

Television

Professor Matt Sanders

MANY PARENTS WORRY ABOUT THE AMOUNT OF TELEVISION THEIR CHILDREN WATCH. WHILE RESEARCHERS REMAIN DIVIDED ABOUT THE EXACT EFFECTS OF VIEWING TELEVISION ON OUR GROWING CHILDREN, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT TELEVISION HAS A MAJOR IMPACT.

So is television good or bad for your kids?

I hate to sound trite, but the answer is that it can be both.

Children can learn a lot about their world from seeing people, animals, places, things and events they may never actually experience. Television can encourage fantasy and create an enjoyable learning process. It also helps children relax and wind down after school or a boisterous activity.

But not all children's television programs are up to the benchmark of "Sesame Street", and for older children parents are faced with the dilemma of what programming to allow children to watch.

Content aside, the very nature of television watching is passive and that means when children spend too much time watching television they miss out on opportunities for learning through doing — the nature of interactive activities. Homework, outdoor play, exercise, reading, and time spent talking with parents and other family members must not be neglected.

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As parents we can help make the effects of watching television more positive by influencing how much our children watch, what they watch, and whether we are around and available for children to talk to us about a confusing or upsetting program.

Of course, you need to decide for yourself how many hours of television you think your child should watch. It might be a good idea first to quietly note just how much television your child is viewing in a normal week. The figure for 7- to 11 year olds could be at least 21 hours.

For children aged up to 12 years of age I recommend a maximum of only one hour per day during a school week and a little longer on the weekend.

If you want to set new television watching hours, make sure you tell your children about your plans and enlist their aid in seeing it through. Read the TV guide with your child and write down which programs they want to watch. When you agree on these, explain new ground rules such as “only watch selected programs”, “the television will be turned off at other times, or if there are any arguments”, and “no television before homework is finished.”

When setting television watching rules, it's important to include something to combat the common habit children have of turning on the television "just to see what's on". Any time this or any other ground rule is broken, cancel the child's viewing for that night. If it happens again, be prepared to unplug the set and remove it from the room.

Parenting Tip: It's sometimes hard for parents to cope with reduced television hours for their children because of their own viewing habits. Try watching most of your television after the children are in bed. Of course, there is another alternative. Families who decide to cut down on their television watching report that they talk to each other more, get involved in hobbies and other activities, and children start to show an interest in reading.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.