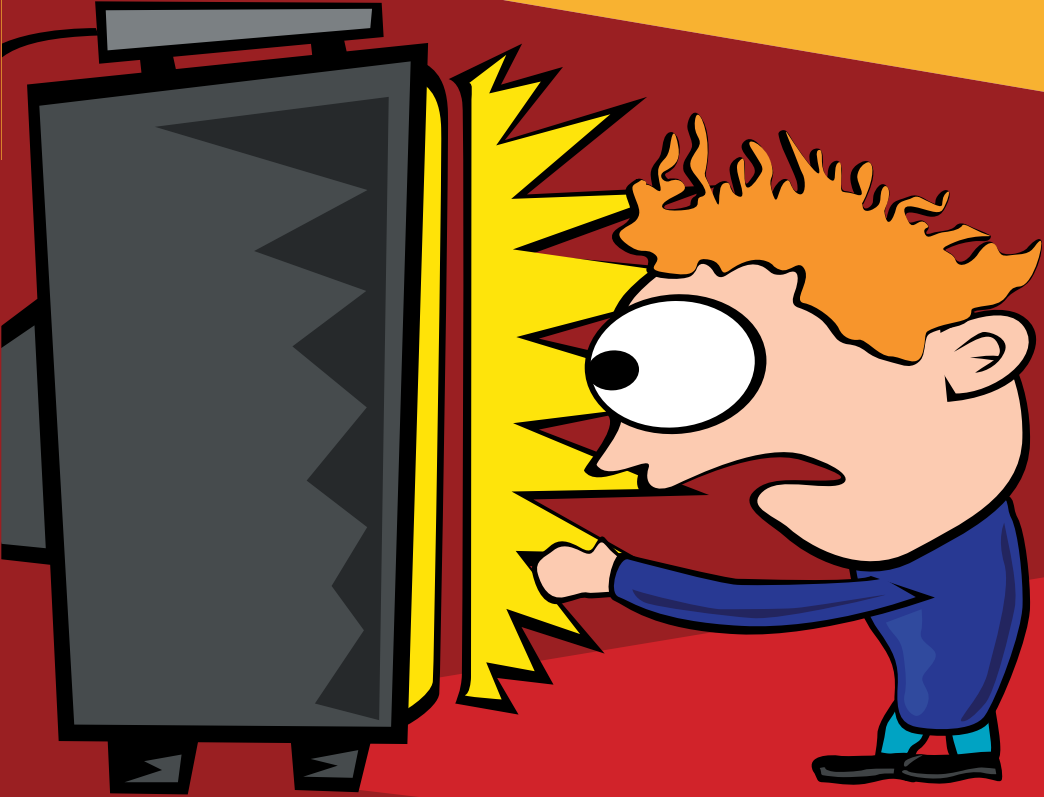


Children & Television

Using TV Sensibly



Lead Researcher
Dr. John P. Murray



Methodist
CHILDREN'S

Hospital of South Texas

"Serving Humanity to Honor God"

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Table of Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction.....	2
Time.....	3
Violence	4
Life on the Screen.....	5
Advertising	6
Quality.....	7
Suggested Reading	8



Dr. John P. Murray

Dr. Murray is a Professor of Developmental Psychology, the former Associate Vice Provost for Research, and Director of the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University. With a career-long focus on cognitive influences, he is one of the country's leading experts on how viewing media effects the brain – particularly the brains of children and adolescents.

He was a Scientist-in-Residence at the Mind Science Foundation five years ago when, in collaboration with researchers at the UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, he led the brain mapping research of children viewing TV violence. Earlier this year, Dr. Murray testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Science, Technology and Space on what neurological research can now show us about the impact of media violence. He also was part of a panel discussing the lack of research on this topic at the National Press Club in Washington, this spring.



Dear Colleagues,

One of the most pressing issues facing parents today is the appropriate exposure of their children to TV programming.

As former Executive Director of the Texas Film Commission, I have seen first-hand how hard people work in the film and TV industries.

