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Limiting and Watching What Children Watch
By Lisa Guernsey

Watch a child's eyes go wide at an all-you-can-eat buffet. So many options -- so many desserts! -- arranged to look so good.

The media buffet for children is quite a feast, too, available at all hours and, with hand-held electronics, anywhere. Pediatricians worry that the bounty of television, DVD movies, Webisodes, video games and the like could hurt children's physical and mental health.

"Remember that TV has a lot of public health implications as we get older," said Donald L. Shifrin, a pediatrician and spokesman for the media committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics. His concerns include weight gain, smoking, aggression and risky sexual behaviors that may follow from children seeing years of the media glorifying junk food, cigarettes, violence or teenage sex.

Is there any hope for a balanced meal?

Yes, say experts on children and the media, as long as parents teach children to make good choices. Instead of talking only about time limits -- the pediatricians' academy recommends limiting screen time to one to two hours a day -- researchers are zeroing in on trouble spots and taking content into account. New guidelines are taking shape: Keep the television and computer out of the child's bedroom, don't be afraid to set limits, pay attention to what appears on screen and how different ages respond to it, and encourage children to think critically about what they see.

Many social scientists see a growing need for media literacy, especially on the Internet. A blistering analysis by Consumer Reports WebWatch earlier this year asserted that many online games and virtual worlds are ruses to sell toys or junk food.

Keeping televisions out of children's rooms is very important, Dr. Shifrin said. "Once they are in there," he said, "they are dug in like a tick."

A June report on children's sleep from the Kaiser Family Foundation cited a "thin but worrisome" base of evidence linking bedroom TVs to sleep problems.

But positive choices take forethought, especially for parents who grew up with TV and video games. One mother trying to find balance is Leticia Barr, who writes the blog Tech Savvy Mama and works as a school technology coordinator in Montgomery County, Md. She said she was concerned about computer and TV time interfering with free play. "But I also realize the value of things that are out there on the Net," she said. She and her 4-year-old daughter are fans of PBSKids.org, especially the games for the literacy-based TV show "Between the Lions."

Ms. Barr's choices would likely be applauded by **Jeanne Brooks-Gunn**, a professor of child development at Columbia University and co-editor of this spring's issue of the journal **The Future of Children**, which focused on electronic media. Many studies, she said, point to the positive effect of high-quality, age-appropriate screen media.

"Marshall McLuhan was wrong when he said the medium is the message," she said. "It's the content. It's what's in the medium."

What does good content look like? For preschool-age children, researchers single out programs on PBS, Noggin and Playhouse Disney that include repetition, teaching of new words and pauses that encourage children to supply answers.

Many shows are tested with children before they are broadcast. Producers for the PBS series "Super Why," for example, rewrote an episode involving a soccer game after 4-year-olds looked blankly when prompted to shout the word "pass." "Kids would watch it, but that wouldn't necessarily mean they would understand it," said Alice Wilder, head of research and education for the series.

For children older than 6, fewer shows are tested for comprehension, and many children prefer whatever their friends watch. Experts caution that even if an episode concludes with a positive lesson about, say, body image, the prior 25 minutes might have been filled with taunts and rough talk. Some research has shown that if parents are not present to reinforce the lesson, children may absorb little more than the negatives.

A manifesto for media may be just as necessary as one for eating.

The food writer Michael Pollan has this advice: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

Maybe we need a similar saying for screen time. Watch and click. Make it worth your time. Then go outside.

"Media is in our world, and as far as I can see we're only going to be offered more choices in the future," Dr. Wilder said. "Parents and kids have to think about who is making it and why. Media should be something you share as a family and talk about."

With a little encouragement, children could become better at browsing the buffet than the rest of us. Take a plate, but be picky about what you put on it.