys created with a TV program in mind, such as the Transformers™, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles™, Hulk™, Power Rangers™, and Spiderman™, in order to encourage children to purchase more items.

Discuss with children the motives behind advertising and the means of selling products. Make a game of identifying the number of commercials that occur in an hour, the hidden messages, and the methods advertisers use to promote the messages, particularly related to food. Take the child comparison-shopping.

Body Image

Body image is the way a person sees and feels about his or her body. This develops over a lifetime. It is influenced by many things, including the media, cultural tradition, and attitudes of family and friends.

Thin people are portrayed as ideal and as healthy in advertisements and in shows. This image encourages even grade school kids to diet. Popular media have projected a thinner and thinner ideal body image for women. Men are also held to an ideal that is trim, but muscular. Research has shown that the more time an adolescent watches the soaps, movies, and music videos the more they are unhappy with their body and the more they desire to be thin. In one study, teenage girls felt less confident, more angry, and more dissatisfied with their weight and appearance after viewing commercials that depicted women as unrealistically thin. Fifth-grade boys and girls both reported being unhappy with their bodies after viewing a Brittany Spears video or an episode of the TV show “Friends.”

Parents should talk to their children about realistic body shape. You may want to have the child’s doctor discuss reasonable expectations and growth spurts with the child to help counter the media images.

Fantasy

Young children are influenced by television differently than older children. However, both are attracted by fast-paced action, special effects, zoom shots, rapid changes in scenery, and sudden loud noises. Most television programs and commercials contain these features.

At age 3, children begin to follow the characters and stories they see in cartoons and television programs. By age 6 or 7, children begin to understand the interpersonal relationships, behavior, and moral messages contained in television story plots. However, even school-age children may not be able to pick up subtleties in humor or symbolism or be critical about advertising techniques.

People flying, turning into monsters, surviving fire, eating weird things, and coming back from the grave are fantasies that children have difficulty distinguishing from reality. The event can amuse the child during viewing, but horrify the child at night. Sixty-two percent of parents report that their children have become frightened that something that happened on TV or in a movie could happen to them.

Fantasies can teach unrealistic food behavior – living in a cookie and candy land; food growing everywhere without scientific knowledge or work to produce it; food appearing from nowhere without preparation effort and without the cost of purchase; and royalty or heroes receiving free food. The characters are rarely shown eating a variety of foods or being concerned about nourishment.

Be aware of cartoon shows or stories that children watch alone. Ask questions about “pretend ideas” and “real ideas.”

- Who prepares and makes food?
- Where does food grow?
- Who gets free food?
- Do people live in cookie land?

Social Behavior

Increased television viewing may also cause poorer school performance and increased aggressive behavior. Kids who spend a lot of time on the Internet may spend less time with family and friends and may become depressed and lonely. They may also be less physically active, leading to overweight or obesity.

A concern over children watching so much TV, spending time on the computer, and playing video games is that these are one-way communication. The television

or computer speaks and the child listens. Children learn best through hands-on activities, asking questions, exercising, manipulating objects, and experiencing new relationships. To counteract the TV, provide alternative activities for children: art projects, picture books, blocks, outdoor play, helping in the garden or with meals. These activities also contribute to the mental, physical, and social development of young children.

The following are signals that a child cannot distinguish between TV and video games and “real” life.

- When the child declines activities with family or friends in order to watch TV, play a video game, or use the computer
- When the child desires a TV product because “everyone has one” but only the TV character has the item
- When the child refuses to actively comparison-shop for food, toys, or other products and wants only the TV product
- When the child becomes dissatisfied with family lifestyle and what the family can afford

In these cases, restrict television (or computer and video game use) and talk to your child about how TV shows, advertisements, and video games are created.

Electronic Media and Learning

There are some positive aspects of television viewing. Television does more than entertain children. It can also teach children about choices and about values like right and wrong, cooperation and selfishness, dependence and independence, health and sickness, understanding and prejudice, and negotiation and violence.

Computers are also great opportunities for children to express their ideas by writing (typing) papers, find out more about their interests by searching the Internet, and communicate and interact through instant messaging and e-mail with friends and loved ones who may not live nearby.

Television and media are major influences on child development and behavior. Therefore, it is important that parents help children use TV and media in positive ways and to avoid the negative influences.

Recommendations

Parents play an important role in children’s lives by being role models and by creating opportunities that promote learning and health. Set boundaries for television watching and media use, allowing them to be educational and positive family experiences. You can do this several ways:

- Limit television viewing and video games to less than two hours per day.
- Take breaks. Encourage children to move around every half hour when watching television, playing video games, or using the computer.
- Identify TV programs that the entire family can watch together. If the child watches a TV program alone, be aware of the content of the program and the commercials. Be able to talk about it and to ask questions.
- Follow up the TV program or commercial by discussing what happened. How did the child feel about the characters and the story? Why? Can the child distinguish between “fact” and “fiction”? Was there violence or stereotyping or fantasy? What did the child think of these? Discuss your values.
- Talk about how your family is different from or similar to the family shown on television. Discuss body size and body image so children recognize that the people on television are not necessarily a realistic and healthy size.
- Use commercials as an avenue to becoming critical thinkers. Encourage children to analyze how and why they are trying to market products:

Encourage children to watch television programs that teach:

- values you believe in such as cooperation, trust, honesty, sharing, and academic skills
- new words or new ideas
- family relationships that you want your child to identify with
- new information about nature, science, geography, and everyday living skills
- about food and consumerism