For the most part these film and TV workers are parents like you, just as concerned about the effects of TV violence and excessive commercialism on their own children.

The solution to higher quality TV programming lies in this common bond among parents.

As with most difficult issues of our time, the issue of TV violence and commercialism of Saturday morning programming for children will be solved by mounting a unified voice among concerned parents and not by polarizing the issue into separate camps.

The Mind Science Foundation is therefore proud to present Dr. John Murray, a developmental psychologist with 30 years experience studying the effects of TV on children, and Cyrus Yavneh, an award-winning producer with 30 years experience in TV production, in a "Distinguished Speakers Series" dialogue intended to foster understanding and encourage progress towards higher-quality TV programming.

As this guide suggests, parents have the greatest influence on the quality of TV programming seen by their children. Your own TV watching habits will influence your children, as will your decision to turn off the TV and spend quality time with your children in one-on-one activities.

I want to thank Dr. Murray, the author of "Children and Television: Using TV Sensibly," and the Methodist Children's Hospital and Methodist Healthcare System for their sponsorship of the Mind Science Foundation's "Distinguished Speakers Series" and this publication.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph Dial".

Joseph Dial
Executive Director
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Introduction

Television has been around for over a half century. The first appearance of TV in the United States occurred at a World's Fair in 1939, but regular television broadcasting did not begin until the late 1940s. Still, concern about the impact of television on children began when TV was in its infancy. By the early 1950s, parents, teachers and social scientists started to ask their legislators to "do something" about the amount of violence on TV.

In addition to this initial worry about violence, many professionals and parents questioned the quality of television programs designed for children, the amount of advertising directed to young viewers, and the way television portrayed men, women and ethnic minorities, as well as the effects of the amount of time that children spend watching television in general.



Over the years, social scientists have published a large number of studies and reports—more than 3,000 articles and books—in response to the questions raised about children and television. The results of this research provide the basis for the issues discussed here: What is known about the ways in which television influences our children? What can parents or teachers do about television? How can television be used to encourage children's growth and development?

The following sections summarize what we know about:

- the effects of the **amount** of time children spend watching TV;
- the impact of **violence** seen on the small;
- the way **life** and **values** are portrayed;
- the influence of TV **advertising** directed to children;
- the signs of quality programming for young viewers.

Suggestions for parents and teachers to deal constructively with each of these issues will also be provided.

Time

Surveys by audience rating services show that the typical American household has a TV set turned on for about 7 hours each day. This figure, multiplied by the number of households and residents in the United States, suggests that in the space of only one calendar year, Americans spend approximately *20 million years* of human experience watching TV. These same studies show that by the time youngsters graduate from high school, they will have spent about 1,000 hours in school but over *15,000 hours* watching TV.

What are the effects of all of this time spent with an electronic playmate and teacher? Children who are light viewers (1 hour or less per day) and heavy viewers (4 or more hours per day) researches found that the heavy viewers put in less effort on school work, have poorer reading skills, play less well with friends, have fewer hobbies and activities, and are more likely to be overweight.

Should you be concerned about extensive TV viewing? Most child development specialists suggest that you review the "balance" of your child's daily activity. If your child chooses to watch TV rather than play with friends, talks only about TV programs and characters, or is not performing well in school, you may wish to cut back on the amount of time the youngster spends in front of the television set. Some researchers suggest that preschoolers watch no more than 1 hour of TV each day and elementary school children watch no more than 2 hours daily.

To reduce the amount of TV viewing:

- Work together to keep a time chart of your child's activities, including TV viewing, homework, and play with friends.
- Set a weekly viewing limit. At the beginning of the week, have your child select programs you approve of from television schedules.
- Rule out TV at certain times such as before breakfast, or on school nights.
- Make a list of alternative activities - riding a bicycle, reading a book, etc. Before watching TV, your child must choose to do something from the list.
- Encourage planned viewing. Have program choices in mind before turning the TV set on and turn it off when the particular show is over.
- Don't locate a television set in your child's room.
- Remember that children learn from their parents. If you watch a lot of TV, chances are your child will also.

