

TV Time for Tots

Creating Guilt-Free Guidelines for Babies & Toddlers

By Kyla Steinkraus



No matter how much you love your baby, once in a while you just need a few minutes to yourself to take a shower or make an important phone call. Although the Academy of Pediatrics recommends that babies and toddlers refrain from watching television, a recent University of Washington study revealed that 40 percent of 3 month olds and 90 percent of 2 year olds regularly watch an hour or more of TV a day. According to another study, 20 percent of children under two have televisions in their rooms.

"The AAP's recommendation is because television time replaces important parent interaction, and not because of any harmful effects of television viewing," says Dr. James Sears, MD, a noted pediatrician and co-author of *The Baby Book*.

If parents make it a priority to get in lots of cuddle and play time to stimulate their baby's brain the rest of the day, they can stop feeling guilty about switching on the tube every now and then. Dr. Sears suggests a limit of 30 minutes a day for children under two. For kids over 2, the AAP recommends a maximum of two hours of media exposure (including video games and computers) a day.

Too much TV is detrimental for kids of all ages. Excessive television-viewing by young children has been linked to lowered cognitive development, smaller vocabularies, ADHD, and obesity. One study showed that for every hour a day a preschooler watched TV, his risk for obesity increased by six percent. A TV in the bedroom increased a child's odds of being overweight by 31 percent. More than one to two hours a day replaces critical interactions with par-

ents, siblings, and friends and reduces time spend reading, engaging in imaginative play, exploring, and exercising outside.

"I can see a difference in my sons' behavior when they've been spending too much time in front of the tube," says Heather Hoffman, a mom of two boys, aged two and five. "They don't listen as well and tend to get overactive after the TV goes off."

What your child watches may be as important as how much he watches. Shows and DVDs deemed 'educational' can enhance a preschooler's learning development when used in limited amounts. A 2005 study published in the *American Behavioral Scientist* supports the importance of content when choosing programs for your child. Thirty-month-old toddlers who watched *Dora the Explorer*, *Blue's Clues*, *Arthur*, or *Clifford* developed larger vocabularies and higher expressive language scores, while those that watched *Teletubbies* or *Barney & Friends* knew fewer vocabulary words.

The educational value of television for babies is suspect, however. If you show your baby educational programs in the hopes of enhancing her development, you might want to reconsider popping in that *Baby Einstein* DVD. According to the University of Washington study, 29 percent of parents believe that television is educational or good for their child's brain development. In fact, there is no proof that educational programming enhances cognitive, social, or emotional development in babies and toddlers under two.

When your toddler does watch television, make sure he's viewing age-appropriate material, especially if there are older children

in the house. Nix any kind of violence, even cartoon violence. "Your child can't recognize that the images on the television are not real, and this can have important implications in terms of mental and social development," warns Dr. Perlmutter, MD, FACN, a neurologist and author of *Raise a Smarter Child by Kindergarten*.

So what's appropriate? *Baby Einstein* and nature DVDs, or educational shows like *Dora the Explorer* and *Blue's Clues* are all excellent choices for babies and toddlers. The Noggin channel features educational, commercial-free programming for young children.

"I usually feel good about a program that gets kids dancing and singing along," says Sears. Hoffman chooses *PBS*, *Veggie Tales*, and *Leap Frog* DVDs for her sons. Just make sure you're realistic about the actual value of such shows. Think of the majority of television as empty calories, the pop and candy of your child's developmental diet. If your toddler spends most of his day playing, singing, reading, exploring, and interacting with loving caregivers, then an episode of *The Wiggles* is fine.

You have enough to worry about without adding guilt to the mix. Think balance. Go ahead, turn on the TV and tend to yourself for a few minutes. After all, a well-showered mom is a happy mom—and a happy mom can devote herself to all of her child's physical, emotional, and cognitive needs.



HOW MUCH TV DO WE REALLY WATCH?

- Adults and teens spend four hours and 35 minutes a day watching the tube. That's 65 non-stop days a year in front of the TV. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006)
- By the age of 65, the average American will have spent nearly nine years watching TV. (Nielsen)
- 99 percent of American Households own at least one television.
- The average American home keeps the television on for over 8 hours every day. (Center for Screen-time Awareness)
- The average American child spends 900 hours a year in school. Hours per year they watch television: 1500. (Center for Screen-time Awareness)

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