Helping Children Responsibly Watch TV, Internet, and Other Media

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Summary

For over twenty years, I developed technologies to help parents control their children's television watching and media exposure. Parents and educators around the country are concerned over the amount of time children watch television and other technologies that are increasingly available in many homes (VCRs, cable, Internet, video games, etc.). Part of this concern stems from the fact that a considerable amount of violence is regularly portrayed on television and other media technologies. In addition, those youngsters who watch an excessive amount of television and other media technologies have little time for developing other interests and hobbies.

Approximately 25% of children watch from 4 to 11 hours of television daily, as well as other media exposure. Parents of these children, and parents of those who watch even less, need help in dealing with this problem. Using simple electronic principles and behavior modification, it is possible to reduce children's TV viewing and other excessive media exposures.

The Problem of Viewing Television and other Media Technologies

Kids, TV, and the Electronic Media: Solutions From the Home Front

--Leonard A. Jason, Ph.D. and Libby Kennedy Hanaway

It used to be simpler. When today's parents were kids, the media options were served from a limited plate: Kookla, Fran, and Ollie and My Three Sons, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books, occasional Saturday matinees, and maybe (if they're pushing 50) a serialized radio show or two. For the most part, these amusements functioned as entertaining, yet manageable punctuation in the lives of children and youth. Fast forward to the late 1990's, a time in which kids are constantly bombarded with glowing, flickering media options. Network, cable, and satellite television, web sites, chat rooms, MTV, WebTV, Sega Genesis, Nintendo, CD-ROMs, books, magazines, and e-mail constitute more than just punctuation in the lives of children today; they are a central substance and presence.

This explosion of electronic entertainment is not a necessarily negative development; indeed most of these innovations represent an amazing leap forward in the realms of entertainment, education, communication, and everyday fun. Yet for all the dazzling allure and promise of the electronic frontier, many parents, educators, researchers, and child advocates have legitimate reservations about their wholesale, wholehearted adoption on the part of American children and youth. Of the two chief concerns, one is a problem of content, the other a problem of time.

Content is the more obvious of the two issues. Take TV, for example. As any parent knows, putting a child in front of a television set has become an increasingly dicey move. The smattering of quality programs, some intended for children and families, some not, is routinely squeezed out by a roaring audio-visual parade of lame sex jokes, paranormal sleaze and slime, and tired, demeaning stereotyping. Televised violence is a topic of particular concern; there are about 20 violent acts each hour in children's TV shows alone. According to the American Psychological Association, decades of psychological research have shown that violence on TV may make children less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, more fearful of the world around them, and more likely to behave in aggressive and harmful ways toward others. In studies on related topics, children themselves have reported that TV makes them think that people are dishonest, selfish, and care more about money than other people. They also confess that TV encourages them to talk back to parents. Content problems plague other entertainment options as well. Video game manufacturers specialize in peddling testosterone-laced killing fields, while web site creators openly invite kids to view violent scenes of pornography.

In addition to issue of content, the field of electronic entertainment also presents the more subtle problem of time. American children spend an average of 4 hours of television a day, 28 hours per week watching TV; by age 18 they have watched 22,000 hours of TV--more time than they ever spent in the classroom. Add to these totals the time kids devote to ancillary electronic pursuits like video games and computer activities, and the result is a generation of media savvy, if not media weary kids.

In the same way kids adore sugar-coated cereal and late bedtimes, we should not be surprised that children devote so much time to the electronic media. But like other appealing but non-edifying aspects of childhood, excessive indulgence in electronic entertainment is unhealthy and in some cases outright dangerous. At risk for the TV-seasoned child is the failure to develop crucial social skills, the lack of meaningful family interaction, the sacrifice of reading time (which can affect cognitive development and academic achievement) and physical and imaginative play, and the faulty expectation that life should deliver easy, instant entertainment.

Most parents know that between the issues of content and time, a good situation is not at hand. Though television can be a temptingly handy baby-sitter, even the most beleaguered parent must admit that in excess or in age-inappropriate doses television and other electronic entertainment options create an unprofitable deal for their children. At the same time, though, many parents are experiencing an increasing sense of powerlessness, feeling abandoned in a sea of unsettling media messages. Especially in electronically advanced homes, complete with cable TV and the surging waves of the Internet, parents feel at a loss to control the tide of information and images rushing toward their children.

A parent's natural reaction might be to push the whole load of blame on the media industry, the very source of the storm. And while the media industry does bear the burden of guilt in this debate, finger pointing alone will not improve the landscape for our children. To truly stem the tide and preserve the integrity of families, solutions are going to have to come from all quarters, parents included. Finger pointing is out, action is in.

