



Kids and TV: Researchers Urge Parents to Cut Back – and Offer Help on Pulling the Plug

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Philadelphia -- Although most parents agree that their kids should watch less television, they also aren't certain how to pull the plug, according to a new study by researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, RTI International in Research Triangle Park, N.C., and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

The study, published today in the journal *Pediatrics*, offers simple recommendations for parents – and health care professionals – to reduce excessive screen time, which is blamed for physical, academic and behavioral problems among children.

Children are averaging five hours a day in front of televisions, computers and video games, the researchers found. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children over age two spend two hours or less watching screen media. Yet few parents have taken steps to cut into viewing time, in part because they fear disrupting home life, the study found.

“For many families, limiting children’s television viewing time to two hours per day would bring dramatic changes to how children spend their time at home,” said James Hersey, of RTI and a co-author of the study. “Many parents see the value in the recommendation but are looking for practical ways to implement changes in their own families.”

Amy Jordan, of the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Media and the Developing Child Project and co-author of the study, said the first two places where parents can get results are in kids' bedrooms and where meals are eaten.

“A stunning finding from this study – given our concerns over obesity – is the extent to which kids and families eat when they watch TV,” said Jordan. Nearly half of those surveyed said they had a TV in the room where they have their meals. Preliminary research indicates that viewing while eating increases the consumption of energy-dense and less nutritious foods.

Nearly two-thirds of the 180 children sampled had a television in their bedrooms, which limits parental control over viewing, both in terms of content and hours watched. The sample included children ages 6 to 13, plus a parent or guardian, and included families in Philadelphia, Chicago and Richmond.

On average, the families participating in the survey reported owning four television sets. Although parents estimated their children's time in front of a television at less than two hours a day, the kids reported watching more than three hours daily. In addition, the children spent time in front of computers and playing video games. Total viewing time among 12- and 13-year-olds averaged more than six hours.

Although agreeing that screen time should be reduced, parents often said they were reluctant to institute strict controls. Some said they feared missing their own favorite programs, that they depended upon the television to reduce bickering among their children, or that they relied on TV to entertain kids while they were engaged in other household activities.

The researchers offered the following simple recommendations for scaling back TV viewing:

- Turn off the television when no one is actively watching.
- Turn off the television during meals, or in areas where children eat. (Do not associate TV viewing with eating of any sort.)
- Do not put a television in a child's bedroom. (Removing a set once it's there is much more difficult than not putting one in the room in the first place.)
- Limit television on school days.
- Identify non-screen, in-home activities that are pleasurable to children. For a list of such activities, the researchers recommended a website created by the Center for Screen-Time Awareness (www.tvturnoff.org).

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