

Television



Watching TV is a common form of entertainment and relaxation for many families. While some shows are now viewed on computers or other screens, TV is still the main way families watch programs.

TV provides a window into the world for children. They need you to help them get the most from their viewing and have other activities and interests too.

TV and other screens

These days TV is not the only technology in children's lives. They can view programs, play games, learn and socialise on a number of different devices.

This increased screen time has come at the cost of:

- physical activity which helps build healthy bodies
- opportunities to socialise face to face with friends and family
- free play which encourages children to use their imagination and entertain themselves.

Parents can help children maintain a balance between screen time and other activities. Some healthy aims are to:

- let children be screen free until age 2 (apart from video chats with loved ones)
- have a range of engaging activities of which screen use is just one
- choose only high quality children's programs
- limit recreational screen time to one hour a day between the ages of 2 and 5 and 2 hours for older children
- enjoy screen time together
- keep your phone for your own use until they are older.

Helping children develop

Skills such as thinking and talking are affected by experiences in early childhood, including watching TV. While some programs are educational research shows that very few do more than simply entertain. Watching TV is mostly passive - children don't need to think for themselves or be creative.

There are many things parents can do to help children's development. Simple activities like reading, drawing, singing, listening to music and storytelling are important for healthy child development. They also provide opportunities for enjoyable and relaxing family time.

There are other benefits too. Limiting TV time helps children:

- get enough sleep. It also helps with sleep quality
- avoid becoming overweight or obese. They are not exposed to as much advertising of unhealthy food and drinks and tend to consume less of these. It helps to keep the TV out of their bedroom
- develop a healthy attention span. TV camera shots change every 3-4 seconds which teaches children to expect constant stimulation
- be less exposed to adverts which can lead to gambling problems.

Helping children set limits on TV viewing is easier than trying to change habits once they are formed. Show children you have a range of activities and interests. They learn from what they see you doing.

How TV affects children

Pre-school children (under 5 years):

- are developing language, reading and social skills. Too much television can have a negative impact on their learning
- find it hard to work out the difference between fantasy and reality, especially if things on TV look like they do in real life
- tend to focus on the exciting bits but need help to follow plots
- can be frightened by scary images such as vicious animals or monsters, or when a normal character turns into something scary
- can become afraid and upset by stories involving injury to a parent or images of natural disasters. Telling them 'It isn't likely to happen to us' may not help at this age
- may become fearful if violence is shown in familiar settings, eg homes, families, schools or to children or animals.

Lower primary school children (5 – 9 years):

- still have some difficulty working out what is real and what is fantasy. They tend to admire and want to be like the hero or heroine
- may get the message from cartoons that 'violence works and wins' even if they can tell it is fantasy
- six to seven year olds can believe TV families are real or Sesame Street is an actual street. Nine to ten year olds are much clearer that actors are playing a role.

Upper primary school children (10 – 12 years):

- are likely to be disturbed by negative content based on fact because it means it could happen to them
- are curious about the teenage world, sex and fashion. They can be misled by the way romantic relationships are presented

- can be influenced by unrealistic expectations of what a person's body is 'supposed' to look like
- understand how TV programs are made, eg cartoons or the use of special effects
- can be upset by violence or the threat of it, or stories in which children are hurt or threatened.

Early adolescence (13 years and up):

- can be affected by realistic looking physical harm or threats of intense harm, images of sexual assault or threats from aliens or the supernatural.

Some children/young people may enjoy being a little frightened but only when they feel secure. Knowing they are really safe allows the freedom to have 'thrill' feelings. However, the more children see frightening programs the more they believe the world is a scary place. This can make them anxious and fearful.

Try to avoid children watching news or current affairs programs with stories of natural disasters, crimes or violence. Mobile phone footage means children can be viewing things that may worry them.

Advertising

Advertising influences all of us. Pre-schoolers find it hard to tell the difference between advertising and the program they are watching. Most children under eight years believe what adverts tell them, particularly if they show a well-known person or favourite character. Children between eight to ten years are aware adverts don't always tell the whole truth. However they are not sure how to tell when they are not true. You can help children learn how advertising works.

Talking about what they see on TV and in other places helps children spot the tricks and gimmicks used to get people to buy products. The hidden message in many adverts is that you need to buy the product to be happy, feel good about yourself or be accepted by others.

You might ask 'Why do you think everyone in that advertisement is happy and beautiful? Is that how it is in real life?', or 'Do you think the product will make people like them more?'



Violence

Teaching children how to manage conflict and emotions in healthy ways is important for their development. Many studies show that watching lots of violence on TV increases the risk children will:

- view violence and aggression as a way of solving problems
- become less sensitive to violence in real life
- become anxious about the 'mean and scary' world in which they live.

