



Mind Over Media: Developing healthy relationships

Child health, child development, neuroscience, psychiatry and psychology professionals agree that the development of a close relationship with a child's primary caregiver is crucial to that child's healthy development. The development of this first close relationship will affect the way the child forms relationships later in life. In addition, some researchers consider that patterns of relationships formed early in life directly affect the development of the brain, and therefore the individual's ability to organise emotions and respond to stress later in life (Siegel, 1999, p. 4).

Relationships and the media

The types of media of most relevance in discussing relationships and very young children are television, videos and computer games.

Australian children begin watching television from an early age, with an average of 44 minutes at four months, building to two and a half hours by four years (RACP, 2004). Contrast this with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommendation that children under the age of two should watch no television at all. For older children, the AAP recommends no more than one to two hours per day of quality screen time (AAP, 1999).

There are two main points to consider with respect to the media for each stage of a preschooler's life:

- the amount of media consumed. The primary problem with excessive use of the media in the preschool years, is that neither a television nor a computer alone, is able to relate to a child in a way that will foster the healthy development of relationships, or provide the 'give and take' of language.
- quality of media consumed. Between the ages of two and five, there are many quality television programs and computer games that,

used in moderation, can contribute to a child's development of relationships.

Infants (0–1 years)

One of the infant's most important developmental needs is for the development of a secure, trusting relationship with their primary caregivers. It is important that they learn that their emotions will be responded to and that they can influence what their primary caregivers do for them.

It has been shown that infants prefer human stimuli, such as language and song, over other things. Babies have an innate response which makes them seek out people's faces and turn towards them as soon as they are able. Most adults instinctively like to hold, comfort, rock, sing and talk to infants—this forms the best kind of stimulation for young children's growing brains.

Infants generally form their first secure attachment in their first year of life, and this attachment is important for the development of social competence, a sense of self, confidence to explore and other fundamental skills.

Another important factor in an infant's development is contingent, or collaborative communication.

Contingent or collaborative communication

- Contingent or collaborative communication is communication in which verbal and non-verbal signals are directly responded to by the other. It is not only the content of the response that is important. It is just as important that caregivers' responses match the quality, intensity and timing of the child's communication.
- Infants need collaborative communication from their caregivers in order to develop

healthy, secure attachments. It is crucial to the development of an ability to self-regulate emotional and behavioural responses. This ability underpins the development of emotional and behavioural competence.

- No parent can provide contingent or collaborative communication all the time, but it is important that most of the time, the child has the feeling of being connected with their caregiver. Disconnections will inevitably occur, and any impact can be repaired by addressing the issues quickly and directly with the child.

(Siegel & Hartzell, 2003)

Infants, the media and healthy relationships

“The infant who has learned that he can engage his parent in play and make objects do what he wants them to do acquires a fundamental belief in his ability to affect the world around him” (NRCIM, 2000, p.90).

Television is not capable of collaborative communication and cannot 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.

The following are examples of how an infant might ‘expect’ their needs to be met, how collaborative communication assists them, and the shortcomings of the media to fulfil this role.

“If I am hungry and cry, Mum will usually pick me up and feed me”

- Infants learn that they can influence what happens to them.
- Visual media does not respond to an infant’s expressions of their needs. The child’s earliest experiences that they have the personal power to affect their environment may be compromised.
- Responses from visual media may be inconsistent, which tell the infant that their world is unreliable and not to be trusted. Absent responses could leave them feeling abandoned.

“If I smile at Dad, he will smile back” “If I frown, he will speak with a soothing voice and cuddle me”

- Caregivers generally take the lead of the infant as they engage with them. This is important for the infants’ developing sense of relationships.
- Attempting to elicit emotional responses from a television set or computer will fail. This can be very confusing for infants and very young children.

“If I look away when my carer talks to me, they will stop talking to me and put me down in quiet place to rest.”

- Infants need to be able to indicate when they are tired and want to rest from further interactions.
- Television is intrusive and can overload neural circuitry. The infant can’t switch off the images and rest when they have had enough.

“These pictures are scary and there is no-one here to keep me safe; the world is a very unsafe place.”

