



PARENTING IN THE NEWS

TELEVISION EXPOSURE OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND ATTENTION PROBLEMS LATER IN LIFE

According to a recent study by the Child Health Institute, the number of television hours watched each day by small children between the ages of 1 and 3 years old is associated with attention deficiencies at age 7. While previous research has linked children's television exposure to obesity and lower academic achievement, this report, entitled, "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children"¹ specifically examined the relationship between TV and attention deficits. In addition, this study is one of a few that included very young children (1 and 3 years) in their sample, and utilized a data set that tracked the same children over many years.

The data used was from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and the sample included 1,278 one year olds, and 1,345 three year olds. The main finding was that a one hour increase in television viewing among 1 and 3 year olds was associated with a 9% increase in the probability of having attention problems at age 7. The problems exhibited included "difficulty concentrating, restlessness, impulsiveness and being confused easily" (Christakis, 2004, p. 709).

It is important to note that this study does not show that television viewing causes attention deficits, rather that an association between the two exists. In addition, the authors acknowledge that there may be certain

characteristics of parents whose children watch excessive amounts of TV that may also influence the strength of the association found between TV and attentional problems. Finally, this study does not address the quality of programs viewed by children, including educational programs that may increase literacy and promote attention skills in children.

This study reveals that the number of very young children exposed to television is quite high. Parents report the following viewing habits of their young children:

Number hours watched per day	Percent 1 year olds	Percent 3 year olds
None	36%	7%
1 – 2	37%	44%
3 – 4	13%	27%
More than 5	14%	21%

These viewing patterns are troubling given the recent report entitled, "An Increase in Electronic Media Geared Towards Young Children," (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003) and the American Academy of Pediatrics' 1999 recommendation that children under the age of 2 years should not watch television at all. All three of these reports show that research examining the specific impact of television needs to be continued, and that at this time, young children's exposure to television should be curtailed when possible.

Finally, a recent article, "An Intervention to reduce Television Viewing by Preschool Children," summarizes results from a new approach to reduce television's impact on children ages 2 to 5 years old by educating

¹The criteria used to make the determination of attention problems correspond with the hyperactivity subscale of the Behavioral Problems Index, which differs from a medical diagnosis of ADD or ADHD. Nonetheless, the proportion of children in this study who were classified as having problems corresponds with the proportion of children in the general population with attention deficit problems.

parents and their children of the dangers of watching too much television, or certain types of programs. As part of a seven-part session, children and parents were encouraged to turn off the TV and develop alternative activities to engage in, in particular, to read together more often. One year after the completion of the program, families who had participated reduced their weekly viewing by 3.1 hours (Dennison, et al., 2004).

These results suggest that strategies can be effective in reducing TV exposure of young children. The Child Health Institute's finding that there is an association between TV exposure and attention deficits only adds to a long list of negative outcomes experienced by children who watch a lot of television. This highlights the importance of developing and implementing strategies to teach parents of very young children to reduce their exposure to TV.

REFERENCES

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