Stanislaus County
Office of
Education

Child/Family Services

Tom Changnon, Superintendent
1324 Celeste Drive • Modesto, CA 95355 • (209) 558-4030 • FAX (209) 558-4061

Resource & Referral Handout

Television and Children

Why and to what extent should parents control their children's TV watching? There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with TV. The problem is how much television a child watches and what effect it has on his life. Research has shown that as the amount of time spent watching TV goes up, the amount of time devoted not only to homework and study but other important aspects of life such as social development and physical activities decreases.

Television is bound to have it tremendous impact on a child, both in terms of how many hours a week he watches TV and of what he sees. When a parent is concerned about the effects of television, he should consider a number of things: what TV offers the child in terms of information and knowledge, how many hours a week a youngster his age should watch television, the impact of violence and sex, and the influence of commercials.

What about the family as a whole? Is the TV set a central piece of furniture in your home! Is it flicked on the moment someone enters the empty house? Is it on during the daytime? Is it part of the background noise of your family life? Do you demonstrate by your own viewing that television should be watched selectively?

Since television is clearly here to stay. It is important that parents manage their children's TV viewing so that it can be a plus rather than a minus in the family situation.

Preschool Children

Parents need to take control of the television viewing of preschoolers and children of early school age. A workable technique is to make a simple but firm weekly plan as to what programs will be permitted and how much time overall may be spent in viewing.

Any child's weekly schedule normally involves a certain amount of time for school, naps (for young children), outdoor play and indoor play. There should not, therefore, be great amounts of unfilled time when the child gravitates towards the TV set.

Whenever possible in the normal course of the day's events, parents should with their children. Preschoolers seem to enjoy having their parents on hand to laugh with them and occasionally to explain what is going on. Afterwards lively discussions can result. "Was that real or make-believe?" "Do people really act like that?"

Parents can demonstrate while the child is still very young that TV is a medium to be used selectively. They can quite literally point children in the direction of informative, educational programs. There are some remarkable things for a preschooler to see and enjoy on television, and parents can impart the wonders of it while discouraging undesirable programs.

Parents of young children should remember that while television undoubtedly does, through its better programs at least, provide preschoolers with considerable useful information, it doesn't make them smarter or improve their school performance.

Children need to discover their own strengths and weaknesses in order to find fulfillment as adults in both work and play. Watching television does not lead to these discoveries; it only limits children's involvement in those real-life activities that might offer their abilities a genuine testing ground. And young children's need for fantasy is gratified far better by their own make-believe activities then by the adult made fantasies they are offered on television.

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Elementary School Children

A number of families solve their television-control problems by a television-during-the school rule, which becomes so accepted a part of family life that they live a virtually television-free existence five days a week, enjoying meals filled with good conversation and a pace of life dominated by their own needs. The children do their homework without the pressure of hurrying to finish before a specific TV show begins. On weekends they enjoy television as other families do but without feeling that it is taking up too much of their family's time together.

Other families set a strict daily time limit of no more than one hour of TV a day, not, of course, without some howls of protest from the children. It is necessary for all adults in the family to be in complete agreement on this family rule.

Sometimes the location of the television set can aid the problem of control. A location in a far corner of the house where the set cannot be flicked on as soon as someone comes home and where it is out of range of the refrigerator seems to limit television viewing. Carrying this to the extreme, some families have been known to keep their portable TV set in a closet, and the effort to bring it out into a room can discourage casual viewing. When a worthwhile program is scheduled, out comes the set, and the family watches together. This approach has merit because it keeps TV watching from becoming a habit. Television viewing should have a beginning and an end, like playing a game or seeing a movie. A portable TV can be put away just as a book is put away when it is finished.

Violence on Television

It has not yet been definitively proven that viewing violence on television will lead a child into violent behavior. But even experts agree that it's not good for a child to be exposed constantly, several hours a day, day after day, week after week, to television violence. Research has shown that such exposure has at least four effects: children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others; they may become more fearful of the world around them; they may be more likely to behave in an aggressive manner toward other people; they may get an unrealistic sense of the amount of true violence that exists in the world.

One interesting theory is that children choose active violent programs because it gives them a feeling of activity with all the sensations of involvement while enjoying the safety and security of total passivity. They are enjoying a simulation of activity in the hope that it will compensate for the actuality that they are involved in a passive, one-way experience.

It's Not All Bad!

Since television is definitely here to stay, parents need to look at it as a resource and not necessarily as a menace. A good way to start is to consult the listings of the public television stations which offer magnificent programs on nature, literature, history, current events, the arts, etc. Also, consider:

- Studies have indicated that television does increase the general vocabulary of children, especially when it involves term referring to outer space.
- Television does provide opportunities for children to learn about all kinds of things, although whether they do so to any great extent depends largely on the specific programs the child actually watches.
- Television can increase a child's range of interest since it exposes him to a variety of activities and topics he might not otherwise encounter-archeology, science of all kinds, architecture, music, etc.
- Television has probably been the most effective of all the mass media in making people aware of a wide range of human problems ranging from pollution to homelessness. It also has increased awareness and acceptance of various kinds of illness, both physical and mental.

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