Television Viewing and its affect on Children Today

Watching television is becoming a negative influence on our children. There have been a significant number of studies done to determine the affects of television shows and commercials on our children. As a nation, we are facing an epidemic of obesity, eating disorders, a lack of understanding of what is socially acceptable, and a downward spiral of violence and crime. Excessive television viewing plays an enormous role in these concerns and we should all turn off the tube and educate ourselves on what needs to be done to put a stop to it.

Children, parents, and educators have very different opinions about the effect of television viewing on children. Children, both adolescents and young adults, are less likely to believe the negative influences of watching television. They are more likely to believe that television is associated with increasing their originality and problem-solving ability! On the contrary, parents believe that television takes away time spent on physical activities causing obesity and laziness. Educators are concerned with the fact that television is taking over many children’s home life. They are troubled that children are not being read to or even played with by their parents. Children, in general, are not being taught about family values and morals from their parents because they are gathering that essential information from what they watch on television. Educators are saddened that children can actually quote commercials word-for-word but have no idea who the president is! Hopefully, we can educate the parents of today’s students of the potential disaster that is forthcoming if television remains such a major part of children’s lives!
What is watching your child?

The fact that television is often the babysitter of many of our students raises an enormous red flag! The significant demographic shifts that have occurred over the years have made a huge impact on how much television children are watching today! Over the past 20 years, parents spend 40% less time with their children. This is the result of having more mothers who are working full-time and the fact that there are more single parent homes. Parents use the television as a way to find some time to get the chores done, pay bills, and cook meals. Because of the lack of attention that parent’s can give toward their kids, children are actually becoming attached to the television instead of their families! It is no surprise that 99% of US households have at least one television and 2/3 have two or more sets! It is even estimated that 54 % of children have television sets in their bedrooms! Preschool children (Ages 2-5) watch about 28 hours a week and the average school-age child (Ages 6-11) watches about 24 hours per week! Because of the accessibility, television can surround, dominate and engulf children for as many as seven hours a day! It is estimated that the time the average child reaches age 70, they will have spent 7-10 years of their life watching television! The average High School graduate will have spent more hours watching television than any other activity (other than sleeping)! These are some scary statistics and hopefully we can help to guide children to other activities other than watching television.

Television and VIOLENCE

Television violence has been a major concern for parents and educators for the last decade! The average child (ages 4-8) watches 250 episodes of war-related cartoons and 1000
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commercials selling war toys. Commercials and cartoon spokespeople have enormous influences on our children because they use popular characters and gimmicks to help sell their products (or shows). Children have become vulnerable to the marketplace and feel that they HAVE TO get a certain toy because the character that they like is promoting it. It’s as though they become attached to the television because they don’t want to miss a beat! Children try to act like the violent characters they see and sometimes the “pretending” evolves into who they are as a child. The American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association (Chory-Assad, 2004) gathered research that showed that children tend to learn that violent behavior is appropriate in given life situations. They act out what they see in their play and in actual life events because that’s “what they do on TV”? As these children mature, they are more aggressive in their teenage and even adulthood years. Prolonged viewing of television violence can cause a desensitizing effect leading to the acceptance of horrific behavior.

Children do not have to be watching bloody, horror movies to be affected negatively by encountering it. Even watching sitcoms have shown to increase one’s aggressive responses enormously (Chory-Assad, 2004)! By viewing the attacking nature of arguments or “verbal slams” between main characters in sitcoms, aggressive responses soared higher than when watching a crime scene drama. Data indicates that television violence can lead to aggressive acts and tolerance of violence! Some children learn to be the aggressor while others learn to be a victim. Studies have shown that children are tending to “imitate” what they see on television instead of playing with their own originality and imagination! Children are more likely to believe what they see on television than what they learn in school or other surroundings! Most children relate everything to their understanding of what they have seen on a show. In the future,
I hope that since we do not have control of what children watch at home, that federal legislation will do a much better job regulating what is shown on television.

