

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 54

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CHILDREN & WATCHING TV

Television viewing is a major activity and influence on children and adolescents. Children in the United States watch an average of three to four hours of television a day. By the time of high school graduation, they will have spent more time watching television than they have in the classroom. While television can entertain, inform, and keep our children company, it may also influence them in undesirable ways.

Time spent watching television takes away from important activities such as reading, school work, playing, exercise, family interaction, and social development. Children also learn information from television that may be inappropriate or incorrect. They often can not tell the difference between the fantasy presented on television versus reality. They are influenced by the thousands of commercials seen each year, many of which are for alcohol, junk food, fast foods, and toys. Children who watch a lot of television are likely to:

- Have lower grades in school
- Read fewer books
- Exercise less
- Be overweight

Violence, sexuality, race and gender stereotypes, drug and alcohol abuse are common themes of television programs. Young children are impressionable and may assume that what they see on television is typical, safe, and acceptable. As a result, television also exposes children to behaviors and attitudes that may be overwhelming and difficult to understand.

Active parenting can ensure that children have a positive experience with television. Parents can help by:

- Viewing programs with your children
- Selecting developmentally appropriate shows
- Placing limits on the amount of television viewing (per day and per week)
- Turning off the TV during family meals and study time
- Turning off shows you don't feel are appropriate for your child

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In addition, parents can help by doing the following: don't allow children to watch long blocks of TV, but help them select individual programs. Choose shows that meet the developmental needs of your child. Children's shows on public TV are appropriate, but soap operas, adult sitcoms, and adult talk shows are not. Set certain periods when the television will be off. Study times are for learning, not for sitting in front of the TV doing homework. Meal times are a good time for family members to talk with each other, not for watching television.

Encourage discussions with your children about what they are seeing as you watch shows with them. Point out positive behavior, such as cooperation, friendship, and concern for others. While watching, make connections to history, books, places of interest, and personal events. Talk about your personal and family values as they relate to the show. Ask children to compare what they are watching with real events. Talk about the realistic consequences of violence. Discuss the role of advertising and its influence on buying. Encourage your child to be involved in hobbies, sports, and peers. With proper guidance, your child can learn to use television in a healthy and positive way.

MAKE TV VIEWING AN ACTIVE PROCESS FOR CHILD AND PARENT!

For additional information see: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins) and *Facts for Families*: #13 Children and TV Violence, #40 Influence of Music and Music Videos, #67 Children and the News, #79 Obesity in Children and Teens.

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