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Young children and television viewing



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Young children and “television viewing”

by Philip Gosschalk, Clinical & Educational Psychologist | Director

“Television time”. There are “those” topics about parenting that parents are passionate about and are either for it or against it. Screen time are one of those topics. So I have bravely chosen to write about it today, examining some of the research literature and hoping to arrive at a sensible conclusion about television viewing in children under five.

Let’s start with the bold statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics whose panel of experts state that children aged 18 months or younger should not watch television without an adult present (they had previously stated NO watching television under age 2). “That’s not good” I say to myself when I first read this. I looked after my son during the week from when he was an infant and he watched *In the Night Garden* almost every day!

It was a ritual of ours and some down time for me! As I write this article, I’m looking at him he seems pretty typical of any 10 year old boy. Well that’s good news as it appears years of watching *Iggle Piggle* and *Upsie Daisy* do not appear to have destroyed my sons development. Phew!

So why do experts say to avoid television and screen time in children under 18 months? First of all, the experts don’t say avoid screen time. They say if the child is aged 18 months or younger then they can watch television with an adult present. If a child



it appears that television viewing can effect language development...

is aged 2-5, then the recommendation is no more than an hour of TV per day. It appears that attention problems are associated with increased television viewing, obesity is associated with increased television viewing, and so are emotional problems.

So what is it about television viewing that is so bad? Is it the light from the TV or the content or something else? In general, if you’re a child and watching TV then you are not engaging in other activities growing healthy children need to participate in. For example, developing children need to play with toys, engage in art, experience the world and interact with other human beings. All of this is mentally stimulating for the child and results in healthy brain development.

Most concerning is that it appears that television viewing can effect language development. Unfortunately research has shown that television does little to develop your vocabulary (even in adults) and that a lot of children’s television is below standard. So obviously young children should only be exposed to television that helps develop their vocabulary and intellectual development. American research has suggested that programs such as *Dora*

The Explorer and *Dragon Tales* actually enhanced vocabulary development.

So what about background television noise? Unfortunately it appears that children’s play is disrupted when a television is on in the background. Why is children’s play so important you may ask? “Play” is incredibly important for children as it develops a child’s dexterity, emotional and intellectual development. By ‘play’ we mean playing with others, toys and engaging with nature. Teacher’s call this a multi sensory experience.

Unfortunately, the more challenging a child, the more likely they are to watch more TV than their peers. This is not a surprise as parents need time to prepare dinner, down time or simply a break from constantly parenting a difficult child. If you fall into this category, then speak to us and we can assist you with managing this aspect of your family life.

Is television really that bad for children? The short answer is “No”. Good quality children’s television not only develops children’s minds, but also teaches social skills such as; taking turns, caring for others and managing emotions.

Want some good news? Australian research suggests our children are watching less television than they did 10 years ago!

Lets get back to my son watching *In the Night Garden* and reflect on things. Was the program good for his language development? No (but mind you the

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television viewing con't

developer of the program is a Speech Pathologist). Did my son watch more than an hour a day of television? No. Did he watch other television programs that fostered language development and social development? Yes. Did he have ample opportunity to play alone and with other children? Yes. Did we read to him? Yes. Did we provide him with mentally stimulating experiences (e.g. Playing in the dirt, visiting zoos and museums)? Yes. Would I have not watched In the Night Garden with him because it didn't promote good language development? NO! He often sat on my lap with his blankie and watched the 30 minute program and when it ended it was his nap time. A beautiful memory for me and time for us. How's he going so far? He's quite good at literacy (his strongest subject), likes sport and has lots of friends. So watching some inane TV doesn't appear to have effected him.

At the end of the day, "everything in moderation" as our grandparents say. The guidelines are helpful for managing television viewing in children under 5. Don't feel guilty if you "break the rules" every now and then.

Here are a few guidelines to consider:

1. don't feel pressured to introduce technology early. Children pick things up fast.
2. avoid fast paced programs as children can't understand them.
3. turn off the TV when not in use.
4. no TV one hour before bed.

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