



## Television Watching: Practical Advice for Parents of Young Children

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TV watching is a part of our everyday lives. Since television burst onto the scene in the 1950s, we have grown to the point that 98% of households in first-world countries have at least one television. Many homes have TVs in prime living space, such as in the family room, kitchen, eating area and bedrooms.

As a speech pathologist doing frequent home visiting as part of my work, I have been told by parents that they use TV with their children for a number of reasons. “He loves this show” (entertainment); “he has learned the alphabet from watching it” (educational); “she is a fussy eater, but she doesn’t notice she is eating when the television is on” (diversionary); and “it keeps her occupied while I am cooking dinner” (babysitter).

Sometimes parents will say “You know, I didn’t even notice it’s on. We turn it on in the morning and I just forget to turn it off”. Television then becomes background noise, part of the many everyday sounds around us.

We all know that television can be a cheap, entertaining way to keep our children occupied, but is there any downside to it?

### What does the research say about children watching TV?

The research says we have the television turned on a lot. A Nielsen Company poll in October 2009 indicated that television viewing by children aged 2-11 years is at an eight-year high in the USA. The average child is now watching more than 4 hours per day of television. Studies in other countries have also shown high television viewing. In Canada and Australia, the figure for this age group is over 2 hours per day, and in the UK about 2½ hours per day. By the time a child has finished his high school years, he has spent more time in front of a screen than in a classroom.

The research tells us this is not beneficial on a number of fronts:

1. **Physical Health** – a large part of the childhood obesity epidemic evident in most western countries is being blamed on all the additional sitting and doing nothing time that children are involved in while they watch television, DVDs and videos, or their computers. In the past, this time would more likely have been spent doing physical activities like walking, running, and playing.

Even interactive games on TV involve minimal activity compared to what would happen in real life.

2. **Behavioural Health** – even the most innocent looking children’s television shows include on average 20 acts of violence per hour, from bopping each other over the head in cartoons (and of course the victim jumping right up, like it never happened) to real life, or real life simulations of much more violent acts. The average child in the USA has seen 100,000 acts of violence portrayed on TV, including 8000 murders by the age of 13. Unfortunately, typically developing children under the age of 8 and some children with intellectual disabilities who are even older cannot differentiate clearly between what is real and what is just being acted on TV (even in cartoon form). There is an argument that increased TV viewing can promote copycat behaviours, increased anxiety and fearfulness and a tendency to deal with issues in a more violent manner.
3. **Language and Overall Learning** – unfortunately the news is not good here either. There have been several studies in this area, and the results are mixed. In relation to so-called "educational" DVDs, researchers are telling us that, for every hour per day these DVDs are viewed by babies and toddlers (the main market for them), there is an actual decrease in vocabulary learning.

Some research has shown that high quality TV shows (e.g., Blues Clues, Dora the Explorer, Sesame Street), can be beneficial to a child’s comprehension. Other studies have shown that the most positive effect on children’s learning occurs when parents sit with the child and discuss the program as they watch together. However, another study indicated that the quality of parents’ input to the child declines during television watching. There has also been research to show that heavy television viewing by preschool aged children is related to poor language comprehension, to poor information retention and to a poor attention span in the early school years. This is regardless of whether the television show or DVD is considered “educational” or not.

## What do the experts recommend regarding young children’s TV watching?

Television is a fact of life. There are some recommendations from experts, which parents can use to guide their children’s TV viewing:

- **Under 2s:** The American Association of Pediatrics and many other experts recommend no television viewing under the age of 2. Baby’s brains are just not wired to take in the fast paced language and visual images presented. Even with DVDs designed for this age group, the baby is going to learn to communicate and interact through being with others, not watching the DVD on his own.
- **2-3 year olds:** Dr. Sally Ward, who was a well-known speech and language therapist in the UK, recommended limiting television viewing to half an hour per day.
- **3-5 year olds:** 1 hour per day is enough.

### ► *Turn the TV off if it’s not being watched*

If the TV is not being actively watched, turn it off. As background noise it can be distracting, making it difficult for children to focus on more important sounds, like their parents’ voices. If your child has a communication delay, this is even more important.

### ► *Choose suitable programs*

Allow your child to watch programs that he will enjoy, but that are appropriate for his age and stage of development, with no adult themes. Programs that relate to what your child is experiencing in his life are most appropriate.

As already mentioned, research has shown that so-called “educational” DVDs and videos may actually hinder the child’s learning. They may do so because they have little dialogue, short, unconnected scenes and pictures. They may contain fast moving and unrelated images and lack a story. Good quality children’s TV programs that have a clear developmental foundation are likely to be a better option.

### ► *Watch and talk about the program together*

Try to watch the program together with your child, with lots of conversation about what is happening. If you can’t watch with him all the time, it is important to check that the content is suitable. Familiar characters are often popular, but beware of ones that might be frightening.

### ► *Think about alternatives to TV*

Children who do a lot of TV viewing often experience difficulties with reading. As an interest in reading is important to later academic success, try and start your child very early on books. Babies may first relate to books as they do to other toys – i.e., by throwing, chewing and banging them – so buy the strong plastic, cloth or cardboard books. With continued fun and exciting exposure to books, children come to love sharing books with their parents.

The Hanen Centre has developed an interactive approach to book reading with children, which is outlined in chapter 8 of the It Takes Two to Talk® guidebook. Titled, “Turn Book Reading into a Conversation”, this strategy offers parents a simple, yet powerful approach to sharing books with a young child.

## **In conclusion...**

So, if you are tempted to use the TV occasionally, acknowledge it for what it is - an inexpensive but not very interactive or informative babysitter. Make sure you can see what is in front of your child, and ‘check in’ with him about it frequently.

### **About The Hanen Centre**

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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