- ‘Unresponsive relational trauma’ is when a traumatic event in an infant’s life is accompanied by a lack of response on the part of the caregiver. This is known to have a significant negative impact on the development of the right brain of the child.
- Exposure to violent and scary visual images on television could possibly constitute ‘unresponsive relational trauma’ for infants and toddlers.
- If exposure to violent and scary visual images is combined with absence of the carer or unresponsiveness on their part, the child is at risk of learning that the world is unsafe.

An infant’s need for collaborative communication from their caregivers can be compromised if the caregivers are so involved in a television program that is on ‘in the background’, that they fail to respond consistently and appropriately to their child’s immediate needs. This could influence what the infant learns about relationships.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- Minimise the exposure of children under the age of two to electronic media.
- The *Teletubbies* is a program made specifically for very young children, and your

infant may enjoy ‘watching’ this from time to time (keeping in mind the AAP’s recommendation that it is best that children under two don’t watch any television at all).

- If the television is on while they are in the room, stay in the room with them to monitor what is happening and respond to them as necessary.
- If *you* need a rest, try to think of other ways to entertain your infant or very young child, for example, keep a supply of objects that will provide stimulation but allow them to also ‘interact’, e.g. saucepans, large strips of brightly coloured fabrics, while you put your feet up for a short time.
- Different types of music played in the background may simultaneously entertain your infant and provide some relaxation for you.

Toddlers (1–3 years)

“The toddler who has learned that the people she depends on for comfort will help her when she is distressed is more likely to approach others with empathy and trust than the toddler whose worries and fears have been dismissed or belittled” (NRCIM, 2000, p.90).

Some of the following developmental tasks that toddlers are engaged in are:

- further developing their attachment relationships
- developing a sense of independence of action, and feelings of competence
- forming ‘friendships’—it is important that they have the opportunities for social learning that comes from play with peers.

Toddlers, the media and healthy relationships

At about the ages of 18–24 months, toddlers begin to actually pay attention to what is on television, showing sustained and focused attention, whereas prior to this time, it seems that they are not able to distinguish real programs from randomly moving forms and sounds (Anderson & Evans, 2001).

Toddlers will benefit from exposure to complex environments. Older toddlers and preschoolers may benefit from viewing more complex worlds on nature shows etc. Of course, they will benefit even more, where possible from a visit to the zoo, a marine boardwalk or a museum.

As their language development is rapid and imitative, it is best to choose programs carefully, and avoid adult programs that use derogatory terms and model disrespectful relationships. Rather, select programs that provide positive models of respectful and empathic relationships.

Toddlers begin to be susceptible to the message that violence is a solution to interpersonal conflict as well as the ‘normality’ of physical or verbal abuse. Forming the view that violence is a normal part of life can begin in the toddler years.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- As much as possible, minimise total screen time to one hour a day.
- Make sure they watch only good quality programs, made for preschoolers, for example, *Play School*, *The Wiggles: Lights, Camera, Action* or *Bear in the Big Blue House*) Watch the programs with your child, responding to their reactions and supporting or extending them wherever possible.
- Listen very carefully to what your toddler has to say about what they have been watching on television. It is important for their developing relationships that that they feel understood.
- You can start to introduce your toddler to many of the excellent computer games that are available, for example *Reader Rabbit* and *Spot and his friends*. Try to always do this with them and interact with them, mediating what is going on on the screen.
- Listening, talking, and helping toddlers explore their surroundings will be of great benefit at this stage.
- Avoid violent television content. Research tells us that violence performed by heroes and which is seen as justified and is rewarded, increases the risk that children will use violence. This includes the many children’s programs which have the theme of ‘goodies’ defeating ‘baddies’ by using violence. Cartoon violence and comic violence are to be avoided also. They give the message to very young children that violence wins, violence is funny and violence has no real consequences. Programs with verbal abuse should also be avoided.

Preschoolers (3–5 years)

“The preschooler who has routinely cuddled into an adult’s lap and read books before going to bed is more likely to enter kindergarten with a keen interest in reading” (NRCIM, 2000, p.90).

