



HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD MY CHILDREN SPEND WITH THE MEDIA

While there may be many entertaining experiences for children to be had on TV, with videos, and with computers, it is important to keep in mind what children of different ages need for healthy development.

This topic covers:

- what children of all ages need
- children under the age of two years
- preschoolers
- children from the age of five to seven or eight years of age
- children over eight
- what parents can do.

What children of all ages need

It's important that children have time to be in the real world, and to build strong bonds with real caring people. Media can be a thief of children's time that they really need for other experiences—active physical play and “hands-on” activities of all kinds. Children need experiences that enhance their development, and all too frequently media content fails to do that. Keeping children's media time down can reduce the impact of programs and games where harmful messages are constantly repeated.

Children under the age of two years

The most important developmental task that children have in this age group is to develop strong relationships with their carers. They need to be close, feel loved and talked to.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that screen based media should occupy very little of the time of infants.

Preschoolers

These children are starting to explore the world more actively. They need constructive play activities, and need to feel secure, loved and valued.

When they watch TV, they focus on the most physically obvious features of TV programs, and rarely follow plots. They need programs that are specifically made for pre school children. An hour of TV a day is plenty.

A strong view has been recently expressed by the Alliance for Childhood (August 2000) that computers should not play a significant part in pre-school children's lives.

Children aged five to eight years of age

These children don't easily distinguish between fantasy and reality, and are vulnerable to the messages conveyed in cartoons (for example, that violence works and violence wins), and advertisements.

In relation to computers, the Alliance for Childhood, says that “there is no clear commanding body of evidence that students' sustained use of multimedia machines, the Internet, word processing, spreadsheets and other popular applications has any impact on academic achievement”. (attributed to Larry Cuban, Stanford University and former head of the American Educational Research Association).

An hour a day with screen based media is plenty.

Children over eight

It is still important that children's time with TV and other screen based media is kept in balance with their need to relate to the real world and real people. It's important for these children that they have time for active, physical play, and face to face conversation with more competent language users.

In regard to the use of computers with this age group, there is a place for considering the concerns of the Alliance for Childhood. They point out that academic success is not dependent on the use of computers. Academic success depends on "the development of focussed attention, listening and persistence". Many children, "overwhelmed by the volume of data and flashy special effects of the Web and much software, have trouble focusing on any one task." (Alliance for Childhood 2000).

An hour and a half to two hours with screen based media per day, is plenty.

What parents can do

The earlier you start with screen based experiences the more children will look there for stimulation. Introduce other sources of enjoyment early.

Teach children how to plan their own TV viewing. If old enough to plan ahead, give them say, 14 counters for the week. As they watch each program they have to surrender a counter. If counters are left over at the end of the week, they can be rewarded. For very young children, use star charts.

Model the behaviour of turning off when the chosen programs have been watched. The TV should be Off 'n' ON rather than Often ON. (Young Media Australia 1995)

Further reading

Alliance for Childhood (2000) *Children and Computers: a call for action Position statement*. http://www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/computers/computers_articles_call_for_action.htm

American Academy of Pediatrics (1999) *AAP discourages television for very young children* News release August 2, 1999
<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/archives/augdis.htm>

Young Media Australia (1995) *Off 'n' On kit*. SA: Young Media Australia