



Television and Early Childhood Health and Development

Television is a part of the environment in which early childhood development occurs. Most children in Australia are exposed to television from a very early age, sometimes even from birth. All aspects of early childhood development – cognitive, social-emotional and physical – occur while children experience television. Not all television exposure is intentional as televisions are almost everywhere, including in shopping centres and doctors waiting rooms or in the many homes where television is always switched on.

Perhaps surprisingly, young children watch more television than anyone else. Research shows that young children typically spend more time watching television than doing any other single activity, apart from sleeping.

Why is television an early childhood health issue?

Recent research has looked at the impact of television on children's well-being, health and development. It shows that there are links between television viewing and obesity, language development, behaviour, sleep and social-emotional development.

The effects of television exposure are affected by:

- Content (e.g. is the content of the program violent?)
- Time duration (the risks increase with the number of hours of television exposure)
- *How* the young child watches television (Is the child watching on their own or with a parent?)

While older preschool children can benefit socially and educationally from watching certain television programs, research shows that this is not the case for children under two years. In fact, the negative impact of television is most significant for children under two years. Experts advise limiting young children's exposure to television. The American Academy of Pediatrics advocates a 'no screen policy' for children under the age of two years.

What can parents do?

- **Limit** the time your child spends watching television. Consider the total 'screen time' (DVDs, screen-based games, any time the television is switched on) your child is experiencing – not just television screen time.
- **Decide** what television programs are appropriate for your child. The Raising Children Network provides practical advice about how to choose appropriate programs for children. See: www.raisingchildren.net.au
- **Monitor** what your child is watching, and if possible, watch television with your child.
- **Talk** with your child about what you have seen.
- **Provide** alternative activities for your child, including things he/she can enjoy when you are busy. Children learn best through *doing* things rather than by *watching* television.

This Parent Fact Sheet is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

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