



No TV for us

by ALLEN KANNER

My three-year-old daughter, Cassidy, is growing up in a TV-free household. By all accounts — not just my biased one — she is thriving. Our family and friends mostly co-operate by keeping their sets off when we visit. I have had a child or two ask me, “What do you do at night?” It’s a question I find amusing since I still don’t have enough leisure time. But I also find this question sad, for it reflects how often television replaces intimacy in families.

Is TV bad for children? In a word, yes. A more nuanced answer is that so much of television is problematic, so many disturbing questions remain unanswered, and so many better alternatives exist that it’s not worth the risk.

Why do I, a child and family psychologist, give television such a bad report card? It’s the combina-

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tion of several factors that paint a pretty grim picture. Over the last 60 years, research has shown that television viewing is associated with violent behaviour, obesity, depression, low self-esteem, poorer social relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, and poorer cognitive and academic functioning.

Some of this research is correlational, meaning we can’t tell, for example, whether television *causes* depression or depressed children gravitate to TV. But a recent study at Boston College used sophisticated techniques to tease out cause and effect in the impact of media on 10- to 13-year-old children. This study found that television played a causal role: Watching more TV led to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, psychosomatic symptoms, and negative attitudes toward parents. However, these psychological problems did not cause children to watch more TV.

Another concern is the narrow and distorted

view of life portrayed on TV. Although there has been some improvement, most shows reflect a predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, gender-stereotyped perspective. Further, beyond the violence that is epidemic in dramas, action shows and cartoons, people on TV don’t treat each other very well. Put-downs rule the day on comedies. There is very little that is subtle and complex, and even less that is kind.

Television is also the largest source of marketing to children. Marketing contributes to violent behaviour, childhood obesity, precocious sexuality and drug and alcohol abuse, among other problems. In 2000, six major U.S. professional societies reviewed more than a thousand studies and signed a joint statement saying that the evidence points “overwhelmingly...to a causal connection between aggressive media and aggressive behaviour in some children.” But violent behaviour isn’t the only risk. The vast majority of youth-focused advertising is for products that are bad for children.

People often point to the educational value of television. But this claim falls apart upon closer scrutiny. As a passive, one-way medium, television is a poor educational tool. Adult teachers, lively discussions with other students, hands-on engagement and reading are superior tools. Parents would not want to rely on television in any serious way for their children’s education. In fact, TV interferes with superior ways of learning. It is partly responsible for children’s waning interest in reading.

Television viewing is on the rise. That is why parents need to become aware of the vast harm this powerful medium is already generating. It is also why reducing or eliminating children’s viewing time is more important than ever.

Allen Kanner, Ph.D., is a child and family psychologist living happily TV-free with his wife and three-year-old daughter in Berkeley, Calif. He is co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (commercial-freechildhood.org). ♥