**Increased Obesity**

The enormous increase in childhood obesity and eating disorders has been linked to viewing television shows and commercials. Healthcare officials have found that when a child watches more than two hours of television a day, they are at risk of having poor diets and low physical activity levels. Television viewing has been found to encourage frequent snacking and overeating because viewers get so engulfed in what they are watching that there is less thought put into what they are eating and drinking. A study done by doctors at the Center for Applied Psychological Research (Klesges, 2006), found that television viewing also lowers metabolic rate and is a mechanism for increased obesity in children. They reported that the obesity rate in children ages 6-11 has increased by 54% and by 98% in extreme obesity over the last 15 years. Though many factors have contributed to this epidemic, sitting around watching TV for many hours plays an enormous role. Researchers found that a child’s metabolic rate while watching TV is lower than during rest!

**Eating Disorders**

People who are obese tend to have a low concept of themselves and a bad body image. By watching the unrealistically thin characters in television shows and commercials, their self image keeps dropping lower and lower. While obese people tend to eat because they think that they do no measure up to those individuals on television, others restrict their diets to a dangerous
level to make up for their insecurities. All of this because what we see on television actresses and actors is not realistic. For example, on television 31% of females are underweight and only 3% of characters are obese but, in reality only 12% of us are underweight and 7% of us are considered obese (Greenberg, 2003). This idea is important because of the impressionable children who are viewing these stereotypical characters. For example, when obese characters are shown on television, they are often the butt of a joke and do not have a romantic partner like the thin characters. They are sometimes shown to be the funny character or the person who just lies around and mooches off others. Their thin counterparts, however, have the “great life” and are productive in whatever they do. Watching television can be a downward spiral for many children who rely on it for information regarding social acceptance and body image.

Who you are!

There are also economic and age factors that effect how much television is being watched in households throughout our country. People with low incomes watch more television than those who have a higher paying job. The amount of education one has, also affects how much television they watch. Individuals with more education tend to watch less television then those with a lower amount of education. Race also plays a role in how much television is watched in households. African American children ages 2-11 view 55% more television than the same-aged children in all other households (Hepburn, 1998). African-American men watch 90% more daytime television than their counterparts in other households. Poor and minority children rely more heavily on television as a prime source of their information background and education! Age also effects how much television people watch. Elderly people are the heaviest viewers,
watching more than 55 hours per week. When grandparents are the main family that children are around, watching television is going to be a major aspect of their upbringing.

**Regulations**

There have been many regulation attempts to help monitor what children are viewing. Regulating policies that would protect children from what they see and hear on TV have been largely unsuccessful. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (which is a regulatory agency created by the Federal communications Act) of 1934 was established to determine what was best for the public interest (Lazar, 1994). They tried to make mandates to develop standards for determining what was best for the public interest but were hit with the argument that they were interfering with the freedom of speech amendment. In 1954 Senator Estes Kefauver, who was the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee to investigate Juvenile Delinquency, raised the issue regarding the regulation of television before Congress. He presented that since children are exposed to TV so often, it is one of the most influential components in their lives. In 1972, a large-scale study of children and television was conducted by the US department of health, Education and Welfare (HEW). The study was going to be used for the purpose of providing a basis for the elimination of violence on children’s programming just as the Surgeon General’s Report on smoking provided protective public policy measures. This was the first time a connection between the violence on television and the aggressive behavior in children were connected in an actual study. In 1974 a set of principals were developed that addressed children’s special status as public viewers. Commercials were cut down to 12 minutes an hour on weekdays and 9.5 minutes on weekends. In 1990, the compromise bill passed enforcing the
commercial viewing times and setting aside additional money to study the effects of television on children. Broadcasters again fought back saying that requiring them to broadcast programs that were specific to children was unconstitutional but were defeated in court and the special modifications were allowed. Though more work needs to be done, I believe that it is primarily up to use to turn off the television and educate parents of the necessity of one-on-one relationships with their children!
References


