

*Division of Paediatrics  
Royal Australasian College of Physicians  
Health Policy Unit*



# Getting in the Picture

A Parent's and Carer's Guide for  
the Better Use of Television for Children

*This publication has been compiled by the Division of Paediatrics (Royal Australasian College of Physicians) for use by members of the community and health professionals. The information and advice is based on current medical knowledge and practice as at the date of publication. It is intended as a general guide only and where relevant, not as a substitute for individual medical advice. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians and its employees accept no responsibility for any consequences arising from relying upon the information contained in this publication.*

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The Division of Paediatrics of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians recognises that television has a major influence upon the health and development of children in Australia and New Zealand, and that different children are affected by television in different ways.

Television is not necessarily good or bad, and its impact on the health and development of children may be either helpful or harmful. Television can be a valuable resource for children.

The impact that television has on children may be affected by the emotional state and age of the child, the environment in which the child watches television and the quality of the relationships between members of the family.

Examples of children who can gain from watching television include those:

- ▶ with good learning, understanding and reasoning skills;
- ▶ whose television viewing is selective and educational;
- ▶ whose families and schools actively monitor and discuss what they view; and
- ▶ who are involved in a range of other childhood entertainment and learning activities.

### *Examples of children at risk from watching television include those:*

- ▶ whose television viewing is less supervised;
- ▶ at risk of becoming overweight or obese;
- ▶ from families that are stressed or dysfunctional;
- ▶ who watch too much television;
- ▶ who are younger (if they watch inappropriate programs); and
- ▶ with intellectual, emotional, learning or other developmental problems (if they watch inappropriate programs).

The College recognises that excessive television viewing might be caused by other factors. For example, a child may watch too many hours of television or inappropriate programs because of emotional or family based problems.

Examples of situations where television viewing habits might be related to other problems include:

- ▶ television being used often as a form of 'babysitting' which can result in the children being neglected;
- ▶ regular stress and fighting within the family (children might 'escape' and withdraw by watching television); and
- ▶ children who are depressed or avoid homework by watching too much television.

Television viewing can be a relaxing and useful activity for children, and there are many ways in which children can be helped to get the best out of watching television.

### *What Is The Royal Australasian College of Physicians?*

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (the College) comprises a Fellowship of medical specialists who are committed to providing the highest quality of care in internal medicine, paediatrics and sub-specialties to all people in Australia and New Zealand. Core functions of the College include training, accreditation and the maintenance of professional standards, as well as research and policy development in areas such as

workforce, public health, health financing and systems development.

The Division of Paediatrics is the part of the College which includes the majority of consultant paediatricians in Australia and New Zealand. Included within the Division of Paediatrics is the Chapter of Community Child Health, which is a group of consultant paediatricians and other medical professionals interested in community child health and welfare.

### *Why Is The College Involved?*

Because television has become almost a universal experience of childhood, the health and developmental effects of television are important. Therefore the College sees that it has a role in raising the profile of and discussion about these issues.

Children's television viewing habits should be supervised in the same manner as their schooling and nutrition. This may be difficult for parents who must assist their children to resist television marketing and peer pressure from their friends about what, and how much, television they watch.

Health care professionals, like paediatricians, can help parents and encourage the industry to take more action to ensure that children benefit from watching television.

### *Using This Booklet*

This booklet provides parents and carers with information about how to make television viewing a more useful and positive activity for children.

The information applies to both Australia and New Zealand.

### *Violence on Television*

This document does not address issues relating to television violence because this information is available in another document called 'Does Media Violence Hurt Your Children?' which can be obtained from Young Media Australia on tel: (08) 8232 1577 or website: [www.youngmedia.org.au](http://www.youngmedia.org.au).

## When & How We Watch TV

### Viewing Habits of Children and Families

Australians and New Zealanders watch a lot of television. For every 10 Australian households, 9 have a television, 6 have two televisions and 7 have a videoplayer<sup>1</sup>. The average household views more than 22 hours of television during the week, and the most popular hours are between 7pm and 8pm<sup>2</sup>. The figures are similar for New Zealand, where 2 out of every 10 households has pay television<sup>3</sup>.

This suggests that most families regularly watch television every night. This raises questions about what children are watching given that children's programs are screened at much earlier time slots.

