



## Effects of the media from a child development perspective

Child development theory has educated teachers and informed policy makers for 50 years. In the last decade, the same strong foundation of child development principles has been applied to identify the risks of prolonged or inappropriate exposure of children to the media.

The term 'early childhood' generally refers to the years of a child's life from birth to about seven. The central developmental needs in the early childhood years are:

- Developing a sense of trust and safety
- The need for autonomy and connection
- A sense of empowerment and efficacy
- Developing a gender identity
- Understanding how people are alike and different
- Developing a sense of morality and social responsibility
- The need for meaningful play.

### Developing a sense of trust and safety

Children need to feel that the world is a safe place and that people can be trusted. This allows them the freedom to explore their world and approach new experience with curiosity and openness.

**Media experiences that help ...** There are many excellent programs made for children, which will show children elements of their world in a safe and non-threatening way. Choosing programs and seeking out videos and DVDs that support and extend your child's interests, without depicting violence, scary images or threatening situations, will ensure that they develop a more rounded view of the world at a pace that suits them. Helpful media present children with a world where people are

predictable and can be trusted and where they treat each other with love and kindness.

**And media experiences that don't ...** Violent and scary television programming is developmentally inappropriate because it undermines children's sense of safety and security. Such programs do not show children how to resolve conflicts non-violently and can heighten children's anxieties about their own safety. Many programs present a world filled with violence and evil, where 'bad guys' threaten the safety of 'good guys'. An underlying message of instability and threat is repeated over and over again in many children's programs giving children the impression of a threatening and unsafe world where danger is never put to rest.

### The need for autonomy and connection

It is important for children in the early years to do an increasing range of tasks for themselves. At the same time they also learn to participate more and more in relationships with others.

**Media experiences that help ...** 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. In this way, you are building your relationship with them with activities that they enjoy and teaching them to be responsive as well. Developmentally appropriate TV shows children ways to act autonomously while maintaining a positive connection with others. It shows a world where people help and support each other, while maintaining their own independence.

**And media experiences that don't ...** Television programming that presents its characters as being *either* autonomous *or* in relationship don't help children to develop the idea that they can be *both*

independent and connected to others. Many cartoons and other children's programs present the themes of separation and connection as if they are mutually exclusive. Autonomy is commonly equated with violence and hurt toward others and connection with helplessness and victimisation.

## **A sense of empowerment and efficacy**

Children have to develop a sense that they can affect their world and feelings of inner strength and belief in themselves as competent and capable people. To do this, children have to learn exactly what actions, skills and words will have what kinds of effects in different situations.

**Media experiences that help** ...Some programs suggest activities for toddlers that are manageable and can provide ideas for the caregivers to extend into play time. Likewise, some computer programs, chosen carefully, may provide toddlers with opportunities to master simple skills. Appropriate television programs make children feel that they can make a positive difference in the world. It shows a wide range of things that people can do to bring about positive change.

**And media experiences that don't** ...Much of current children's television programs undermine development by failing to provide content that helps children develop a sense of empowerment. There are very few characters that serve as role models for achieving positive effects in non-violent ways. On many children's programs the characters display empowerment and efficacy only by using weapons and violence. Using words and wits to solve problems is not often shown.

## **Developing a gender identity**

The more broadly children approach the question of what it means to be a 'boy' or a 'girl', the more they are likely to develop to their full potential. Children need to be shown that boys and girls can do a wide range of things, many of which are common to both sexes.

**Media experiences that help** ...Good quality television made for very young children can assist children in developing gender identity by showing both male and female characters as having a diverse range of characteristics and interests. They can provide preschoolers with the opportunity to identify with appropriate role models. Appropriate television provides models of both sexes engaging in a wide range of activities. Children need to see

complex characters who embody characteristics traditionally thought of as both male and female in order to open up possibilities for themselves.

**And media experiences that don't** ...TV can give children a restricted picture of what it means to be a boy or girl, exaggerating a tendency for stereotyping naturally occurring in young children. Many of the popular children's shows present a very narrow range of behaviour options to boys and girls. Males are muscle-bound characters who like to fight especially with big weapons. Females are sweet, kind and often sexy, spending a lot of time caring about how they look.

