



Kids and TV

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Most kids love TV. They may have 5, 10, or even 15 favorite shows. For many, it's their number one pastime.

But how does their TV viewing affect them?

On the average, children watch 3 to 4 hours of TV per day. That's 21 to 28 hours each week or between 1,100 and 1,450 hours a year. By contrast, kids spend 900 hours a year in the classroom.

On the Positive Side

Under some circumstances, TV can benefit kids. It can be educational.

Studies prove that some TV shows have a positive effect. Three shows that were noted include Sesame Street, which was shown to produce educational growth in children, Blues Clues which helped develop children's attention and focus, and Mr. Rogers which helped kids deal with everyday life events. When watching these three shows, children were able to learn.

There's also some evidence that TV can be useful as a distraction. It can get our minds off unhappy thoughts. This works for both children and adults. In particular, TV viewing can be used as a short-term solution to stress. The trouble is, this doesn't help you solve the problem; just avoid it for a little while.

On the Negative Side

Perhaps the strongest negative effect TV has on kids pertains to violence. There's a correlation between watching a lot of violent TV and performing violent acts.

This has been documented for acts of violence in general. Kids who see a lot of aggressive or violent acts on TV are more likely themselves to act in an aggressive or violent way.

It also has been demonstrated for specific acts. Kids who have seen a specific act of violence on TV are more likely to commit that specific act. This is the "copycat effect."

Other research on the long-term effects of TV shows that the amount of aggressive TV we watch as young children predicts our level of aggressiveness in later life. What is alarming is that the research supports the idea that watching violent TV actually causes children to be more violent. This data comes from well-run studies conducted over 10 - 15 year periods of time. In other words, we tend to model behaviors we see regularly.

For society as a whole, there's another problem. The more we see a set of images that evoke an emotion, the less those images will bring about a strong emotional response. So if we see a lot of violence, we become less uncomfortable with violence, or more tolerant of it.

Is this good? Wouldn't it be better if all of us remained repulsed by violence?

There's another interesting, long-term side effect to watching a lot of TV. Adults who have watched a lot of TV throughout their lives tend to misperceive the likelihood of being victimized by a crime. They believe, for example, the chance of being robbed or being raped, or being the victim of a violent crime is much greater than what it actually is. Some social scientists worry that this may mean that we are becoming more accepting of being the victim of violence, and that may have a big impact on how we prosecute and punish crime.

There's one last issue that researchers have just begun to study. It relates to the fast pace of the action on TV. In recent years, many commercials and shows use fast cuts from scene to scene, sometimes to the point of flashing image after image in an attempt to create a "total experience." Can this cause problems in the viewer? One thing for sure, it creates an atmosphere of "high stimulation" and this may change how we see the world. It affects children especially. Kids can grow to expect high stimulation to the point that anything else, like daily classroom activities, seems boring.

Researchers are also studying whether the fast pace of TV may decrease kids' ability to pay attention and lead to such disorders as Attention Deficit Disorder or ADHD.

Often those things we "love" to do, like watching TV or eating sweets, actually cause problems. The reason? If we let ourselves go, we tend to overdo it.

The trick is not to let ourselves go, not to overdo it. So if we can help our children find ways to limit and structure their TV viewing habits, we may be doing them a big favor.

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