

KEEPING IT REAL: TEACHING GOOD TV HABITS

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If there is one thing parents across America agree on, it's that the media, particularly television, is bad for children. Ask any parent. The litany of complaints is universal.

At best, most people think there are just not enough good programs on the air. At worst, they assume television is corrupting the youngest generation with excessive violence, inappropriate content, and lots of advertising.



What can you do about it? **You have options.** Today there is so much choice available for parents; the answer to your challenges on Kids TV lies in *what you can manage given the demands on your time.*

Most parents are preoccupied with multi-tasking throughout the day. Whether they like it or not, parents often rely on television to occupy their child

while they do necessary but routine tasks. It takes an extra effort to restrict television viewing when there's competition between getting dinner ready and planning an activity for the kids at the same time. Do you stand outside for an hour while your child rides a tricycle around a circle, or do you pay the bills while the laundry is in the dryer and your child watches "Finding Nemo" for the 400th time?

The secret to managing your child's exposure to television does not lie in obsessing over how many minutes and hours of the day the television is on. Instead, it requires having a consistent daily routine that is punctuated by predictable opportunities for media encounters. These encounters may include television, but also video content, games, and computer use. Most importantly, you can control what kids see in your home, not just how much of it gets seen.

Here's a five-point plan that not only provides for controlling media exposure but may help with life management too.

1. Establishing Your Daily Routine

When you examine your daily routine, make sure your child can expect regularity, consistency and predictability in the choices you make. Your daily routine should balance



the time spent in front of a screen with time spent doing other things. In other words, automatically limit television consumption by including your child in many other activities during the day. The activities could range from your children learning how to help you do things to letting them build and create from the toys you have at home. Segment your day and insert the television time at the moments you can use or participate in the break. One of my colleagues, Professor Dan Anderson, at the University of Massachusetts, compares this approach to television viewing to having a healthful diet; moderate amounts of time with television with an adequate amount of variety.

2. Create Your Own Television Library

Create your own "television library" of media content. You don't have to be frustrated by an overwhelming amount of bad programming. If you have digital recording device with your cable subscription, you have the ability to create your own "network" of top-notch programming for your children. There are several 24 hour a day channels specifically programming for children and you can record the program you and your children like, and even classify them by the age of each of your children. Then you know exactly what they are watching when you turn the DVR on. If you can't figure out what's best, take a look at www.common sense media.org for top TV picks for kids.

Also, most of us parents use our televisions for purchased media content. This where you have a lot of control to decide what goes on your personal network. Again, the website above reviews all types of visual media, and the rating systems are helpful. Lastly, the v-chip in late model televisions can be used to screen out inappropriate content on the television set most in use for family viewing.

3. Forming a Peer-Support Group

Get some peer support from the parents of your children's friends to limit television and to avoid commercials. Make group decisions to not use television during play groups or birthday parties and to use your pre-recorded or purchased library whenever possible. Another bonus of creating your own library is limiting commercials that invariably infect your child with the desire for an unlimited array of products, services, and more media consumption.

Every parent knows children are very susceptible to advertising messages. But we, parents, are weak, too. We get a kick out of hearing a very young child use language to express his or her wants and needs. We find their imitation of characters and commercial slogans entertaining; after all, it reflects their ability to memorize content and pay extraordinary attention to all sorts of subtle and complex details. Then we buy what they ask for to express our praise. By this time, a parent has inadvertently joined the advertising bandwagon only to lament, in frustration, that the media has our child fixated on the toy or costume trend of the



year. Maybe if you had your own peer support group, the adults could set limits on themselves to not foster consumptive behavior.

4. Sharing the TV Experience

Watch enough television with your child to know what's on the air. Do the same for other visual media content. Use a television show as a taking-off point for conversations about what you might have learned from the story. Basically, extend the time spent sharing a television experience with your child into a conversation *without* television. Most importantly, with co-viewing you can see if what your child is watching is really inappropriate and eliminate that show from your television library.



5. Setting an Example

Limit your own television viewing - or at least the amount of television your children think you watch. Example is the most powerful teacher during the early years of life. When you cannot pay attention to your child because "your favorite shows" are on, don't expect your child to pay attention to you when it's his turn to watch TV. It's not intentional disrespect; your example has taught your child that part of television protocol is to ignore others and get irritated when viewing time is interrupted.

Television really does not have to take over your life, nor that of your child. With these simple steps, you don't have to struggle for control of the remote because you and your child have plenty of other things to do. Television can be just one of many activities in the course of a day. And, it never needs to be the *only* activity.

