



by Karen Stephens

Television and Technology: Select the Best, But Limit Children's Screen Time

In the U.S. today, television, videos, DVDs, and computers with games and web access are a household staple for most families. In fact, over 50% of children live in a home with at least three televisions. The average child is exposed to at least seven hours *daily* of media programming flashed to them through a screen.

Programs and games with worthwhile, solid content help children learn positive skills, both intellectual and social. Good media can be both exciting and relaxing for children. And it can be a way to share an interest with peers or to learn new facts.

But these potential positive affects also have a dark flip-side. At least 80% of media aired isn't developed with children in mind at all. But while older siblings or parents view programs, young children are likely to be viewing as well. And so children are often exposed to information too advanced, confusing, or graphic for preschool development.

Media that communicates negative images, stereotypes, and violent behavior undermines a sense of security and self-control over aggression for all ages of children. The more hours per week a child spends watching television (whether it be entertainment or news programs), the more likely the child is to re-enact aggressive behaviors and language. More frequent child viewers are also more pessimistic and fearful, especially preschoolers still unable to distinguish between "real" and "pretend" or between "real time" and repetitive "instant flashback" news coverage.

Children who consume many hours of "screen time" also show a tendency to be "de-sensitized" and more blasé about violence in "real life" or fantasy stories. There are other influences needling at children's emotions, too.

Commercial advertisers peddle wares via media trying to capture your child's "brand loyalty" by the age of 8 years. Most children accept commercials as fact rather than a sales-pitch designed for the seller's profit. And so kids are literally sitting ducks for one-sided commercials created to capitalize on children's trusting naiveté, limited experience, and under-developed reasoning skills.

We shouldn't be surprised that children's physical health is compromised by excessive screen-time, too. We have kids idling away hours and hours of childhood sitting in front of screens instead of moving in active play. And so today's generation is experiencing a burgeoning obesity problem.

And then there's all the leisure time media use gobbles up. The time children spend in screen time diverts precious energy that is far better channeled into active play with family and peers. Even good media excessively watched steals valuable time from children — time they need to develop and practice social skills, thinking strategies, and physical abilities, such as strength, coordination, and stamina. The loss of quality time spent actually interacting with family is as devastating to childhood as the negative, violent images that poor media can communicate.

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Encouraging Good Media Habits

Parents are children's first teachers for developing good media habits. The following are a few lesson tips:

- Be a good example. View media in small doses so children follow your lead.
- Specifically plan screen-time; resist watching just whatever is on. Avoid unconsciously turning on the television whenever you enter a room. Resist leaving the television on for "background" sound; the stimulation can be distracting to children.
- Encourage children to entertain themselves with low-tech toys, hobbies, "hands-on" activities, and personal interests rather than relying on media as a "babysitter."
- Delay screen-time to the preschool years. Children under the age of two years don't benefit from screen-time. Warm, responsive parent interactions raise baby and support brain development best, not technology of any kind.
- For preschoolers and older, limit television and computer/video play to no more than one hour a day, total. Brave parents limit television watching to one hour a day on weekends.
- Screen media of any kind — both programs and commercials. Watch what your children view to determine if it reinforces values, beliefs, and behaviors your family supports — from diet to purchasing practices. If it doesn't, discuss the differences; and look for better screen-time offerings.
- With the kids, create family media use rules. Decide: where and when screen-time is allowed, how often and how long, how viewing decisions will be made, whether children must ask permission for screen-time, etc.
- Watch or use media with your child. Talk about the experience. Validate storylines that affirm respect, honesty, and peaceful resolution. Avoid storylines that glamorize danger, such as violence, casual sex, drug use, illegal behavior, etc.
- Don't invite screens to be full-fledged family members. Turn the television off during meal times, celebrations, and when friends or extended family visit.
- Keep screens out of kids' bedrooms for easier supervision of their viewing material and habits. In-bedroom screens rob siblings of practical chances to learn to negotiate, share, trade, and compromise over viewing choices. Personal screens merely allow children to isolate and retreat from family, not join in.
- Don't give screens "center-stage" in your family room or family life. Make *your family's* experiences and stories more important than fictional characters.
- Focus on active alternatives rather than passive screen-time in order to support family bonds and children's development. Enjoy social activities together often, such as: game or card playing, reading books or telling jokes and stories, play with toys, such as blocks, art materials, puzzles, or puppets. These activities build children's attention spans, problem solving, and learning skills better than media can.

There is a place for media in family life. Just make sure it plays second fiddle to loved ones. A childhood of too much screen-time leaves too much unsaid and too much undone to be worth the cost.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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