



**Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine**  
11119 Rockville Pike, Ste. 310  
Rockville, Maryland 20852  
(301) 468-9225

**Raymond H. Coleman, M.D., F.A.A.P.**  
**Nandini Thillairajah, M.D., F.A.A.P.**  
**Jeffrey D. Greenberg, M.D., F.A.A.P.**

### TELEVISION, THE INTERNET AND VIDEO GAMES

The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that exposure to mass media (i.e., television, movies, video and computer games, the Internet, music lyrics and videos, newspapers, magazines, books, advertising, etc.) presents both health risks and benefits for children and adolescents.

#### TELEVISION

Children watch a lot of television! For better or for worse, the TV is a pervasive force in our lives, and parents need to know how to take control of its seductive powers.

TV is the leading leisure activity of our children, and they spend more time watching it than doing almost anything else. Children watch an average of 22-25 hours per week of TV!

What are the effects? Children can learn a lot from television: they can master simple arithmetic, memorize the alphabet; increase their vocabulary through programs like "Sesame Street." They can develop socially positive attitudes about racial cooperation, harmony, kindness, etc.

But, they can also become less physically active, as well as fall into the common habit of mindless eating in front of the set, activities associated with childhood obesity. They can, most importantly, be affected by the excessive violence they observe, in the process becoming more aggressive in their own behavior.

Television is also a great exploiter "of the younger child," with the Saturday morning cartoon programs being the prototype of full length features designed specifically to sell a product. By age 18 the average American child will have seen (or have been subjected to) 350,000 commercials!

For the adolescent, beer and wine commercials are seen 25-50 times for every 1 public service announcement warning about the dangers of drugs. The amount of gratuitous sex or sexual innuendo is seen in a wide variety of programming, now creeping increasingly into the "family hour" time slot, greatly exceeds any attempt to portray behavior marked by self-control, abstinence, responsibility, respect.

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the messages conveyed through television, which influence their perceptions and behaviors. Many younger children cannot discriminate between what they see and what is real. Research has shown primary negative health effects on violence and aggressive behavior; sexuality; academic performance; body concept and self-image; nutrition, dieting, and obesity; and substance use and abuse patterns.

Parents should take the time to think about the impact of TV on their family. They should re-think their own viewing habits in terms of the message it gives their children. They should limit TV time to 1-2 hours per day. They should screen the content of programs known for their violence or reference to subtle sexual material. They should watch "controversial" programs together as a family and discuss the implications of the programming. Use the VCR/DVR/TiVO effectively to pre-select worthwhile material.

The new television ratings system and the v-chip are tools that can help protect children from potentially harmful content. All new television sets with screens measuring 13 inches or greater contain a v-chip that enables parents to program televisions to block out any shows that they deem inappropriate for their children.

## THE INTERNET

The internet has become a valuable tool of daily use in most households. Despite the wealth of information that it provides, there are the temptations of the "forbidden." Many of the same advantages and disadvantages that apply to television also apply to the internet.

The biggest plus of the internet is the vast amount of information that can be searched and learned. This is great for school projects, book reports, or just general curiosity about how something works or what it looks like.

But, just as in TV, there can be many areas that need to be closely monitored. These include: pornography (adult and child) and other mature sites; chat rooms/sites that could potentially lure unsuspecting kids out of the safety of their homes; gambling sites; and the ability of an outsider to gain access to all of your personal information if the use of the "Web" is not closely monitored. There are sites like "Web Nanny" that allow you to block visiting certain sites. Many of the anti-virus and spyware software also provide good protection from visiting or receiving material from "unsavory" sites.

## VIDEO GAMES

This is not your father's Pong. With the continuing evolution of computers and graphic design come more sophisticated, realistic and provocative games. Some games pose emotional or social risks. Graphic depictions of sex and violence presented in an interactive way, such as in some computer or video games, can lead to acts of violence or sexually deviant acts by the child. Although video games are rated, even those deemed for "everyone" may contain significant sexual innuendos and/or violence.

There are advantages, though. Playing video games can improve hand-eye coordination and there are many that are educational. Like TV watching and surfing the Web, video games should be monitored for content and should be limited in use.

## PARENTAL TIPS

1. Limit children's total media time (TV, computer, video games) to no more than 1 to 2 hours per day.
2. Remove television sets from children's bedrooms.
3. Discourage television viewing for children younger than 2 years, and encourage more interactive activities that will promote proper brain development, such as talking, playing, singing, and reading together.
4. Monitor the shows, games and internet sites children and adolescents are viewing. Most of these should be informational, educational, and nonviolent.
5. View controversial television programs along with children, and discuss the content.
6. Use controversial programming as a stepping-off point to initiate discussions about family values, violence, sex and sexuality, and drugs/alcohol.
7. Use a recording device wisely to show or record high-quality, educational programming for children.
8. Encourage alternative entertainment for children, including reading, athletics, hobbies, and creative play.