Violence

About five violent acts are committed during 1 hour of "prime time" evening television programming and 20 to 25 violent acts occur each hour on Saturday morning "children's programs." While still in their formative years, before they leave elementary school, children who watch the typical amount of TV will see about 20,000 murders and more than 80,000 other assaults. That's around 100,000 violent acts witnessed by these children before they become teenagers. Some of the violence will be seen on "realistic" programs and some will be seen on cartoons, but social scientists have shown that all forms of violent programming can have an effect on children. There are three possible effects of viewing TV violence: Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, they may be more fearful of the world around them, and they may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others. Although scientists are convinced that children can learn aggressive behavior from television, they are also sure that parents can limit some of these effects.

To limit the effects of violence:

- Judge the amount of violence in the shows your children view by watching several episodes over a period of time.
- View TV together and discuss the violence with your child. Talk about why the violence happened and how painful it is. Ask the child how conflicts can be solved without violence.
- Explain to your child how violence on an entertainment program is "faked."
- Restrict violent videos. Some states have passed legislation which prohibits children having access to "R" rated, violent videos. Explain these restrictions to your children and discuss your views.
- Encourage your child to watch programs with characters that cooperate, help, and care for each other. These programs have been shown to have a positive influence on children.
- Read to your child rather than watch television. Children's stories, written by thoughtful authors, portray conflict in a realistic and constructive manner.

Life on the Screen

Children may develop distorted views of society because, although television has changed over the years, women, young people, and the elderly still do not appear on the screen as often as they do in real life. Furthermore, minorities are often portrayed in narrow, stereotyped roles. On the other hand, male doctors, lawyers, and police officers are still overrepresented on television. Topics such as drug abuse, alcoholism, and sex may also be brought to your child's attention sooner than you want. In addition, children often have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality on TV.



If you are concerned about the values that your children sees portrayed on TV:

- Ask your child to compare what is shown on the screen with the people, places, and events he or she knows, has read about or studied in school.
- Encourage your child to read newspapers, listen to the radio, talk to adults about their work, and meet people from different ethnic or social backgrounds.
- Discuss with your child what is real and what is make-believe on TV. Explain how television uses stunt actors, camera zooms, dream sequences and animation to create fantasy.
- Explain to your child the values you hold about sex, alcohol and drugs.
- If you own your own VCR equipment, begin a selective videotape library specifically for children.
- Before subscribing to cable television, beware of the variety and types of programming seen on it. Many of these easily accessed channels are for adult viewing only. Ask for a parental "lock out" device from the cable company which will allow you to select channels for your child.

Advertising

The evidence suggests that children younger than 6 or even 8 years of age do not understand that the purpose of advertising is to sell a product. Also, children have trouble distinguishing between ads and programs. Yet, the average child may see more than 20,000 TV commercials each year. In addition, there are some television programs for children which are actually hour-long commercials for expensive toys and games.

While it is true that advertising helps to support the programs on commercial television, scientists have found that advertising can cause children to "want" toys or foods that they do not need and that their families cannot afford. In addition to the tension that may arise in families, many parents feel that advertising encourages their children to be too concerned about "things" rather than people.

If you are concerned about the effects of advertising:

- Tell your child that the purpose of advertising is to sell products to as many viewers as possible.
- Put advertising disclaimers into words children understand: "Partial assembly required" means "You have to put it together before you can play with it."
- On shopping trips, let your child see that advertising claims are often exaggerated. Toys that look big, fast, and exciting on the screen may be disappointingly small, slow and unexciting close-up.
- Teach our child a few facts about nutrition. Then, find ways to let the child practice them. For example, if the youngster can read package labels, allow him or her to choose, a breakfast cereal from those where sugar is not one of the first ingredients listed.

Quality

What is a "good" television program for children? Parents differ in the ways in which they assess the quality of a program, and you are the best judge of what you consider to be suitable for your child. However, there are some general rules that you might use in selecting programs which you would encourage your children to view.