The children most likely to be affected are:

- those who watch over three hours of TV each day, particularly boys
- younger children
- children who feel insecure or who see or hear violence in the home.

You can help children realise the violence they see on TV is often 'pretend'. You might point out that when someone gets shot in real life they probably wouldn't be able to get up and keep fighting, or when a car rolls over in a high-speed chase it is likely to cause serious injury. It helps to avoid programs that portray violence in a positive way.

What parents can do

Make a family media plan

Write down a media plan that is agreed by the whole family. It is a great chance for children and parents to work things out together and to talk about your family's values. You can decide how you will create a balance with other recreational activities. It is important to start as early as you can and review the plan often as children get older.

You might want to agree on:

- which programs children can watch. Make sure these fit with the age-appropriate screen time and classification
- keeping all screens in a family room so you can see what children are watching

- not having a TV in children's bedrooms and leaving electronic devices outside bedrooms after lights out
- no TV and other screens while getting ready for school, at mealtimes, during homework and one hour before bedtime
- only switching the TV on after all jobs are done, and not having TV on in the background
- watching music videos - many are very sexual and show negative stereotypes which can affect children's self-image. Children as young as five or six are more likely to have concerns about their body shape if they watch music videos.

Planning what children watch

Help children plan what they watch from an early age. Use program classifications to select what is suitable for their age. They can make their own ratings such as C (can't be missed), S (so-so), W (waste of time). Encourage them to choose more of C.

It is also important to plan screen-free time so children can do other activities. Make a list together of things they love to do and things you can do as a family.

Watch TV together

Watching TV with children is a chance to teach them to be critical viewers. Help them question what they see. If you can't watch with them, talk with them before or after the show.

You might want to:

- know the characters in the programs your children watch. Ask about their favourite characters and what they like about them
- help them make sense of what they see by explaining the structure of stories, eg that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. Stories also usually try to solve a problem. Talk with them about how the character solves the problem. This helps them problem-solve in real life. You can support this by selecting programs with predictable formats

Express your views so children know when you agree with what's on the screen. Don't let TV shape children's values.





- help them understand that programs can affect our moods. Ask how they feel when they watch something, eg bored, happy, scared, sad, excited, grumpy or worried. Encourage them to talk about any uncomfortable feelings so they learn how to work through their feelings and reactions
- ask questions that help children be critical viewers, eg 'What do you think would happen if they did that in real life?', or 'How do you think you might feel if someone did that to you?' Help them make meaning from what they are watching and connect it to their world
- discuss any 'reality shows' they are watching. Help them see how these are often manipulated.

Watching TV news

TV news programs often show the most violent or shocking events of the day. It is only a small part of what happens in the world. For example, the news doesn't focus on the thousands of planes that take off and land safely, only when there is a crash.

Watching the news can frighten children because they:

- can't understand the low chance of these events happening in their own life
- may think when they see the same event over and over again that the event is happening multiple times.

It can help to:

- talk with children early and often about news images that might come up during other programs and help them understand what they are seeing
- not allow children under 7 years to watch the news
- watch with children as they get older and start to become interested in what's going on in the world. It is a chance to talk about and understand current events. You can help them have a balanced view.

Making a complaint

If you are concerned about the content of a TV program or advertisement you can make a complaint. Put your concerns in writing to the TV station as soon as possible – they don't have to respond if it is more than 30 days after the program. If you don't get a satisfactory response within 60 days you can make a formal complaint to the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Getting help

There is a lot of information available about suitable TV programs, movies and apps for children of different ages. Check TV guides for classifications or visit the Children and Media Australia and the Australian Classification websites for information on movies and apps.

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

Want more information?

Children and Media Australia

Phone 8376 2111

Information and tips about media and children
www.childrenandmedia.org.au

Australian Classification

Information about classification ratings including for movies and games
www.classification.gov.au

Australian Communications and Media Authority

Responsible for regulating media and handling program content complaints
www.acma.gov.au

Australian Government Department of Health

Guidelines for physical activity and sedentary behaviour for all ages, including screen time recommendations
www.health.gov.au

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 24 hours

For advice on child health and parenting
Talk to local Parent Helpline between 7.15am–9.15pm. After 9.15pm your call will go through to the national Healthdirect helpline

Raising Children Network

For parenting information, including TV and screen viewing
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Why stories are important', 'Growing and learning in the family', 'More than reading and writing', 'Cyber safety', 'Safe screen use'
www.parenting.sa.gov.au



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South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Revised: 08/2023.