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A parent's guide to Television

When you are tired or busy and need to get the kids 'out of your hair', the easiest thing to do is let them watch TV. But is too much TV bad for children? And how much is too much? Television has been blamed for many of the problems children experience, including poor communication skills, but in the right circumstances it can be beneficial.

What are the best types of programmes for your child?

High-quality educational programmes that have been designed for your child's age-group are best. The most suitable programmes for under-twos complement a young developing mind by containing low stimulus, such as those presented by a single adult speaker. Three to five-year-olds will benefit most from programmes that ask for verbal responses, and offer a balance between familiar and new content.

Making sure that your child watches age-appropriate programmes can be difficult as an older brother or sister may dominate the remote control. If possible, try to set aside TV time for all siblings, and for yourself.

How much television should your child watch?

Like adults, children sometimes feel tired or stressed and need a chance to relax in front of the box. However, too much television can affect your child's ability to talk, listen and concentrate. Watching TV involves one-way communication - your child is passive and can 'switch off' from what they are viewing. Two-way communication, on the other hand, where your child is interacting with somebody, requires them to listen and express themselves and helps to develop their communication and social skills.

Try to limit your child's daily TV time to no more than half an hour for under-twos and an hour for three to five-year-olds. Always turn off the TV when no one is watching, because constant background noise can distract parents and children from listening and talking to one another, and of course playing together.

What can you do to make TV beneficial?

Your child will benefit most from age-appropriate TV or videos if they talk about what they have watched with an adult. So where possible, try to watch together. Select shows that you both enjoy, as shared interest will naturally lead to conversation. When the programme has finished, switch off the TV and talk about what happened in the story or sing songs from the show. If your child has toys related to a programme, encourage imaginative play when the set is switched off.

Should your child have a TV in his or her bedroom?

Giving your child a TV for their bedroom gives you less control over what they watch, increasing the likelihood of inappropriate viewing. Your child is more likely to watch alone, unable to talk about what they have seen or ask questions if confused. Watching too much TV, which is more likely if your child has their own set, reduces time for more beneficial activities like play, reading books and talking. There is also a risk that your child will become dependent on having the TV on before they can drift off to sleep. If your child does have a TV in their room - for example, if they share with a sibling - make sure it is closely monitored.

Are videos better than TV?

Videos can be better than television as the repetition and familiarity of words and phrases makes it easier for children to learn from them. It might not be your idea of heaven to watch the same video again and again, but your child will benefit more from watching the same video regularly, than from watching new material every time.

