



Is Television Harmful to Children?

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Televisions can be found in almost every home in America and because many children are always in front of them a great debate has arose. Concerned parents have long felt that children are exposed to excessively graphic, violent, sexually explicit and misleading images on television. This kind of exposure is negatively effecting our children's young and impressionable minds. The entertainment industry disagrees with this claim and states there is not enough evidence to prove otherwise. In this paper, I will argue that the effects of television viewing on children are harmful.

One reason this is true is recent studies show that children age two through eighteen spend more time watching TV than any other activity, with the exception of sleeping.¹ What our children see on television today is very different from that of several decades ago. Back then, one would never imagine seeing kissing or promiscuous behavior let alone graphic, bloody images rising from the dead. Nowadays, seeing half naked women in beer commercials and terrifying images of movies flashed across the screen are everyday occurrences. Not only are televisions physically bigger, they are more brash and on all the time.²

From a young age we teach our children not to talk to strangers, yet we are allowing strangers into our home through television viewing.³ Children are easily influenced and will often model what they see; this is why age is an important factor to consider when children are watching television. Young children cannot differentiate between what is real and what is not. Because of this they become vulnerable to what is shown to them on TV, frequently adopting the attitudes and behaviors portrayed.⁴ Some researchers have found that exposure to television violence can desensitize children and make them more aggressive.

In many homes, television viewing is unsupervised. The

amount of violence shown in television programs has increased tremendously just within the past few years. According to the National Television Violence Study (Year 3: 1996-97) "[...] the way TV violence is portrayed encourages children to learn aggressive behavior [...]" The modeling effect occurs when children reenact what they see on TV. In addition to the modeling effect, the way violence is portrayed on television raises concerns that watching too much TV can lead to desensitizing and an altered concept of violence and its place in the world.⁵ It has been found that the more a viewer especially a young one, can personally identify with a character, hero or villain, he or she is more likely to be influenced by their behavior. The more physically attractive a character is, the more likely a child is to model its actions, whether good or bad.⁶

Other negative effects are disinhibition, the bystander effect and fear. Disinhibition is when a person has a reduced ability to restrain themselves in an impulsive situation. For example, "[...] viewers who watch a model rewarded for performing violently in the media are more likely to experience a disinhibition effect and behave in a similar manner. But when violence is punished in the media portrayal, the aggressiveness of viewers is likely to be inhibited."⁷ When watching repeated violence, children can become desensitized to the pain and suffering of others. This, in turn, leads to the bystander effect, when a person witnessing a crime is less likely to help another person in need of assistance if there are other witnesses present. Fear has caused many young people to become more aggressive and carry weapons for protection. The media has created the "mean world" syndrome, causing youths to alter their daily routines and avoid certain areas and people out of fear of being a victim of violence. This fear has not only caused people to become more physically aggressive, but, emotionally it can cause stress disorders, anxiety and depression. Fear also influences our dreams, causing nightmares.⁸ Most often, violent crimes shown on television are unjustified and often go unpunished, leaving the viewer fearful. The National Television Study reports that over half of the violent scenes shown on television lack remorse, critique, or penalty for the action.

Also, television's representation of sex has greatly influenced the attitudes of children, mainly adolescents. Sexual activity has been portrayed as more of a recreational activity leading many youths to behave more promiscuously and engage in sex at an earlier age.⁹ Within the past few years the amount of sexual

1 Susan R Johnson, *Strangers in our Homes: TV and our Children's Minds* (1999), 2, [http://www.waldorflibrary.org/Journal_Articles/Strangers in our Homes.pdf](http://www.waldorflibrary.org/Journal_Articles/Strangers_in_our_Homes.pdf), and Committee on Public Education, "Media Violence" *Pediatrics* 108, no. 5 (2001): 1222.
2 Stuart Jefferies, "Is television destroying our children's minds?" *Guardian*, July 21, 2004, 1.
3 Johnson, 2.
4 Committee on Public Education, "Media Violence" *Pediatrics* 108, no. 5 (2001): 1223.

5 Ronald S Drabman, et al, *Will Our Children Care?* (1977), 44.
6 Potter 33.
7 Potter 33.
8 Committee on Public Education, 1223.
9 Bowie Kotrla, "Is Exposure to Media Content Harmful to Children?"

content shown on television has doubled and in those portrayals little is said about the consequences of unprotected sex.

Although there are other factors that influence teen pregnancy the Journal of Pediatrics recently established a link between television viewing and teen pregnancy: "Adolescents who have high levels of exposure to television programs that contain sexual content are twice as likely to be involved in a pregnancy over the following three years as their peers who watch few such shows, according to a RAND Corporation study."¹⁰

Watching television can lead to other problems as well. As Ron Kaufman says in his article, "How Television Images Affect Children," "Watching television is a passive event. Children [...] remain completely immobile while viewing [...]" This is also known as the Alpha State. The Alpha State has also been linked to children's obesity. The so called "couch potato" evolves when the viewer consumes more calories than he or she burns. Since watching television is a passive event not many calories are used.¹¹ There are an enormous amount of junk food commercials on TV, many geared towards children. Parents buy these products at the request of their children and the children consume them in front of the television, again taking in far too many calories than they are using. The more time spent in front of a television means less time engaging in physical activities.

