

Watch out for this babysitter!

Have you ever used television to baby-sit your baby or toddler? Chances are, if you're being honest, the answer is yes. And while you're not alone --- It's a rare parent who hasn't occasionally turned on the tube to take a shower, make an uninterrupted phone call or start dinner, it's definitely a habit worth curbing. Why? Recent research has shown that there are long-term consequences to too much TV watching in the formative brain-building years.

Two years ago, a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation rang the alarm bell with its results showing that more than 40% of kids under 2 watch TV every day. And it wasn't just for a few minutes here and there. Almost 70% of toddlers encountered some kind of "screen time" for 2 hours a day. I wouldn't be surprised if that number has gone up recently, given the increased availability of videos directly targeted for the youngest of audiences.

What's our motivation?

The amount of TV kids watch doesn't surprise me, given the justifications I hear from so many parents. I've heard parents say of their 6 month old, "She loves that show", or "She looks forward to it every morning." This is fascinating, considering babies' short attention spans. Half of parents say that educational TV shows are "very important" to their child's cognitive development, says the Kaiser study. So the marketing behind shows aimed at babies (HBO's "Classical Baby" is the newest) is something parents are willing to believe. Yet, there is no research to support this theory. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics advocates no television for children under age 2. This policy, while probably not realistic in today's media-saturated world, came about as a direct result of major negative trends, obesity among them, related to TV-watching in older children.

In my experience, parents are usually well-intentioned, but sometimes we slip into bad habits. No one is saying that a fast food meal on the way to soccer practice or watching an hour of cartoons is going to do permanent damage by itself. The goal is to avoid establishing patterns early on that may have negative consequences in the long run. So the AAP taking such a hard-line stance probably reflects the fact that if you say 30 minutes is OK, then pretty soon it's an hour or two a day. And, given naps, that's a more significant chunk of time in a baby or toddler's day than it is in an adult's day.

As a parent of a child this age, you might be interested in what the data does show so you can make the best decision possible when it comes to screen time. First, we do know that heavy TV viewing indisputably limits healthier alternatives. By age 6, heavy TV watchers are spending less time playing outside. They also spend less time reading, especially if they have a TV in their room. This choice translates not only into less physical activity, but also less time spending playtime with their peers or just plain using their imagination.

If you're thinking, "but I only let them watch quality shows, PBS shows, or Baby Einstein videos", to some extent you're still kidding yourself. With the exception of one study on Sesame Street's positive influence on at-risk children's early learning, there's very little evidence to show that TV is the way for

kids to learn. In fact, studies which focus on what are the most important factors for kindergarten success are an eye-opener. What matters most is not whether Jody knows her ABC's by age 3 or some other 'academic learning' we hope our kids are picking up from these shows. Instead, it's the peer interactions kids develop in preschool, the warm relationships they have with their teachers and their own positive attitude toward school that lead to children's high achievement in kindergarten. These are the 'real world' skills that our kids learn on the playground, at the library or at play dates. This is where our focus as their first teachers should be. No two-dimensional screen can replace the human touch when it comes to such early learning.

Now before you dismiss this out of hand, let me be clear. I am not saying (nor are other experts) that you need to be constantly stimulating your baby or toddler. No parent has the patience or energy to be "on" at all times, and in fact, babies who can entertain themselves now and then have a valuable advantage in the future. But the reality is that in a few years, our children will be in a room with 25 others (and likely one adult) for six hours a day. They will not be able to change the channel, or count on a favorite DVD to entertain them. They will, however, be expected to problem-solve, to sit and wait their turn, and to work cooperatively with the other kids. So it's our responsibility to institute good habits early on that will help them feel successful. Trust me, no screen can do that.

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