

## TV... off 'n' on (November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

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Television and videos entertain us all, but for children they also provide a window to the world. That world influences their development. They take in messages about lifestyles and behaviour. Sometimes the harsh realities of life can give messages that are harmful to their development. They can also have positive experiences and be shown responsible ways of acting in the world.

### How does TV affect your child?

Children's reactions differ and it is not possible to work out exactly how each child will be affected by what they see on TV, but your child's age and stage of development will make a big difference.

Children under six years will have difficulty working out the difference between fantasy and reality on TV. They will not follow plots and they tend to focus on the exciting bits. They can see cartoon characters as real and they are open to the appeal of advertising.

Children from six to nine years will still have some difficulty working out the difference between fantasy and reality, especially if it looks like real life. Boys tend to admire and want to be like powerful male heroes.

Older primary school age children are likely to be disturbed by material which is based on fact as it could mean it could happen to them. They are curious about the teenage world, sex and fashion and can be misled by the way boy-girl relationships are shown in soap -operas.

The extent to which your children's behaviour, beliefs and outlook on life are affected by what they watch is influenced by how real they believe the television program to be.

Children judge whether a program is real in three ways.

1. They recognise things and people on TV which they have experienced. "It is real because there is a dog in the program like mine."
2. They think programs are 'unreal' if they clash with their experiences. "People don't really have special magic by wriggling their nose."
3. They understand how programs are made. "I know how cartoons are made" or "I know that the people are actors." Nine to 10 year olds are much clearer about people playing a part, whereas six to seven year olds can believe TV families are real families or Sesame Street is a real street in the USA.

### Advertising

Advertising influences children. Most children under eight years believe what the ads tell them. Children eight to 10 years are aware that ads don't always tell the whole truth, but are not sure how to judge.

Children with little understanding of language can get the wrong meaning, such as thinking Good to eat, or Fruit flavoured means Good for me.

You can help your child learn about advertising by talking about what they see on TV, how the ad might have been made and looking at the product in real life.

## **Violence**

While there are different views about how much violence on TV is harmful to children, we do know the evidence says that seeing violence repeatedly on TV has an impact:

- children become less sensitive to violence in real life
- children are more likely to use aggressive means to solve problems
- children are made anxious about the 'mean and scary' world in which they appear to live.

## **Understanding others**

Children need to understand and enjoy the mixture of differences in lifestyles and traditions that make up our country and our world. Children are not born with prejudices ... they learn them from the people around them.

Television can introduce children to stories, traditions and songs. The kinds of messages children get from TV will affect how they think of others.

As early as six months of age, infants notice skin differences and by their second year, they start to question how people are alike and different. Between two and a half and three and a half years, children begin to absorb the messages from parents, neighbours, friends, books and television about people from other races.

## **How to manage the TV at home**

TV can interfere with the routine in your home, such as getting ready for school, bedtimes, mealtimes, visitors and homework.

- Make a rule that TV is not switched on until all jobs have been done. Have a list of things to do before school and help children manage their time. Be firm and clear about TV viewing time.

- If programs are important to your child, plan to tape them so that they can be watched at a more suitable time.

- Try to keep a mealtime TV free so that there is time for people to talk to each other.

- Use the TV classifications which tell parents and children what is suitable for age groups.

- Teach your children some responsibility for deciding what they watch at an early age. Help them to become choosy about what they watch.

- Decide on a bedtime for your child's age, rather than around the TV program.

- Select a program that finishes well before bedtime.

## **When watching TV**

- Know what programs your children watch and know the characters.

- Give your children a chance to ask questions, describe their feelings, and make sense of what is taking place. Let them know what you think.

Talk about programs ... discuss characters, stories and themes. Describe likes and dislikes.

Talk about moods after watching programs and get children to come up with words that describe how they feel such as bored, happy, scared, sad, excited or grumpy.

If your child becomes quite distressed after a program, allow them to talk about what they saw, what they are feeling and why. Talk calmly, show affection and follow up with some pleasant activity.

Make your views known to the authorities when you are concerned about a program. It is important to have your say soon after the event, and you need to be exact with the time, date, place, program and the channel on which you saw it.