## **Understanding how people are alike and different**

Young children are in the process of learning about who they are as individuals and as members of a broader society, about how they are alike and different from other people and about how people of diverse backgrounds and experience treat each other.

**Media experiences that help** ...Good quality television, computer games and selected websites, made especially for young children, can help them explore other cultures and to develop understandings about the world they live in, including natural environments, human ingenuity and cultural diversity. Television has the potential to show children a diverse range of people and to show them how to respect and learn from each other.

**And media experiences that don't** ...Much of the TV that young children see today doesn't help them develop an appreciation and respect for differences among people. Few stories show how differences among people can enhance human experience or broaden horizons. Many children's television programs promote suspicion, intolerance and even violence against those who are different. Racial and ethnic stereotypes are common.

## **Developing a sense of morality and social responsibility**

Young children are developing ideas about morality, justice and how people should treat each other. Children's tendency to divide things up into categories—either all good or all bad, all right or all wrong—makes them particularly susceptible to material presented in simple black-and-white terms.

**Media experiences that help** ...Programs that model 'prosocial' behaviours such as co-operation, getting along with others and treating people with respect. Children who watch such programs see a range of positive behaviours which they can imitate. TV should provide children with many opportunities to learn about being responsible and moral members of a community; they should see people who treat each other with kindness and respect, help one another, and work out problems without resorting to violence..

**And media experiences that don't** ...Inappropriate media shows that violence is a justified and even glamorous way to resolve conflict and does not explore more complex methods of resolution. Many TV programs present one-dimensional characters who are either 'all good' or 'all bad', who lack the complexity of real human character. Questions of social responsibility and morality are not raised when good characters attack and maim bad ones.

## The need for meaningful play

Play is basic to the healthy development and learning of children. Through the process of play, children can master experiences that may have been scary or difficult for them, they can learn to think creatively, take risks and solve problems. Children need to be in charge of their own play—they need time, space and props to encourage them.

**Media experiences that help** ...Many children's programs are 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. Watching *Play School* yourself may help you to come up with some ideas. Be sure to praise what they produce.

**And media experiences that don't** ...Television can never substitute for children's direct experiences in interacting with the world. However, it could provide them with the kind of content they need for play. Too much television can not only cut deeply into play time, but can sometimes provide a narrow range of content for children to use in play. Many themes in programs are removed from children's experience and understanding. Play becomes merely imitative rather than creative. Single purpose toys marketed along with these shows further the tendency to imitation.

## Tips for finding positive media experiences for under sevens

1. Choose programs made for preschoolers. There are many on the ABC. Those rated P on commercial TV are also made just for preschoolers .
2. Avoid programs classified PG or above
3. Use your local library or ABC store to borrow or buy age-appropriate DVDs or games
4. Use the Australian Council of Children and the Media's *Know Before you go* Movie Review Service which provides reviews from a child development point of view of all G and PG (and some M) movies released since July 2002. Click on the *Know Before You Go* button on the ACCM home page ([www.childrenandmedia.org.au](http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au)).
5. Use the ACCM Fight-free Media list for under sevens. Click on the *Choosing Fright-free Fight-free Viewing* button on the ACCM home page ([www.childrenandmedia.org.au](http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au)).
6. Read the Australian Council of Children and the Media's *Mind Over Media* Fact Sheet series. From the ACCM home page ([www.childrenandmedia.org.au](http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au)) select *Information about Media & Children* on the left hand side, then *Strategies for parents and other caregivers*.
7. Keep an eye out for, and support the many Australian not-for-profit organisations which are trying to support the healthy development of Australian children, for examples: Kids Free 2 Be Kids, Parents Jury, Coalition Against Food Advertising to Children (CFAC) and others. Many of these are listed on the ACCM website. From the ACCM home page ([www.childrenandmedia.org.au](http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au)) select *About Us* on the left hand side, then *Other Relevant Organisations*.