

Television in Child Care: What Do We Need to Know?

The research is in: The percentage of children in this country who are overweight has doubled in the last ten years, childhood obesity is a national problem, and diabetes is diagnosed in children at an alarming rate. A component often associated with these topics is television. As early educators, what do we need to know about television and how does it affect our work with young children?

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry states, "Time spent watching television takes away from important activities such as reading, school work, playing, exercise, family interaction, and social development. Children also learn information from television that may be inappropriate or incorrect. They often cannot tell the difference between the fantasies presented on television versus reality. They are influenced by the thousands of commercials seen each year, many of which are for alcohol, junk food, fast foods, and toys."

Health warnings

Watching TV may encourage excessive snacking and portray unhealthy food choices, violence, and inappropriate information. Equally important is that fact that while watching TV, children are just sitting. This lack of physical exercise is strongly correlated to too much time spent on electronics, TV being a strong forerunner.

Without proper amounts of time for physical exercise, children cannot stay healthy. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports shows two-thirds of American children can't pass a basic physical: 40 percent of boys and 70 percent of girls age six to seventeen can't manage more than one pull-up, and 40 percent show early signs of heart and circulation problems. Many health educators recommend that children experience one hour or more of physical play and exercise daily.



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TV viewing affects food intake

A recent Penn State University study conducted by Dr. Lori Francis shows that "TV viewing can either increase or decrease preschool children's food intakes . . . When children consistently view TV during meals, TV viewing may distract children from normal fullness cues, which can lead to overeating in children as it may in adults."

When children need to self-regulate, or learn ways to care for themselves, TV may cause interference. Consider rest and nap time. When children are presented with a movie or TV show, they can miss cues from their own body. Instead, they are focused on the issue or action in the show, as opposed to their own self-regulating mechanisms. They tune out instead of tuning in to their body's signals.

Adults can help by being active participants at meal times as well as provide nutritious foods, guide conversations, and discuss issues of how full or hungry we feel.

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Should we watch TV in child care?

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no electronic screens or television watching for children under the age of two. The AAP also states that children need active play to promote their developmental, physical, and social skills. Two hours of quality television programming per day is the maximum recommendation for children over two years of age.



Families look to their early caregivers and practitioners to be knowledgeable on issues affecting young children. Therefore, our role regarding television and children is to inform families of what we have learned about television and to present only positive, appropriate experiences with television.

Do we know how the family feels about children watching television? Are our families informed of the research on TV and children? Making the decision to watch TV in child care should be based on research, the development and age of each child, and the opinions of the family and early educator.

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