

# Video Games, Television and Children

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In our technological age, the problem of consuming too much mass media is an increasing problem. How can a parent best monitor this activity, evaluate what is appropriate and set limits? This is a difficult question, given the uniqueness of each child and the vast array of media and technology available. Perhaps a good place to start is with the most common media children have access to: video games and television.

Children and especially teenagers will often argue very convincingly that television and video games are not interfering with other things such as sleep, proper nutrition, exercise and school, but numerous studies indicate otherwise. In fact, the prevalence of these studies have prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics to establish guidelines for media viewing. The AAP has recommended that children's media time (this includes tv, videos, computer games, and video games) be limited to one to two hours a day. Children under two years of age should not be allowed any media time at all. (For more information on the AAP guidelines consult: [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) . Numerous studies have linked excessive media time to obesity, lack of fitness, increased likelihood to consume fast food and junk food, lower performance in school and lack of proper rest. In addition, violent content in media has been linked to increased aggression and social alienation. Allowing media in the child's bedroom is especially linked to these problems since parents are less able to monitor what the child is viewing and the time spent viewing.

## Video Games

While studies seem to confirm that video games won't turn your children into criminals and violent offenders, a number of studies have linked video games to the same negative effects of too much television. Some studies also seem to indicate a direct correlation between violent video games and negative behavior such as aggression, while other studies point to a negative effect only in children who are already predisposed to aggressive or problematic behavior, often children from troubled homes.

While video games are relatively new, they have been around long enough so that the first and second generation video game players now have children of their own. The difference now is that there is almost a bewildering selection of video games on the market, and they are much more realistic and complex than video games of the past. Add to this, the proliferation of on-line role-playing games now played on the internet. It is one thing to set time limits on video games, but what about deciding what types of video games are appropriate to play with and what are not? In an editorial titled "You Grew Up Playing Shoot'em-Up Games. Why Can't Your Kids?", Wired magazine contributor Clive Thompson ponders this parents' dilemma. In an informal survey, he sought the advice of "gamer" parents, that is, people who grew up playing video games and now are parents themselves. One suggestion is to treat content like it is a movie. If you wouldn't let your child watch the content in a movie, then it is not appropriate in a video game. Another suggestion is to disallow realistic combat and violence, but allow cartoon and/or fantasy versions of fighting. An interesting rule of thumb cited was the "Lego Rule." The Lego Company has a policy of not replicating 20th century weapons, but allows weapons, such as swords and alien laser guns, that fall into the realm of fantasy. Lego acknowledges that the good guys versus bad guys theme is common in children's play. Lego's spokesman Michael McNally states that this sort of combat "is at the root of children's play scenarios, and we believe is an important part of a child's exploration of the world," but that it is most appropriate to keep this combat within the fantasy realm.<sup>1</sup> Given the massive supply of video games on the market, how does a parent determine content before purchase? A good resource is the The Entertainment Software Rating Board. (<http://www.esrb.org/index-js.jsp>) ESRB is a non-profit, self-regulating agency established by the Entertainment Software Association that assigns computer and video game content ratings. On the ESRB website, most games and platforms are listed with ratings and a brief description of content. There is also the Coin-Operated Video Game Parental Advisory System for parents concerned about arcade games. The system uses a simple, color code similar to traffic lights that allows parents to easily determine content and give instruction to their children on what "color" games are ok. [www.coin-op.org](http://www.coin-op.org)

## Television

Television is the media most accessible to children given that most families own a television and many families own multiple television sets.

To determine how the AAP guidelines would be received and followed by a typical family, a study was conducted. The average family in this study owned four television sets. Almost half of the families had a television set in the kitchen or dining room. Nearly two thirds of the families allowed children to have television sets in their bedrooms. Most of the children spent approximately three hours a day watching television. In general, parents had little knowledge of the negative effects of too much media viewing. One of the greatest difficulties in convincing parents of the need to limit television viewing in their children was their own heavy television viewing habits. Also, it was a common practice to have television on as background noise during other activities such as eating. Another problem was the parents use of television to occupy their children while they were busy themselves. Overall, there was doubt and confusion over how they would enforce the AAP guidelines. In response to this, a strategy was devised to help the parents and their children make necessary changes. Some key steps were identified as being critical: 1.) Pay attention to how much time children spend using all screen media. 2.) Do not put a television set in a child's bedroom, or remove an existing one from a child's bedroom. (Unfortunately, this will be difficult if the child is used to having one.) 3.) Eliminate background television. 4.) Limit television on school days. 5.) Identify nonscreen, in-home activities that are pleasurable to children. 6.) Do not put a television in household eating areas and do not connect television viewing with eating of any sort, including snacks and meals.<sup>2</sup> A grass roots organization, called The Television Turnoff Network, also has some helpful programs and suggestions: [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org) (For interesting facts about tv and suggestions for alternate activities: [turnoffyourtv.com/turnoffweek](http://turnoffyourtv.com/turnoffweek)

#### Conclusion:

It is very important that parents limit media time (this includes television, dvds, computer games, and video games) and limit exposure to violence. (A good resource for media content ratings: <http://www.parentalguide.org> ) The most effective way to monitor this media activity is to keep tv and other media out of the child's bedroom. This is generally more difficult to enforce with older children and teenagers. Perhaps the least intrusive way to monitor media activity is to make media a family activity, rather than an isolated, individual activity. This is extremely challenging for many families given busyness, schedule conflicts and varying tastes. If this is not possible, it may be helpful to engage in a dialogue about why the particular media is so appealing to the teenager or child. Because it is clearly impossible to monitor everything that a child or teenager is exposed to, considering contact with peers and time spent outside the home, probably the most important skill that a parent can teach a child is to be critical of media. It is never too late to start this dialogue or teach these skills to children and teenagers. The mere act of a parent paying attention and asking questions has been shown to positively affect children's choices and behavior.

#### FOOTNOTES

1.) Thompson, Clive ; You Grew Up Playing Shoot'em-Up Games. Why Can't Your Kids?; Wired ; April 2007

[http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/commentary/games/2007/04/gamesfrontiers\\_0409](http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/commentary/games/2007/04/gamesfrontiers_0409)

2.) Jordan AB, Hersey JC, McDivitt JA, Heitzler CD; "Reducing children's television-viewing time: a qualitative study of parents and their children."; Pediatrics. 2006 Nov;118(5):e1303-10.

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