Toddlers and Television

Is TV good for babies? Until recently, the general assumption has been that infants and toddlers were too young to understand or comprehend much television content. As a result, children’s television and video programming was designed for children ages three and older. In the last decade, however, all of this has changed. Perhaps because of the success of educational programming for preschool children, many of those involved in children’s media production have begun to create programming for an even younger audience. The result is that today’s infants and toddlers can watch television shows and videos that have been created specifically for them, much of it claiming to be educational. Since the positive effects associated with preschoolers’ viewing of educational content have been well documented, creators of this programming argue that we can expect the same positive outcomes for infants and toddlers.

Children’s researchers find otherwise. In *The Future of Children* journal “Children and Electronic Media,” experts conclude that infants and toddlers learn better from real-life experiences than from viewing even educational video and television content. This has been coined the “video deficit hypothesis” - a theory that children two years of age and younger do not seem as capable of learning from television as do preschoolers. Instead, these younger children learn vocabulary, imitate actions, and find hidden objects more effectively when presented with real-life models and information than when the same content is presented via television or video.

Despite the fact that research shows that infants and toddlers do not benefit from television or radio, they still consume a lot of both. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey estimated that 43 percent of infants and toddlers watch TV every day. Nineteen percent of children under the age of one year and 29 percent of children aged two to three years have a television in their bedrooms. Such frequent and readily available exposure to television is likely to influence children's development. In at least one study, for instance, children’s television viewing before age three was negatively related to children's later academic achievement. Given that at best children do not learn from television and at worst is actually harms later school abilities, researchers conclude that television viewing is not appropriate for very young children.


*Specific Chapters Referenced Include:*

For more information on this topic, please contact the issue editors of this volume: Jeanne Brooks-Gunn brooks-gunn@columbia.edu or Elisabeth Donahue edonahue@princeton.edu.