A recent Australian study<sup>4</sup> found that children started watching television soon after they were born. Sydney children only 4 months old watched an average of 44 minutes of television per day, 12 month old children around 60 minutes per day, and 30 month old children were watching an average of 84 minutes. By 4 years the average time had increased to over 2.5 hours per day.

By the age of 18 years the average child has spent more time watching television (14,000 hours) than attending school (12,000 hours)<sup>5</sup>.

### What Influences The Viewing Habits of Children and Families?

There is strong evidence that the attitude of parents towards television viewing affects what children watch<sup>6,7</sup>, and that this attitude relates to the parents' level of education and socio-economic status<sup>8,9</sup>. Parental attitudes also influence whether or not parents watch television with their children. Parents who see the positive potential of television tend to view television with their children more often, and their children watch a greater percentage of educational programs<sup>6</sup>.

The viewing habits of children whose parents have not had the opportunity to gain higher levels of education are different in that the television tends to be on all day at home, and

the parents are less involved in the children's viewing habits<sup>10</sup>.

Children's viewing habits are affected by the family circumstances<sup>11</sup>, including the number of televisions in the house and the number of people living in the house. The more televisions, the more television is viewed. Older children tend to have more influence over their television viewing than their younger brothers and sisters. Children in day-care, or whose mothers work outside the home tend to watch less television than those who are at home all day<sup>11</sup>, although children who are unsupervised after school can watch a great deal more television<sup>12</sup>.

### Obesity and Fitness

The number of overweight and obese Australian children and adolescents and New Zealanders is increasing. Research shows that there is a very strong link between time spent viewing television and obesity. It is one of the major causes of obesity in childhood, and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians believes that this issue is a major public health problem for children.

The more television children watch, the fewer sports activities they undertake<sup>19</sup>.

Children's metabolic rate when they are watching television is at least as low as when they are sitting and reading<sup>20</sup> and possibly even lower for children already obese<sup>21</sup>. A further important factor, influenced by television programming content, is that television viewing seems to increase children's 'nibbling' or 'snacking' behaviour<sup>22</sup> and their requests for foods advertised on television<sup>23</sup>.

Studies have found that children lose weight when they increase their amount of physical activity and reduce the amount of television they watch<sup>24,25</sup>.

### How We Can Improve a Child's Television Experience

Children's understanding and television viewing behaviour can be influenced and improved through media studies in school<sup>26,27</sup>. Some Australian States/Territories have developed a curriculum for media studies from the beginning of primary school to the end

of high school, and the College would encourage schools in Australia and New Zealand to include these types of subjects in their curriculum.

Parents play an extremely important role in changing a child's television viewing habits. Parents who help their children choose their television programs and supervise their viewing habits can ensure that their children get the best out of television. Studies have shown that supervision of television viewing and discussion about television programs can help children to manage fear<sup>28</sup>, and to increase the understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality<sup>29</sup>.

### Family Problems

Children may watch too much television because of family problems. Children tend to watch more television when there is stress or constant fighting within the family<sup>30</sup>. The more television that a family watches, the less likely the family members are to communicate with each other, and this provides fewer opportunities for a family to solve its problems<sup>31</sup>.

### What You Can Do

- ▶ Develop rules or guidelines for television viewing for all members of the family.

Think about your attitudes to television, and your viewing habits which may promote bad television viewing habits by your children. For example, if you watch television without being selective about the programs you watch, and if you regularly snack on high fat foods and/or eat meals while you watch television, it is likely that your children will copy your behaviour.

Children and adults who watch television for long periods of time are more likely to be overweight or obese. Eating high fat snack foods whilst watching television increases the chance of putting on extra weight. It is important to plan a balance between watching television and more physically active (and fun) activities.

Promote television viewing to your children as a privilege (to be earned) rather than a right.

Try to ensure that watching television is not the only option during quiet times or school holidays. Alternative activities might include reading, drawing, writing and story telling. Make sure that the television does not become a 'babysitter'.

- ▶ Plan family activities (such as mealtimes) where the television is turned off to encourage more discussion and fun activities.

Think carefully about where the television(s) is placed in the house. Ideally, the television should be in the family room where you can supervise your children's television viewing, and not in the children's bedrooms or in the kitchen (where it disrupts meal times).

