



Making the Most of Television...

Written by: Lizette van Huyssteen and Loren Stow

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In my Summit Talk, I will cover the topic of "Should babies and toddlers watch television". In this article, we want to equip parents with the tools they need to make the most of television when it comes to their older toddlers and children. We hope that it makes a difference in your life!

Switch it off when you're not actively watching

Parents often report that their children don't seem to be interested in television and they want to know if it's ok to have it on in the background while they go about their day?

Studies have confirmed that a television on the background is actually detrimental to one-on-one interaction between parent and child. These studies have found that parents say an average of 941 words when the television is off, but this drops to only 171 words when the television is on in the background (and not even being actively watched!).

Obviously this does not bode well for language development and the precious 'sharing-time' that you have with your child. We cannot stress enough the impact that one-on-one time with your child has on language and intellectual development. This will become a dedicated post in and of itself in the near future. So when you're not actively watching a program, keep the television switched off.

Limit Viewing Time

Young children learn language (which is closely linked to intellectual development) through one-on-one conversations. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation in the US, the average American family spends four hours watching television a day, but only 38.5 minutes engaged in meaningful conversation with their children.

The Daily Mail in the UK reported that by the age of five, when children there enter formal education systems, only about half of the children are able to speak properly. The other half struggle to string a sentence together and understand simple instructions. Experts point to modern-day parents no longer having conversations with their children, televisions being used as 'babysitters', and dinner-time being held in front of the television, as reasons for this lack of language acquisition (for a link to this article visit:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-541012/Half-year-olds-speak-properly-start-primary-school.html>)

Television is Only for Older Children

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television before the age of two and that children over the age of two be limited to one or two hours of screen time per day.

The rule of thumb is that your child needs to have and understand language first, before they are able to gain anything out of television. If your child is not actively talking, then television is not for them yet.



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Repetition Leads to Recognition

Young children naturally do not know enough about the world, people or the meaning of words to gain anything from watching a program once. Instead, they need to see the same program (or DVD) over and over again in order to learn something from it. So treat television as you would a book that you read over and over again.

See the Television as a Book

Watching television with a young child in a way that facilitates learning is not going to be without effort. For a young child to benefit from watching television, the experience has to closely resemble reading a book.

Because of the way in which young children learn and process information, you need to talk to your child and deliberately help him to focus his attention. Otherwise, he'll spend large portions of the time staring mindlessly at the screen. You can, for example, pause a show at certain points and alert your child to watch for certain details such as actions, sound effects and visual images.

Keep an eye on your child's reactions and encourage him to talk about what is happening on the screen, to intentionally involve the language regions of his brain in the process.

You can also copy what the characters are doing and encourage him to do the same, for example, "Can you show me how scared the piggy was?", or "Let me hear how the wolf huffed and puffed!".

In the same way as reading a book, the aim is to enjoy language and discover new ideas as you enter into an imaginary world. You want to deepen your relationship with your child and build his brain by involving various regions of the brain in order to make sense of what he hears and sees.

Give Background Information

One of the best ways to nurture memory and language skills is when a parent and child talk about (or quote from) favourite books. Do the same thing by talking about a television show before and after viewing it. As you talk about main events and characters, you are guiding your child to view the experience from a whole new perspective - as if he is on the outside, looking in.

This is the start of developing an important skill called 'meta-cognition', which refers to the ability that all successful students have to 'think about how they think'.

Move and Learn

Hit the pause button and ask your child to physically stand up and go and point something out on the screen, like a bird or apple etc. Also, clap hands, sing and dance together to the music and songs on your shows.



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Bring it Home

Little ones learn by using their bodies. Your child will learn more about the meaning of 'big' and 'small' if he actually touches and holds something that is big and then something that is small. Seeing it on the screen will not help unless you demonstrate new concepts in real life.

For example, if you watch a show and learn about the concept of a 'triangle', you can then teach your child how to make a triangle with his fingers or using matchsticks on the floor.

Find Out More

When your child shows an interest in something that he sees on television, whether it be a certain animal, cowboys, a food or activity, invite him to join you as you google the subject on the Internet or visit your local library and take out a book on the subject.

Read some of the newly found facts out loud and print out some pictures or get some posters to stick on his wall or in his scrapbook. This is a great way to instill a love of learning in your child and to teach him that learning is even more fun when he actively pursues it.

Eat Elsewhere

Eating in front of the television is the biggest conversation killer, and it's also been found that it increases obesity because it's easier to overeat when you're enthralled by a program on television.

Parents often also find that it is easier to feed their children while they're in front of a television, and that they'd often gulp down food they wouldn't ordinarily eat.

However, nutritionists warn that this is not a good way to get food into picky eaters, because they're not learning to accept new foods at all - they're simply mesmerised and don't notice what they're eating. Sneaking in a few mouthfuls of a new food while your baby watches television is not developing a healthy relationship with food.

There is no doubt that television can be used as a learning tool, but only if it's done correctly and with effort on the part of the parent. Again, nothing can take the place of one-on-one interaction, especially when it comes to your child's language and intellectual abilities.

By applying these tips, something that would otherwise dampen one-on-one time and rob your child's brain from growth opportunities, now becomes a tool for sharing, learning and making wonderful memories!

Words: Loren Stow - *when we know better... we do better*