We know that television is most effective as a teacher when it is attuned to the needs of the viewer. For children, the best programs are those that speak to them in ways they can understand about topics that are important to them. Also, good programs encourage children to explore their feelings, learn about their world, and increase their competence and self-worth.

Programs that exploit children's feelings of envy, competitiveness and anger, or encourage narrow and stereotyped views of the world, do not help children grow and develop. Good programs do not need to be "educational" in the sense of being designed to instruct children. Rather, the best TV-teachers are entertaining as well as informative, and they are also child-centered and designed to expand horizons.

If you are concerned about the quality of children's programs:

- Look for programs that are designed for your child's particular age group.
- Talk to your child's teacher or the children's librarian in the public library about their recommendations.
- Every program has a message or theme. Ask yourself what the main message is of a particular program and whether it will help your child grow in wisdom or understanding.
- Remember that a balanced "diet" of entertaining and informative television programs is like a balanced diet of food—both help your child's development.

Suggested Reading

If you want to learn more about children and television, here are some books, pamphlets, and videos that you might find useful:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. *Television and the Family*. Elk Grove Village, IL, 1985. (Available from your pediatrician.)
- American Psychological Association. *Violence on TV: What do Children learn? What can parents do?* Washington, D.C., 1994. (Available by writing APA Public Affairs Office, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-4242.)
- Gordon L. Berry and Joy K. Asamen. *Children and television: Images in a changing sociocultural world*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993. (Available from a library or bookstore.)
- *Beyond blame: Challenging violence in the media - A multi-media literacy program for community empowerment*. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Media Literacy, 1995. (Available from the Center for Media Literacy, 1962 S. Shendoah Street, Los Angeles, CA 90034)
- David M. Considine, and Gail E. Haley. *Visual messages: Integrating imagery into instruction*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 1992. (Available from the National Telemedia Council, 120 East Wilson Street, Madison, WI 53703.)
- Neil Hickey. *Violence on television*. New York: TV Guide, 1992. (Available by writing TV Guide, 1211 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036.)
- Aletha C. Huston, Edward Donnerstein, Halford Fairchild, Norma D. Feshbach, Phyllis A. Katz, John P. Murray, Eli A. Rubinstein, Brian L. Wilcox, and Diana Zuckerman. *Big world, small screen: The role of television in American society*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. (Available from a library or bookstore.)
- Robert M. Liebert and Joyce Sprafkin. *The early window: Effects of television on children and youth*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1988. (Available from a library or bookstore.)
- *The kids are watching - A 13 minute video for teachers, parents, and community organizations*. Studio City, CA: Mediascope, 1993. (Available from Mediascope, 12711 Ventura Boulevard, Studio City, CA 91604.)
- John P. Murray and Barbara Lonnberg. *Children and television ... A primer for parents*. Boys Town, NE: Boys Town Press, 1994. (Available by writing Public Service Division, The Boys Town Center, Boys Town, NE 68010.)
- Edward L. Palmer. *Television and America's children: A crisis of neglect*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. (Available from a library or bookstore.)
- Dorothy G. Singer, Jerome L. Singer and Diana M. Zuckerman. *Teaching television.- How to use TV to your child's advantage*. New York: Dial Press, 198 1. (Available from a library or bookstore.)
- Charles A. Smith. *From wonder to wisdom: Using stories to help children grow*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989. (Available from a library or bookstore.)

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TV Violence and Brainmapping in Children

Dr. John P. Murray

Research conducted over the past 30 years leads to the conclusion that televised violence does influence viewers' attitudes, values and behavior (Hearold, 1986; Murray, 2000, 1994, 1973; Paik and Comstock, 1994; Surgeon General's Scientific advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972). Although the social effect of viewing televised violence is a controversial topic of research and discussion, the body of research is extensive and fairly coherent in demonstrating systematic patterns of influence. In general, there seem to be three main classes of effects:

- Aggression. Viewing televised violence can lead to increases in aggressive



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