Other suggestions include:

- ▶ Develop a family video library of favourite children's programs and films.
- ▶ Buy some story audiotapes and practise listening.
- ▶ Have a family story time each night.
- ▶ Develop strategies to help you and your children resolve disagreements about the selection of particular television programs.

You may need to develop a range of strategies to help your children resist television marketing and pressure from their friends to watch many hours of television and inappropriate programs.

If your children wish to watch too much, you may suggest a number of other activities which they enjoy such as playing a particular sport or joining a group of interest to them.

If your children wish to watch a program (such as one that all their friends are watching) which you are concerned about, one option is to sit with them while they watch it. This gives you the opportunity to discuss the content of the program with them.

If you are finding difficulties in negotiating the rules with your children, you may find it useful to talk to family and friends or your general practitioner/paediatrician. This may give you the support you require and provide you with ideas about dealing with difficulties.

- ▶ Monitor your children's television viewing habits and response to programs.

Children may become scared or anxious if they watch some complex programs (such as news or violent programs) and you can play an important role in reducing the fear by discussing the content of those programs. For example, if your child sees a story about a massacre or bomb explosion on the television news, you can explain that the chances of this happening to your child are very small. However, keep in mind that young children (under the age of about 8 years) may not understand this concept of probability and it is best for them not to watch news programs and violent programs (including violent cartoons).

Use the classification system ('G', 'PG', 'M', 'MA' in Australia and 'G' or 'PGR' in New Zealand) to assist you in selecting the programs. Select programs specifically made for children (such as those rated 'C' for primary school children and 'P' for pre school children in Australia or select appropriate programs rated 'G' in New Zealand) which will build on children's interests and stimulate their development.

It is also important to monitor your children's television viewing habits to see if they are watching too much television.

## What We Watch

### What Children Understand At Different Ages

Children under the age of four do not really understand what many shows are about<sup>32</sup>, and this is what makes them especially vulnerable. The different styles and techniques used in programs can make programs very attractive to children regardless of content<sup>33</sup>. For example a very violent movie may be visually entertaining to very young children.

It is believed that at around the ages of two and three children begin to understand that what they see is not actually occurring within the television, and that by four years most children realise that what they see on television is not necessarily real<sup>34</sup>. However, it is not until sometime between the ages of 6 to 9 that children can understand the television techniques which show unrealistic actions (such as action replays)<sup>35,36</sup>.

At around 6 or 7 years, children understand that some of the characters they see on television are actors playing roles<sup>37</sup>.

From an early age (2 to 3 years) children can understand (in a very basic sense) and memorise the literal aspects of what they see - the features, the action and dialogue<sup>38</sup>. They can absorb factual information, however this does not mean that they fully understand what they see.

The concern about very young children in this age group is that they are not intellectually, socially and emotionally mature enough to interpret what they see on television. They cannot understand the emotional cause and effect which lies behind what they see on television<sup>34,39</sup>. So if they see a violent cartoon or movie they may not realise the consequences of violence - pain and death.

In addition, children are more vulnerable to believing that what they see on television happens often, and that it reflects their own society<sup>40</sup>. Children who watch large amounts of television are more likely to have these incorrect beliefs<sup>41</sup>. The special effects used in television programs which make unrealistic actions seem real also encourage children to believe that it reflects reality<sup>42</sup>.

For children, one possible consequence of viewing information they cannot understand is that they may experience more fear. What children fear as a result of their television viewing changes with age -- younger children are afraid of tangible threats, children in middle childhood can be afraid of people, their motivations and behaviour, and adolescents are more likely to experience fear from broader social threats<sup>28</sup>.

Another consequence is that they may copy the action or violence they see without really understanding the consequences and may harm themselves or other children as a result.

### Television and Play

Due to their ability to understand factual information from an early age children can play out what they see on television - quite accurately and in some detail<sup>43</sup>. This suggests that television can have both a negative<sup>44</sup> and positive impact on children.

On the positive side, television may provide children with a broad sample of life situations and possibilities to explore through play<sup>45</sup>. This can help to improve their understanding of the world around them<sup>46</sup>. Television can directly influence children's behaviour in a pro-social way<sup>47</sup>.

On the negative side, children might imitate antisocial behaviours<sup>48</sup> such as resolving conflict through violence (which they often see in cartoons). Children may also believe that people and society are similar to what they see on television, and this probably does not reflect reality. Often, people on television are shown in stereotypical ways. For example, heroes are attractive, 'bad guys' are usually bald or fat and some programs have actors of only one nationality or race.

