



## Mind Over Media: Early choices for healthy development

What do we, as parents, want for our children? That they grow up as happy and responsible members of the community who share our values and outlook on the world? That they learn skills that will help them to have fulfilling personal and work lives as adults? Perhaps also that they have happy and fulfilling lives *as children*, learning the necessary skills in a safe, fun environment?

Many aspects of their lives contribute to them having these opportunities and experiences, some of which are outside of our control as parents. The media is an all pervasive and influential element in the lives of most Australian children, and it is a factor that is within our sphere of influence as parents and caregivers—we can use the media to help rather than hinder our children’s healthy development.

This is the first of a series of Fact Sheets called *Mind Over Media*. They show you how to use media to make a positive contribution to your child’s life. Prepared by Young Media Australia and sponsored by the Telstra Foundation, the series provides parents and caregivers with information about media use and early development of very young children, that is children aged 0–5 years. Each Fact Sheet will include strategies for parents and caregivers.

This topic gives you an overview of the six *Mind Over Media* Fact Sheets, exploring the role that careful choice of media can play in assisting your children to develop:

- healthy relationships
- good social and emotional skills
- a strong and confident sense of self
- good language skills
- thinking skills—analytical and creative
- a realistic understanding of the world.

Here are some snippets from this exciting series...

### **Mind Over Media: Developing healthy relationships**

The first five years of a child’s life are vital in developing their ability to relate to others. The formation of healthy relationships in the early years is the foundation on which subsequent development is built.

It is important that infants learn that their emotions will be responded to and that they can influence what their primary caregiver does for them. Television, however, can not respond to an infant’s needs nor give appropriate emotional responses. As such, it is a very poor babysitter for infants and can hinder rather than help their most important developmental task, that of attachment to their primary caregiver.

Older preschoolers will benefit from watching television or videos, playing computer games or using the internet, if you participate in the activity with them, responding to them and what they are doing or watching.

### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Minimise the exposure of children under the age of two to electronic media. If they are ‘watching television’, stay in the room with them to monitor what is happening and respond to them as necessary.
- Watch television or play computer games with your older preschooler, responding both to the content of the media and to your child’s interests and reactions.

### **Mind Over Media: Developing good social and emotional skills**



As children mature, they learn to moderate their emotional reactions and develop appropriate social skills. It is a relatively 'normal' response of a frustrated two year old to scream, kick or hit. However, by the time the child is five, it is expected that they will have learnt a number of different ways to solve problems and to deal with having their wishes frustrated.

This transition is due in large part to the development of language and cognitive skills between the ages of two and five. The media can also assist by showing the toddler what behaviours are appropriate and successful in dealing with problems and frustrations.

Many excellent children's television programs are available which model behaviours such as cooperation, getting along with others and treating them with respect. Children who watch such programs see a range of positive behaviours which they can choose to imitate.

There is now an abundance of evidence which shows that media violence has both short and long term consequences. In the short term, aggressive behaviours increase immediately after watching media violence. In the long term, over-exposure to violent media limits the individual's ability to generate alternative solutions to conflict.

#### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Choose children's programs where characters treat each other with respect. Examples are *The Wiggles: Lights, Camera, Action!* and *Bananas in Pyjamas*.
- Avoid violent media, especially glamourised violence performed by an attractive hero with whom they can identify, and where violence has no real life consequences.

#### **Mind Over Media: Developing a strong and confident sense of self**

Many elements go to make up a strong and confident sense of self, including a sense of being loved and appreciated.

Renowned child psychologist, Steve Biddulph, has described commercial television as "...a direct attack on the self-esteem of children and teenagers" in that its specific purpose is to make you feel that you will only be happy when you buy the items being advertised.

The best defence against the negative impact of advertising is for parents to constantly remind children, verbally and with their actions, that they are loved exactly as they are.

#### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Select commercial television for children under the age of five very carefully, especially choosing 'P' rated programs which have no advertising.
- Share with your children your own amusement that anyone would believe that having 'stuff' makes you worthwhile, while it is clear to us that being loved is the important thing.

#### **Mind Over Media: Developing good language skills**

Children develop good language skills by listening to their carers and experimenting with words that name things and action words to get what they want. Some television programs, notably the *Teletubbies*, support this language development by showing four stages of development with each of the Teletubbies, with everything they attempt to say being repeated accurately by an adult voiceover.

Some experts have theorised that private vocalisations during early play are important for developing language, and that this may be disrupted by having a television on in the background while the very young child is playing.

#### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Watch the *Teletubbies* with your child. Observe how your child interacts with the program and occasionally repeat the adult voiceovers for emphasis while engaging your child in the relevant action.
- Minimise the time that the television is on in the background while your child is playing. After a program has finished, comment on what they have been watching, including how much fun it seemed to be, and discuss with them what activity they would like to do next.

### **Mind Over Media: Developing good thinking skills—analytical and creative**

Children develop good problem solving and analytical skills by actively experimenting with natural environment. Some computer and video games, used in moderation, can support this process.

There is some evidence to suggest that children's programs specifically designed to stimulate children's imagination can promote imaginative play, particularly if the child has the opportunity to imitate and extend the play after the program is finished.

The majority of studies suggest that *extended* television viewing reduces imagination and creativity—the time that your child spends watching TV is time that they are *not* spending doing other things such as imaginative play.

#### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Choose computer or video games that encourage problem solving skills, such as the *Putt Putt* series.
- Go to the website ([www.sosmart.com](http://www.sosmart.com)) and follow the links to activities you can do with your preschooler.
- Choose children's programs designed to promote imaginative play, such as *Play School*. Encourage children to extend what they have seen with materials that are available around the home.

which will show the child elements of their world in a safe and non-threatening way.

#### **Here are a few media strategies that will help:**

- Avoid the TV News, even as background.
- For older preschoolers, choose children's television programs such as *Totally Wild* and *Magic School Bus* which explain aspects of the natural world from a child's point of view.

### **Mind Over Media: Developing a realistic understanding of the world**

Between the ages of zero to five a child learns important lessons about the difference between fantasy and reality. This is largely done by doing 'reality checks' of how they are feeling and behaving against the reactions of their primary caregivers.

While interacting with media, it is helpful for the child if a caregiver is present to comment on the 'reality' of what they are watching or doing. Extended television consumption may interfere with this important 'reality checking' process.

Young children may also be vulnerable to what might be seen on television, particularly exposure to frightening events, such as is shown on the TV News. There are however, many excellent programs