Another reason to consider the negative effects of television watching is that children learn through sensory experiences. Stimulating those five senses can be critical to the learning process. Watching TV stimulates only two senses, seeing and hearing. Dr. Susan Johnson has studied the effects of television on these senses and has concluded that the reproduced sound we hear and the bright, flashing and overstimulating images we see can cause developmental problems to these two sense organs. Also, "children watching TV do not dilate their pupils [...] the lack of eye movement when watching television is a problem because reading requires the eyes to continually move from left to right across the page. The weakening of the eye muscles from lack of use can't help but negatively impact the ability and effort required to read."¹²

There has been an effort to improve the standards of television viewing; the entertainment industry developed a system of parental guidelines. This system was similar to the Motion Picture Association of America's movie rating system (See Table 1). Though the intentions of these guidelines were good, the system had three serious flaws. First, the parents were surveyed and "an overwhelming support for a *content-based* rating system as opposed to an age-based system [...]"

was found."¹³ Second, the ratings did not warn parents about the content each rating would contain. Lastly, there was a concern that the ratings would actually attract children to programs parents wanted to protect them from. Since then, the guidelines have been revised; although improved, they still suffer from problems.¹⁴

Opponents of this viewpoint argue that watching television creates family togetherness. It is a chance for everyone in the family to gather, watch a program and spend quality time together. This can be true provided the program you are viewing is appropriate to all ages. Television can also be educational and can help develop critical thinking by exposing the viewer to different cultures and current events. It can also teach important values and help develop learning skills. However too much viewing can become harmful, not only emotionally through desensitization but physically through lack of movement and obesity.

Educational programs such as *Barney* and *Sesame Street* have long been recognized for being intellectually engaging. However, studies show that watching TV leads to an increase in slow alpha waves within the brains left hemisphere thus putting the child into an alpha state. These shows in particular use distraction techniques such as constantly changing pictures, loud startling sounds, flashing colors and close-ups to get a child's attention; although this may work momentarily it still leaves their brain operating in an alpha state.¹⁵ Watching television deadens a child's ability for creative thinking; of being able to create an internal picture within themselves rather than visualize external pictures (from TV) which are imprinted in their minds.

Opponents also maintain television is not harmful to children; that it can be nourishing. In his article, "Watching TV Makes You Smarter" Steven Johnson discusses the "Sleeper Curve." The sleeper curve is believed to enhance the cognitive faculties of today's youth by challenging the mind through puzzle solving, pattern detection and deciphering complexities. Aside from its lack of physical impetus, viewing television can be intellectually stimulating, giving the viewer a good cognitive workout. This may be true for older viewers and adults but that is not the case for young children, because if their underdeveloped cognitive ability.

Jib Fowles claims television is not harmful to children and in his paper, "Violence Viewing and Science," argues that the research that has been done on the effects of television on children is inconclusive. There is no comparison between clinical testing and home viewing of television programming. In laboratory settings the children involved often don't know the

Children and Libraries (2007): 50-51.

10 RAND Corporation, Teen Pregnancy Linked to Viewing Of Sexual Content On TV. ScienceDaily (2008). <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081103084042.htm>

11 Miller, Television's effects on kids: It can be harmful.

12 Johnson, 5.

13 Amy I. Nathanson et al, "Protecting Children from Harmful Television: TV Ratings and the V-Chip", Parenthood in America, (1998): 2-4.

14 Nathanson, 6.

15 Johnson, 6.

other children in the room with them, are shown things they cannot touch and are usually commanded to watch a program perhaps not to his or her liking, leaving the child feeling frustrated, angry and not in control. When children elect to watch television in their home, it is because they want to. They are usually in control of the programming being viewed and can enjoy it in a relaxed and safe environment. Whereas in the laboratory setting, the programming is chosen by someone else, the viewer is not in control, and the experience can be uncomfortable and unsatisfying.¹⁶ Is it the television program being viewed that makes a child aggressive or is it the situation of being in the laboratory with feelings of frustration and anger that lead to aggressive behavior? Evidence shows that exposure to television whether it is short or for prolonged periods has immediate and long term effects on children regardless of the setting or surroundings when watching. It is the act of viewing and what is being viewed that has been known to cause these negative effects and not so much the place of viewing.

The effects of television on children is not only a concern in America, this has long been a topic of concern in the United Kingdom as well. The International Television Commission (ITC) agrees that, "children can learn harmful behaviour from the television."¹⁷

In conclusion, evidence supports that the effects of television viewing on children are harmful, through both immediate and long-term negative effects. Children should be encouraged to play outside, take up a sport, read a book, and engage in creative thinking. Families can spend more time together, playing games, cooking or doing a building project.¹⁸ Parents need to take it upon themselves to limit television exposure and seek out quality programming for their children and view it with them whenever possible.¹⁹

16 Jib Fowles, "From Violence Viewing and Science." in *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Mass Media and Society* ed. Alison Alexander and Jarice Hanson (2008), 41.

17 Deans, Jason. "ITC admits kids can learn harmful behaviour from TV." *Guardian*, November 6, 2000, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2000/nov/06/broadcasting1>.

18 ohnson 7, 8.

19 Media Awareness Network. *The Good Things About Television*, http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/television/good_things_tv.cfm?RenderForPrint=1.

Table 1

(Source: http://www.fcc.gov/parents/parent_guide.html)

TV-Y (All Children -- This program is designed to be appropriate for all children.) Whether animated or live-action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.

TV-Y7 (Directed to Older Children -- This program is designed for children age 7 and above.) It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children. Note: For those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category, such programs will be designated TV-Y7-FV. For programs designed for the entire audience, the general categories are:

TV-G (General Audience -- Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages.) Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.

TV-PG (Parental Guidance Suggested -- This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children.) Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).

TV-14 (Parents Strongly Cautioned -- This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age.) Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).

TV-MA (Mature Audience Only -- This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17.) This program contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).

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