

Television; the World at Our Tips, Is it Always Good? Percussions of Watching Television on Children's Behavior: Mini Review

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Short Title: Impact of Watching Television on Children's Behavior

Abstract: *Television (TV); a means of mass communication, has a significant influence on children's behavior. It affects their sleep, weight, scholastic achievement, attitudes, and much more. It could be a great educator, entertainer, and a magnificent tool to get familiar with other cultures, people, and places that many of us might not have the chance to know anything about in real life. Nevertheless, spending too much time watching TV can deprive children from other healthy activities like outdoor play with friends, participating in different sports or artistic activities, and spending quality time with family members eating, talking, or reading. Furthermore, the screen time is not the only issue that it matters concerning the impact of TV watching on children as the quality of TV programs they watch could have a deleterious influence on their behavior with increased risk for violence and aggression, obesity, premature sexuality, and smoking or substance abuse. In conclusion, "better safe than sorry parental policy" seems a wise guideline to follow with children concerning their TV watching.*

Keywords: Television, Violence, Obesity, Sleep disorders, Sedentary life, Substance abuse

1. Introduction

The word media comes from the Latin plural of medium meaning "an intervening agency, means, or instrument. It was first applied to newspapers but nowadays, the media are the means of communication that reach or influence people widely; i.e. means of mass communication (broadcasting as television (TV) and radio, publishing as newspapers and magazines, and the internet via computers or smart phones) [1,2]. Today's children are spending many hours a day on entertainment media that makes parental monitoring of such media contents crucial in order to help their children in controlling their screen time and improving their choices [3].

The concept of data communication i.e. transmitting data between two different places through an electromagnetic medium such as radio or an electric wire predates the introduction of the first televisions and computers. Such communication systems were typically restricted to point to point communication between two end devices; hence their impact was limited. With the great advances in manufacturing compact TV sets, portable computers, and smart phones; it has been easier now for most of children to have their own devices, even in their bedrooms, and use them 24/7 [4-6].

2. Television and Children's Behavior

Media; TV included, is a double ended weapon that not only can be of priceless value for children, if used wisely and in

moderation, but also it could have a tremendous negative impact on their lives [3]. TV has its good side as it can be entertaining and educational, and can open up new worlds for children, giving them a chance to travel across the world without leaving their seats, learn about different cultures, and gain exposure to ideas they may never encounter in their own community. TV programs with moral, community, and social messages can have significantly positive impact on children's behavior. However, the reverse can also be true; children are likely to learn things from TV that are inappropriate to learn considering their age and due to excessive screen time they can ignore many other interesting and fulfilling activities and interaction with others [7, 8].

3. Negative Percussions of TV on Children's Behavior

TV viewing is probably replacing activities in children's life including playing with friends, being physically active, getting fresh air, reading, playing imaginatively, and doing homework and chores [9]. Children who spend more time watching TV (both with and without parents and siblings present) spend less time interacting with family members [3]. Excessive TV viewing can contribute to poor grades [10], sleep problems, behavior problems, obesity, and risky behavior. Unfortunately, most children's programs do not teach what children should learn; many shows are filled with stereotypes, violent solutions to problems, and mean behavior [8, 9].

Advertisers target children, and on average, children see tens of thousands of TV commercials each year. This includes many ads for unhealthy snack foods and unhealthy drinks [11]. Children see their favorite characters smoking, drinking, and involved in sexual situations and other risky behaviors in the shows and movies they watch on TV [12].

4. TV Watching by Toddlers

There is an ongoing debate about the possible effects of watching TV by toddlers on brain development. Some studies link early TV viewing with later attention problems such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, other experts disagree with these results. One study found that TV viewing before age three slightly hurt several measures of later cognitive development but that between ages three and five it slightly helped reading scores [10]. It may be tempting to put your infant or toddler in front of the TV, especially to watch shows created just for them but the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends not doing that because these early years are crucial in children's life and such watching might compromise their development [12].

On the other hand, TV watching can harm parent-child interactions. Under age two, talking, singing, reading, listening to music or playing are far more important to a child's development than any TV program [12, 13]. In addition, TV can discourage and replace reading which requires much more thinking than television. This could be serious because reading fosters infants' and children's healthy brain development. Children from families that watch much TV spend less time reading and being read to, and are less likely to be able to read [13].

