

the media and your family: television and other screens



While family is the most important influence in a child's life, media in all its forms, including TV, computers, and other screens, are not far behind. Because media can influence how children think, feel, and behave, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages parents to help their children form healthy media use habits early on. Read on for information about steps you can take to encourage healthy media use habits and to learn more about media messages and TV ratings.

What you can do

The following are ways parents can encourage healthy media use habits:

1. Create a family media use plan.

- **Set limits.** Limit screen time to no more than 2 hours each day. Screen time includes TV, computers, video games, DVDs, tablets, and cell phones. A timer may be one way to help keep track of time. (See "Media and young children" for guidelines for children younger than 2 years.)
- **Power off.** Turn off screens when not in use or during homework time. Set a media curfew at night and turn off all media (including cell phones) at bedtime. Also, keep TVs and Internet access out of your children's bedrooms.
- **Choose media carefully.** Instead of flipping mindlessly through the channels, use a program guide and rating systems (see "TV Parental Guidelines") to help you and your children choose which shows to watch. Remember, ratings should only be used as a guide. It may be helpful to watch a program first.

2. Watch and use media with your children.

- **Connect.** Make time to watch or use media with your children. This can be a time to bond with your children. You may also have opportunities to share your own personal beliefs related to different topics that may be part of the media message like stereotyping, sex, violence, and bullying.
- **Stay connected.** Parents should be aware of all media used by their children. If you have young children, adult supervision is especially important because young children cannot tell the difference between commercials, fantasy, and real life. Also, content on news programs and reality shows may not be suitable.

3. Encourage other activities.

- **Encourage active physical play** like a game of tag or playing on a sports team.
- **Encourage reading.** Children can benefit from reading alone and with parents. Reading can also have a positive influence on how well children do in school.
- **Encourage your children's creativity** through hobbies, art, music, and imaginative play.

4. Be an advocate.

- **Remember that your opinion counts.** Stations, networks, and sponsors pay attention to the views of the public. *Note:* The Children's Television Act ensures that TV stations air a minimum amount of educational programming

for children each week and limit the ads directed at children. Stations that do not follow the law could lose their licenses. For more information from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), visit <http://reboot.fcc.gov/parents>.

- **Express your views.** For example, let a station know if you like a program, or contact the makers of a video game if the content is too violent.
- **Get your school and community involved.** For example, encourage your school and community to sponsor a "Screen-Free Week."

5. Remember to be a positive role model in your own media habits.

Media messages

Children in America spend a lot of time using media. Current research shows that children and adolescents use screen media for more than 7 hours daily. TV takes up most of these hours, but video games and DVDs add to the screen time. Media use means time not spent with friends, in active play, doing homework, reading, or just daydreaming.

Exposure to TV programs, video games, and movies chosen by (and co-viewed with) parents can offer entertainment as well as teachable moments. However, media use may also expose children to messages that may not be appropriate or that may contribute to unhealthy behaviors and outcomes. It is up to parents to teach and model healthy behaviors.

- Overweight and obesity are linked with hours in front of the TV screen. Passive viewing is time away from active play. Children may snack while viewing. Unhealthy foods high in fat, sugar, and salt are heavily advertised in media.
- Exposure to violent media messages and images is associated with violent behavior in some young viewers. New research also finds a connection between media viewing and bullying and other forms of nonphysical aggression with peers. Watching a lot of violence may lead to fear, anger, post-traumatic stress disorder, nightmares, and other sleep problems.
- Media exposes children to adult behavior, like sex. Portrayals on TV and in film rarely show possible risks, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- Messages about tobacco and alcohol are everywhere. Often people on media screens using alcohol or drugs or smoking are shown as sexy, energetic, and healthy. Children and teens may be influenced to want to try smoking and drinking.
- Children see and hear countless advertisements every day. The ads try to convince children and parents that they must have a product to be happy.

Media and young children

- **Educational programs.** Well-designed TV programs for children, including *Sesame Street* and many other examples, are shown through research to enhance learning and model acceptance and cooperation for some young viewers.

Rating	Guideline	Program description
TV-Y	All Children	Appropriate for all children. Not expected to frighten younger children.
TV-Y7	Directed to Older Children	For children 7 years and older. Themes and elements may include mild fantasy or comedic violence or may frighten children younger than 7.
TV-Y7-FV	Directed to Older Children— Fantasy Violence	Same as TV-Y7, but programs may be more intense than TV-Y7.
TV-G	General Audience	Most parents may find this program suitable for all ages. Contains little or no violence, no strong language, and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.
TV-PG	Parental Guidance Suggested	Parents may find material unsuitable for younger children. Contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).
TV-14	Parents Strongly Cautioned	Parents may find some material unsuitable for children younger than 14. Contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).
TV-MA	Mature Audience Only	Designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children younger than 17. Contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).

- **Early media exposure.** Studies show that early media exposure offers no benefits for children younger than 2 years and may affect development, including speech delay and risk of attention problems. The AAP discourages media use and encourages interactive play for children younger than 2. Infants and toddlers benefit from quality time with parents and other adults.
- **Toppling TVs.** Small children have been seriously injured and, in some cases, killed when heavy TV models fall on them. Follow the safety tips below.
 - Place TVs on low furniture designed to hold each TV model. Use brackets or anchors to secure TVs to the wall.
 - Do not place remote controls, videos, or other objects that children might try to reach on top of TVs. Do not let children climb on TVs.

“New media”

More and more of our children and teens are wired and savvy about new media platforms. Millions of teens around the world communicate through social networking Web sites like Facebook. They connect on computers, tablets, and cell phones.

Social and new media offer positives like keeping friends connected or offering ways to express creativity and individuality. New uses of new media are developed every day to improve health, including teens receiving health reminders on their cell phones. However, parents need to be aware when social and new media may become a problem. Children and teens may spend less time communicating with each other face-to-face or they may be easier targets for bullying, and the consequences can be serious. New research also shows a connection between sleep problems and unlimited cell phone use.

TV Parental Guidelines

The TV Parental Guidelines (see chart above) rating system was created to help parents choose programs that are suitable for children. The ratings are usually included in local TV listings. Remember that ratings are not used for news programs, which may not be suitable for young children.

All TVs 13 inches or larger made in the United States after 2000 are required by federal law to have a V-chip. The V-chip allows parents to block programs based on ratings or times or to block specific shows.

For more information, go to the FCC Parents’ Place Web site at <http://reboot.fcc.gov/parents>.

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From your doctor

