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Input Control: Development & Television

1. Watching television harms toddlers, says psychologist

- At least one study suggests that early exposure to TV can be a trigger for autism

90 minutes a day may lead to obesity and retarded development

- MPs are told TV prompts attention deficit disorder

It is a guilty secret for many an exhausted parent: the distracting power of TV. But allowing children under three to watch television can impair their linguistic and social development and puts them at risk of health problems, a psychologist told MPs yesterday.

Aric Sigman said letting young children watch as little as an hour and a half of television a day could put them at increased risk of health problems, including attention-deficit disorder, autism and obesity. The average child in western countries watches up to three times this amount - with the typical 11- to 15-year-old in front of a TV screen seven and a half hours a day.

A growing body of research suggests putting infants and toddlers before a screen also causes irregular sleep patterns, while a study published last year found that children's resting metabolic rate decreased as the amount of TV they watched soared - meaning that physiological changes compounded the fact that they were not exercising.

Speaking to MPs and peers at a Westminster meeting yesterday, Dr Sigman said: "Between the ages of nought and three, particularly when children are acquiring language, their brains are going through rapid development and are being physically shaped, like a piece of clay, in response to what they are exposed to. It's called structural neuroplasticity.

"Key stages of development are language acquisition and social skills and if they're displaced at this stage, they may be irreplaceable." Dr Sigman, an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society and member of the Institute of Biology, said exposing children to fast-moving images at a very young age for a sustained time may inhibit their ability to sustain attention.

And children who were left for long periods with only a screen to interact with, not only had less time to speak to adults but also failed to develop social skills.

Dr Sigman, who has four children aged between three and 17, criticised programme makers who said television was educational and the government for not issuing rationing guidelines. He believes children under three should not watch TV, and those between three and seven should watch no more than 30 minutes to an hour a day.

He told MPs at the conference organised by the pressure group Mediawatch-UK: "I was told by the head of BBC children's TV [Richard Deverell] that TV 'helps children get interested in the outside world'. The world around them gets them interested in the outside world.

“We are told children need electronic entertainment or they get bored. It is not true. Children have an infinite ability to entertain themselves which television seems to erode. What children are exposed to under the age of seven, and particularly under the age of three, is of paramount importance. It's really the under threes we're most concerned about and dramatically limiting the amount watched between three and seven.”

One study, conducted by Cornell University last year, has suggested early exposure to TV could be a trigger for autism.

Dr Sigman's recommendations

- Children under three: no screen exposure
- Ages three to seven: 30 minutes to an hour a day
- Seven to 12: One hour a day
- 12 to 15: one and-a-half hours a day
- 16 and over: two hours

2: "Get The TV OUT of Your Child's Room" says the American Academy of Pediatrics

For children, spending time in the hospital can mean long, boring hours spent in bed, so many young patients turn to the television for relief. But the American Academy of Pediatrics warns that television can promote dangerous behavior in youngsters.

The recommendation is part of an updated statement on children, adolescents and television by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

TV is perhaps the most powerful teacher kids will ever have. It is hypocritical for us to criticize parents for not getting the TV out of their children's bedroom while it is blaring loud and clear in waiting rooms and hospital rooms.

Nearly one third of 2- to 7-year-olds and nearly two thirds of 8- to 18-year-olds have a TV set in their bedroom.

Parents have no right to criticize their kids' bad language or aggressive behavior if they are going to allow them to have a TV in their bedroom.

Educating parents and children on the power of the media can reduce violence and substance abuse among adolescents. Many such programs are now routinely offered in early elementary schools nationwide.

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the messages conveyed through television, which influence their perceptions and behaviors. Many younger children cannot discriminate between what they see and what is real.

The TV should be eliminated from most of our homes. It is an addiction that most of us can not handle and it has incredible negative consequences which are further elaborated below.

Kids don't need a TV to help them get interested in the outside world. As Dr. Sigman so accurately put it, "The world around them [children] gets them interested in the outside world."

The temptation to allow the TV to serve as a surrogate babysitter is tempting because our society has created such an economic challenge that the resources are frequently not available to provide an optimal parenting setting. However, it is important to realize that there are consequences for your choices, and just like choosing to consume fast food, you may regret the long-term complications.

If you believe these restrictions are too harsh, consider all the health issues, including mental development and health retardation, childhood obesity and a lack of exercise, that the presence of an always-on TV exacerbates. In addition, TV can:

- * Change your views and food choices
- * Make you more materialistic
- * Cause you to go into more debt as adults

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* Cause you to be more anxious and aggressive

* Increase your child's risk of becoming seriously injured

Begin the process of lessening your reliance on a TV to "babysit" your child today by taking some time to engage them in activities that have nothing at all to do with sitting in front of a glow box.

Sources (2 articles):

Sarah Hall April 2007 The Guardian UK

American Academy of Pediatrics Feb 2001;107:423-426

Dr Mercola's site