5. TV Watching and its Relation to Aggression or Violence

There is a plenty of evidence concerning a link between exposure to media violence and violent behavior. Media violence has been proven to contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed [14, 15]. Watching violent shows is also associated with having less empathy toward others [15]. Furthermore, most violent acts go unpunished on TV and might be accompanied by humor and even worse as they might be glamorized and shown to be an effective way for a person to get what he wants without being punished while the consequences of human suffering and loss are rarely depicted. Even "good guys" might beat "bad guys" giving a message that violence is normal and okay [15, 16].

Children learn by imitation and modeling; so they imitate the violence they see on TV. Children under age of 8 years cannot tell the difference between reality and fantasy, making them more vulnerable to learning from and adopting as reality the violence they see on TV [16, 17]. On the other hand, children can come to view the world as a mean and scary place when they consider violence and other disturbing themes on TV as a part of real life. Symptoms of being frightened or upset by TV stories can include bad dreams and

sleep problems, anxious feelings, being afraid of being alone, withdrawing from friends, and missing school [9, 13, 17].

6. TV and its Impact in Societal Gender Role Assignment

Children learn to accept the stereotypes represented on TV which they watch over and over again. Gender-biased and gender-stereotyped behaviors and attitudes that children see on television do affect how they see male and female roles in their society; the heavier a female character, the more negative comments are made about her [18]. Furthermore, ads for household items, like cleaning products, usually feature females [19].

7. TV and Obesity

Children get lots of information about health from TV, much of it from ads that do not generally give true or balanced information about healthy lifestyles and food choices and the majority of children believe what they see and hear in these ads. The food and beverage industry targets children with their TV marketing. Most of the products pushed on kids are high in total calories, sugars, salt, and fat, and low in nutrients [20]. On the other hand, watching lots of TV promotes sedentary life style and significantly reduces physical activities that can easily lead to childhood obesity and overweight [21-23]. Success in reducing excess weight gain in preadolescents by restricting TV viewing has been reported [24].

8. Risk Taking Behavior

Physical injuries are the leading cause of death in children, and strikingly, watching unsafe behavior on TV may increase children's risk-taking behavior. Kids have been injured trying to repeat dangerous stunts they have seen on television shows [25].

Even though tobacco ads are banned on TV, young people still see people smoking on programs and movies shown on television. The tobacco industry uses product placement in films. Smoking in movies increased throughout the 1990s [26]. Tobacco industry uses subtle strategies like logos at sporting events, product placement, and celebrities smoking to get around the ban on TV advertising for their products [27]. Children who watch more TV start smoking at an earlier age. Strikingly, the relationship between television viewing and age of starting smoking was stronger than that of peer smoking, parental smoking, and gender [28].

Watching sex on TV increases the chances a teen will have sex and starts it at a younger age. Even viewing shows with characters talking about sex increases the likelihood of sexual initiation [29]. Watching sexual content on TV is linked to becoming pregnant or being responsible for a pregnancy; after controlling for other risk factors, the chance of teen pregnancy went up with more exposure to sex on television [30].

9. Positive Percussions of TV Watching on Children's Behavior

In spite of all the foregoing negative percussions of TV watching on children's behavior, TV can definitely have a strong positive influence on their development, behavior, and attitudes. Antiviolence attitudes, empathy, cooperation, tolerance toward individuals of other races and ethnicities, respect for older people or those with different types of handicaps can be easily adopted by children watching their idols doing that in TV programs and shows. Hence, TV can be considered as a powerful tool for promoting morals, ethics, social positivity, and sense of community responsibility [8, 12].

Furthermore, TV is a very efficient tool in education. In classrooms, it could be much better than traditional textbooks; e.g. reading history events using a plenty of textbooks cannot be compared to watching TV documentaries bringing history to life. In addition, no drug education programs or health awareness campaigns are complete without a media component especially TV [12].

10. Conclusion

The corner stone of any recommendations concerning TV watching is how to minimize its negative percussions and at the same time promote its positive influence on children's behavior. Raising parental awareness about the role of TV in their children's lives is crucial. Parents should share their children in watching their favorite TV programs, discuss their problematic contents with them, and teach them how to develop critical views about risky behaviors and attitudes and how to embrace the positive concepts and morals. This can help children to develop their own sense of personal and community responsibility and have their own ethics, morals, and conscience. In addition schools can play a vital role in education of students about TV and other media and how to improve their choices of media contents.

On the other hand, parents should not let toddlers watch TV or permit TV sets in the children's bedrooms. Limiting entertainment screen time to less than 2 hours per day is highly recommended. Finally, it is worthy to remember the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) that encourages "better safe than sorry" parental policy regarding TV watching for younger children.

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