Older preschoolers are very busy people and their developmental tasks include:

- further developing relationships with primary caregivers, learning more complex aspects of how to relate to others
- imaginary play (sociodramatic or “make-believe”), is very important at this age, in that it provides opportunities for – why? It might be useful to indicate why. Eg: ... Socio-dramatic play provides opportunities for enhancement of all aspects of development, physical, social, emotional and cognitive. For example, when children take on roles in socio-dramatic play they learn to put themselves in another persons place thereby fostering the growth of empathy. The ability to empathise is important to developing healthy relationships.
- playing with peers. Older preschoolers can start to apply what they have already learnt about relationships from their family, to quite complex play with peers.

Preschoolers, the media and healthy relationships

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.

Violent media can have a negative effect on this age group as they are learning how to relate. Children learn through imitation, and boys are particularly at risk of modelling themselves on the many attractive heroes in television and movies, who use violence to be successful and powerful.

Be mindful of what you are watching on television while your preschooler is with you, particularly if you find it absorbing. Indifference on the part of an adult when a child is attempting to connect can leave the child feeling isolated and alone.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- As much as possible, minimise total screen time to one hour a day.

- Watch good quality television programs, for example *Bananas in Pyjamas* or *Babar* with your older preschooler, discussing with them the messages and helping them to apply the messages to their own experiences.
- Play computer games with your preschooler. Examples of some good computer games for this age group are *Hello Kitty* and *ABCs and 123s*. As you play, assist your child with the choices offered by the program and help them explore their own particular interests.
- Avoid violent media completely.
- Attend adult supervised play groups with your preschooler. They are a great way for them to play with any number of props and with an increasing number of peers.

Early brain research and child development

Neuroscience and early brain research, are now active contributors to child development theory and practice. However, their relevance and importance are still being debated by experts. You may hear concepts such as: ‘critical periods’, ‘plasticity’ and ‘enriched environments’ being debated. There is not universal agreement about the application of these concepts.

Nonetheless, a few facts about brain development may be of interest at this stage.

Early brain development

- Most babies are born with more than 100 billion brain cells. At birth, the number of connections between brain cells is much less than a few years later
- Between two and six months, the part of the babies’ brains that will eventually help them to manage and control their emotions is developing rapidly. They are also beginning to learn some internal controls, such as how to handle the normal distress and excitement that come from such daily routines as bath-time, playtime, and feeding.
- Between six and nine months, babies’ brains are forming billions of connections with other cells both within the brain and elsewhere in the body. This process of making connections is key to a baby’s development in every way: physical, intellectual, emotional, and social.
- Between nine and twelve months, a baby’s ability to communicate flourishes and they are

able to comprehend words, gestures, and facial expressions.

- Between 12 and 18 months, children develop rapidly in a number of areas including movement, language, feeding and overall independence. The best support you can provide is to express an interest in their activities and follow their lead. Provide opportunities to engage in play with interesting and challenging materials and provide experiences that broaden their horizons.
- Between 18 and 24 months, the brain is developing in such a way as to allow the older toddler to have more coordinated movement, better understanding of language and the ability to understand symbols and pretend.
- By two years of age, a toddler's cerebral cortex contains well over a hundred trillion synapses. New synapses form rapidly during this timeframe, and a 'pruning' process is also taking place. This process strengthens frequently used pathways, while deleting those that are not used. As pruning continues, the child is able to process thoughts and actions more quickly and efficiently. Myelination (the insulating of the pathways in the brain) also continues. Myelination helps strengthen connections that underlie language, memory, emotions, attention, planning, sensory integration, and coordination of movement. By age three, the toddler's brain is about 80 percent of adult size.

to them in a consistent or collaborative way. Between the ages of two and five, parents and caregivers may choose to watch television and play computer games with their preschooler, using the opportunity to respond to them, support them and demonstrate that their developing interests are valued.

Information in the section has been adapted from the Zero to Three website [www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders].

Conclusion

The most important thing caregivers can do to assist very young children to develop healthy relationships, is to communicate with them in a consistent and responsive way. As the child grows, caregivers can also assist them by providing them with many different experiences, helping them to feel secure as they explore, and providing them with some interpretation of their experiences.

The media can only play a small role in the development of relationships, as this is best learnt by relating to caregivers and peers. In fact, it is recommended that children under the age of two do not use the media at all, as it is not able to respond

Written and produced by



Australian Council on Children and the Media

Australian Council on Children and the Media
08 83762111
www.childrenandmedia.org.au