

Don't Touch That Dial

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Pundits and politicians frequently criticize TV, video games, computers, and music for having a negative influence on children. Various commentators have attributed a wide variety of problems—violent behavior, increasing rates of ADHD and obesity, poor educational achievement, and more—to the influence of the electronic media. So it's no wonder parents of young children are anxious about how much TV, computer, or video gaming is too much—or whether it's better to eschew electronic media completely. The spring issue of *The Future of Children*, a policy-oriented journal that reviews research on issues affecting children, seeks to provide some answers to parents', educators', and policymakers' questions about children and electronic media.

There's clear consensus on one point: When it comes to TV and children younger than two, just say no. In 1999, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) came out with guidance for children under two, with a blanket recommendation against any television viewing for children of that age group. Instead the AAP suggests that direct interaction is better for their emotional and cognitive development. The research reviewed in the current *Future of Children* backs that recommendation up.

For children over two, however, the research is more varied. The key point, several papers here conclude, is that it is less about how much TV kids watch than what they watch. Some programming—especially violent content—is not child-appropriate. But researchers have identified measurable benefits from programs designed to support development in children over age two. For example, one study found that children who watch *Blue's Clues*, a program that features a mystery-solving dog, have better problem-solving skills than those who do not. Research has also found that watching *Sesame Street* boost's children's school readiness. Barbara Wilson reviews the evidence on media and children's social development and describes how situational programs that focus on friendships, sharing, and respect can play a key role in a child's emotional development. These programs are effective because they are understandable to child viewers and are presented in a way to maintain their young viewer's attention. Moreover, conclude Heather Kirkorian, Ellen Wartella, and Daniel Anderson in a separate paper, the best programs repeat key material and encourage viewer interaction.

Researchers stress that parents and teachers should watch TV too. Adults should be there to turn the TV off when the content becomes too violent or frightening—or when it might be better for children to go outside. Moreover, adult co-viewing when the TV is on can maximize educational benefit. Adults can children help by highlighting particular parts of the program, providing feedback, and extending the lesson even after the program is turned off.

Public policy can play a role here as well. But public policy around children and the media has often been limited to protecting children from potentially harmful content, rather than promoting the creation of more or better educational content. Amy Jordan's overview of federal legislation regarding children and the media documents the limited

success of the federal "Three Hour Rule" law mandating a weekly minimum of educational programming on broadcast networks. Federal investments have played a role in supporting the development of high-quality children's programming, such as Sesame Street. But funding for PBS, which supports some of the best and most accessible children's programming, has been cut.

Most federal legislation in this area is designed to protect children from violent and profane content on television and on the internet. This includes penalties for "patently offensive content" shown during the hours that kids are most likely to be watching TV, legislation requiring parental consent to access child-oriented internet sites, a media ratings system to inform parents what their children may be watching, and the 1996 requirement that new televisions to include "V-Chips" that allow parents to block offensive content.

While electronic media, including TV and computers, can be an effective teaching tools for young children, the burden is still on parents and teachers to determine what is proper viewing. This means that parents, teachers and lawmakers also have a lot of learning to do—not just to keep up with their tech-savvy children, but to ensure that they remain active learners in an increasingly digital world.