

TV's Attack on Your Child's Health

by Dr. Jenn Berman

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that children under the age of two not watch any television. While many parents have some idea that television watching is not good, most parents are not aware of the detrimental effects television can have on young children. In fact, there are a number of researchers from different fields who have revealed mounting evidence that television can actually harm your child physically, mentally and emotionally.

Despite the widespread information about the negative effects of TV watching by very young children, a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that on a typical day 61 percent of babies one year and younger watch television or videos and one third of children under six have a television in their bedroom. The study also found that 36 percent of families leave the TV on almost all the time, even when no one is watching, effectively making the TV a constant background noise for those children.

It is never too late to stop watching television. Here are the top reasons you should turn off the TV before your child is exposed.

1 ADD
There is a significant connection between infants exposed to television and the development of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In a study published in the April 2004 issue of "Pediatrics," researchers found that for every hour of television watched at ages one and three there was a ten percent increased chance of developing attention problems that could be diagnosed as ADD by the age of seven. The researchers hypothesize that exposing a baby's developing brain to the quick changing images of today's television may over stimulate it causing permanent changes in developing neural pathways.

2 Metabolism
Television viewing actually slows down metabolic rates. Studies show that normal-weight children experience a 12% decline in metabolic rates while watching TV and obese children experience a 16% decline. This metabolic slowing makes it more likely that a child who watches TV will be overweight.

3 Poor Eyesight
Mom wasn't wrong when she said "stop staring at the TV or it will hurt your eyes." Permanent eye damage which was previously attributed to genetics is now strongly linked to television-screen exposure. The long periods of fixed attention required by viewers is now believed to be the cause of the increase in myopia or short sightedness.

4 Development of Inner Speech
Even just listening to television can be harmful. It can prevent a child from the play and babbling that is so important to language

development. The distraction TV provides can prevent a child from developing inner speech or an "inner voice." According to educational psychologist Jane Healy inner speech is important in order to problem solve both academically and personally. In addition, as children get older they need inner language in order to sort out their thoughts and be able to listen to others.

5 Autism
In a controversial new study titled "Does Television Cause Autism?" researchers discovered a connection between early childhood viewing and the onset of autism. In looking for environmental triggers they discovered television viewing as a potential contributing factor.



6 Melatonin
Television viewing lowers melatonin production. Melatonin is responsible for immune system development, regulating circadian rhythm or sleep cycles, controlling hormone levels, helping learning and memory and many other important bodily functions. Scientists at the University of Florence in Italy found that when children were deprived of television, computers and video games, their melatonin production increased by an average of 30 percent.

7 Bad Sleep Habits
In the study "The Association Between Television Viewing and Irregular Sleep Schedules Among Children Less Than 3 Years of Age" published in the journal "Pediatrics," researchers found that the number of hours babies watched television was associated with irregular nap and bedtime schedules which, as we know, often leads to poor quality sleep. In another study in "Pediatrics" called "Television-viewing Habits and Sleep Disturbance in School Children," researchers found that the more television viewing a child did the

more likely he was to have difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep.

8 Cancer
According to Dr. Aric Sigman, author of "Remotely Controlled: How Television is Damaging Our Lives," reduced levels of melatonin result in a greater chance that cellular DNA will produce cancer-causing mutations. Medical experts have speculated on a link between sleeplessness and cancer. A study in the journal "Brain, Behavior, and Immunity" hypothesized that circadian disruptions form a "neuroendocrine-immune pathway from stress to disease".

9 Little Consumers
In the study "Identifying Determinants of Young Children's Brand Awareness: Television, Parents, and Peers" it was found that children as young as two years old were able to recognize 8 out of 12 brands they were shown. The researchers found that the more television a child watched regularly the more likely he was to be able to recognize specific brands. Children, who don't understand advertising, are at the mercy of the messages that advertisers send them.

10 Alzheimer's Disease
Babies who watch TV become children who watch and later become adults who watch TV. It is now believed that the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease increases with each extra daily hour of television viewing among people aged 20 to 60. By definition, television watchers are inactive. A study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, suggested that people who were relatively inactive had a 250% increased risk of developing Alzheimer's.

What about Educational TV?

Many of the "education videos" give the impression that children who watch them will learn from them or even increase their IQs, but little is known about the long term effects, especially for infant viewing. In fact, Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) reports on their website that when they approached the makers of Baby Einstein to ask about independent research they were told that the Baby Einstein DVDs are "not research-based" and that the company does not have any data showing that children learn anything from watching them. In May of last year, the CCFC filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission against Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby, two of the leading producers of videos for infants and toddlers, for false and deceptive advertising.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Her "Dr. Jenn" column won the 2005 Parenting Publication of America silver medal for Child Development and Parenting. If you'd like to ask Dr. Jenn a question, email her at drjenn@familymagazingroup.com.