### *Television and Learning*

Television can boost a child's rate of learning, although the opportunity to learn depends on the type of program that the child watches. Educational programs such as "Sesame Street" can help children with their learning<sup>49</sup>.

One study found that children who watched educational television programs in preschool performed better in school when they were teenagers<sup>50</sup>.

Television can have an even more positive effect on children who are academically gifted<sup>51</sup>. This may be due to the influence of their parents who are more likely to discuss program content, more likely to understand the potential positive benefits of television<sup>52</sup>, and make positive viewing choices<sup>53</sup>.

Violent programs can have a negative impact on young children's learning. One study found that girls in preschool who watched many violent television programs were less likely to do well in school in their later years<sup>54</sup>.

### *Children and Advertising*

Australia and New Zealand have some of the highest levels of children's television advertising in the world<sup>55,56</sup>. One hour of cartoons can include up to 15 minutes of advertising. A child watching an average of 2.5 hours per day will see 75 advertisements, or over 25,000 per year<sup>55</sup>.

Television advertising works. The percentage of toys sold in the United States of America that were directly linked to movies and television rose from 10% in 1984 to 50% in 1990<sup>57</sup>.

Although children from preschool ages can tell the difference between a television program and an advertisement<sup>58</sup>, they may not really understand that the advertisements are selling a product. It has become even more difficult for younger children to understand advertising since products have become more closely related to the content of television programs (such as toys based on cartoon characters)<sup>59</sup>.

Children up to the age of 10 years are more likely than older children to see celebrities as experts and believe them<sup>60</sup>. Similarly, younger children are more likely to see the action shown in advertisements as real, and this makes children desire the products more<sup>60</sup>. This research suggests that younger children may be much more vulnerable to advertising than older children.

As children grow older their attitude towards advertisements becomes more cynical, although they continue to ask their parents for advertised products (such as toys, food and drinks) at the same rate<sup>61</sup>. Again, children who watch greater amounts of television<sup>61</sup> and children from low income families are more likely to ask their parents for products. This can cause more conflict between parents and children<sup>63</sup>.

Advertisements for food aimed at children are especially worrying because they do not follow advertising guidelines as much as advertisements for other products<sup>64</sup> and questionable advertising techniques have been reported<sup>65</sup>. Also, the advertising standards in both New Zealand and Australia are governed by voluntary industry codes<sup>66</sup>. Studies in Australia<sup>66</sup> and New Zealand<sup>66</sup> show that most of the food advertised on television targeted at children and teenagers is high in sugar, salt and fat such as sweet snacks and fast food. The amount of nutritious food advertising, such as for fruits and vegetables, is low.

Children often don't understand the nutritional make-up of advertised food products<sup>67</sup> and are more likely to believe that 'fast' foods are good for them. One Australian study<sup>68</sup> found that many students get most of their nutritional information from the media, and another<sup>69</sup> found that a number of 9-10 year olds believed that Ronald McDonald probably knew what was good for children to eat.

## Social Stereotypes

Commercial television programs (particularly cartoons, sitcoms and other entertainment programs) portray society in limited ways. Men and women are portrayed in stereotyped ways, and there are often fewer women's roles than men's<sup>70</sup>. Children<sup>71</sup>, the aged<sup>72</sup> and some racial groups are portrayed quite negatively. Over the last 20 years, family life has been portrayed as more and more dysfunctional<sup>73</sup>.

Over the last decade the portrayal and detail of sexual relationships on American commercial television has increased<sup>74</sup>. The ways in which these relationships develop and occur can be portrayed unrealistically. The consequences of sexual behaviours (such as teen pregnancy) are often ignored<sup>75</sup>.

Research shows that this affects the attitudes and behaviours of television viewers, especially young adolescents<sup>76</sup>.

The groups of children most vulnerable to the negative impact of these messages are children who watch large amounts of television<sup>77</sup>, younger children (due to less well developed moral reasoning<sup>78</sup>) and children from vulnerable family situations (less parental supervision and parents who have not had the opportunity to gain higher levels of education).

## Suicide

The suicide rates for young people in Western societies is rising, especially for men aged 15-24 years in Australia and New Zealand<sup>79</sup>. The suicide rates for children under 15 continue to be of concern<sup>79</sup>.

Suicides often occur in clusters where young people imitate other young people who have recently committed suicide. There is concern that the television portrayal of suicide may encourage children to copy this behaviour<sup>80,81</sup>.

You should be aware that your child is exposed to messages about suicide through a range of media including the music and computer games industries which do not follow any particular guidelines about the way in which they portray suicide. This is of concern

because research shows that the more publicity there is about one case of suicide, the more likely it is that young people will imitate this behaviour<sup>82,83</sup>.

## Children with Developmental Problems

Children with emotional or learning disabilities may find it more difficult than other children to understand the difference between fantasy and reality, and so they are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of television<sup>84,85</sup>. Children with low levels of attention seem to watch the same amount of television as other children but may remember less and have less understanding<sup>86</sup>.

There is no evidence to support the belief that television viewing may cause Attention Deficit Disorder.

However, television viewing may be a contributing factor to developmental problems. Watching more television is related to greater difficulties in eye-hand coordination<sup>87</sup>. This might be due to fewer opportunities to develop these skills.

## What You Can Do

► Regularly discuss with your children the content of the programs they watch and be involved in their selection of television programs.

You can be involved in, and influence, your children's television viewing habits in many ways. For example, you can be selective about what your children watch. Use the classification system ('G', 'PG', 'M', 'MA' in Australia and 'G' or 'PGR' in New Zealand) to assist you in selecting the programs. Select programs specifically made for children (such as those rated 'C' for primary school children and 'P' for pre school children in Australia or select appropriate programs rated 'G' in New Zealand) which will build on children's interests and stimulate their development.

Encourage your children to follow their interests when they see something interesting on television – for example, they can discuss the content and issues raised at home and at school, go to the library and so on.

Discuss the media techniques and ways in which shows are produced (such as news, entertainment, documentaries) so that your children understand more about the type of program they are watching.

Teach your children about television advertising. One way to do this is to turn the sound off on the television during advertisements and discuss what they see. This discussion could include questions such as:

- ▶ What is an advertisement - what are they trying to do?
- ▶ How are they trying to do that?
- ▶ Did the advertisement succeed in changing what you want?
- ▶ Do you think those products are necessary?

Other important issues that you can discuss with your children regarding television include:

- ▶ Fantasy (television tricks) vs reality
- ▶ Is what is seen a true reflection of the society in which the child lives and/or is it common?
- ▶ Is it local (a real threat to that child)?
- ▶ Cultural stereotypes (sex, race, age, disabled, children, images of normality and perfection)
- ▶ Motivation - why people did what they did
- ▶ Emotion - how people may have felt as a result of what happened

## Getting Involved

▶ Become active in lobbying the media through telephone calls or letters to television stations, especially when you are concerned or upset about particular programs or advertisements.

In Australia, you may contact Young Media Australia, a national community-based organisation, for useful addresses, phone numbers and ways in which you can make a difference. In New Zealand, you may contact the Broadcasting Standards Authority which provides school education resources and deals with consumer complaints.

More information and other materials are available from:

Young Media Australia  
69 Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide SA 5000, Tel: 08 8232 1577, Fax: 08 8232 1571,  
Email: [info@youngmedia.org.au](mailto:info@youngmedia.org.au), Web: [www.youngmedia.org.au](http://www.youngmedia.org.au)

Australian Early Childhood Association  
PO Box 105, Watson ACT 2602, ,  
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Australian Broadcasting Authority  
PO Box Q500, Queen Victoria Building NSW 1230,  
Tel: Free Call 1800 22 6667, Email: [info@aba.gov.au](mailto:info@aba.gov.au),  
Web: [www.aba.gov.au](http://www.aba.gov.au)

Broadcasting Standards Authority (NZ)  
PO Box 9213, Wellington,  
Tel 04 382 9508, Fax 04 382 9543, Email: [info@bsa.govt.nz](mailto:info@bsa.govt.nz), Web: [www.bsa.govt.nz](http://www.bsa.govt.nz)

## Conclusion

It is clear that television has a powerful effect on the health and development of children. This booklet gives parents a set of strategies to maximise the positive effects and minimise the potential harm of television viewing on children. In this age of rapid media development we must act collectively to

ensure the most positive use of new technologies. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians wishes to take a key role in these activities for the good of Australia and New Zealand and their children.

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