Stepping In

The effect of corralling parents into the picture is not intended to give the electronic entertainment industry a way to quietly slip out the back gate of responsibility. The industry remains responsible for its content, and where reasonable it should chart an ethically correct course in delivering it. But woe to the deluded soul who believes it will graciously adopt this enlightened approach. Despite what we might hope or wish, as a business television and its related industries will do as much as it can to remain profitable, even at the expense of children. In the case of children's relationships with electronic media, the ideal and the realistic are miles apart. And thanks to exploding technology, the gap will continue to grow, putting ever more kids at risk. Fair or not, parents must step in and do some of the dirty work themselves. In truth, if we are after enduring, meaningful change--the kind that touches individual kids in individual homes--no one can do it better than parents anyway.

To begin, concerned parents should adopt a realistic view about the role the electronic entertainment industry can or will have in creating a safer media environment for kids. For example, parents should save themselves any future exasperation by recognizing that the television industry (with the obvious exceptions of cable channels like Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel) is not particularly interested in courting the seemingly unprofitable child audience. By deserting children and families during the traditional family hour, by bumping kid-friendly programming in favor of morning news shows and tacky afternoon talk shows, and by offering children's programs that are thinly veiled licensed-product merchandising efforts, network television has very clearly indicated its priorities. Half-hearted efforts at governmental compliance complete the picture. In response to the demand for increased educational programming for children as stipulated in the Children's Television Act of 1990, local broadcasters blithely

offered programs like Donahue and The Jetsons as examples of educational television. More recently during the ratings and V-chip debate, the industry adopted a concept not unlike the fabled fox guarding the chicken coop, allowing network producers to rate their own shows on a fuzzy, nonspecific age-based standard.

On the other hand, parents should also become familiar with some of the solutions--and their respective limitations--offered by various arms of the industry. For example, as part of a voluntary effort, video, computer, and CD-ROM games now feature ratings that designate the games as suitable for young children, preteenagers, teenagers up to and over the age of 17, and adults only. Cable companies offer blocking options for channels subscribers deem undesirable. And beginning in 1999, the infamous V-chip will become available to consumers.

These are promising steps, but they will only carry consumers so far. As solutions, they only seek to regulate or restrict the flow of material, rather than improve it in the first place. They are patches, so to speak, and for every patching solution offered there seems to be a serious leak. For example, despite video game ratings, many retail outlets sell or rent games to anyone of any age with cash in hand. As for the Internet, a source of serious concern for many parents, recent efforts at a creating kid-friendly cyberspace have proven inevitably weak given its breakneck rate of growth. There are now millions of web pages, but many have not been rated by the Recreational Software Advisory Council or SafeSurf. Meanwhile, software products have been developed to block objectionable material and limit the times of the day when kids can surf the Internet. Regrettably, most of these products can be defeated, and those that can't are fairly to extremely restrictive, preventing kids from getting most of their on-line experience.

As for the loudest debate of all, neither a rating system nor the V-chip is going fully solve our problems with children's TV viewing. First, only new TV sets will have the V-chips within them, meaning that many families will need to spend money to reap the benefits of this technology for the first several years. If you want to purchase a V-chip, see the section on devices.

Either by design or by default, the media industry is incapable of satisfying the concerns of parents wary of its influence. And where the industry leaves off, parents must be willing to jump in and pick up the slack. No one else is going to do the hard work of monitoring what kind and how much television children watch. And no one knows individual kids' needs and temperaments better than their parents. In the end, there is no substitute for parental guidance, which is the key for kids making the most of their TV and Internet experiences.

Making a Difference

Parents overwhelmed by the long reach of the media might be at a loss over where and how to start making a dent in its consumption. Fortunately, it's fairly simple. It begins with small, daily decisions made right at the breakfast table, in the living room, or wherever family life unfolds: How much TV will be allowed on weekdays? On weekends? How much time can each child spend surfing the Internet or playing Nintendo? Which television programs and video games will be declared off-limits? On what basis? And what, besides electronic entertainment, can engagingly fill a child's free hours?

For the most part, a parent's decisions will return again to the central issues of content and time. Though content issues--replete with oozing bullet wounds and references to casual sex--tend to garner the most attention, the more fundamental issue is really that of time. Childhood is short, and parents need to honestly consider how much of their kids' time is worth devoting to the small screen. If an honest review shows a need for change, parents should be ready for action.

The most obvious step involves developing and maintaining consistently enforced rules regarding how much time kids can spend watching TV and pursuing video and computer activities. This is hard, almost always unwelcome work, but sitting down with kids and presenting a fair, but firm plan is an essential place to start. Though most experts suggest keeping the limit under two hours a day, families should individually consider their own goals and needs and come up with their expectations and strategy accordingly. Regardless how a family's rules actually take shape, logical consequences should consistently follow up any creative rule bending; on the other hand, kids who stick to the new plan deserve plenty of acknowledgment and praise (and maybe even a reward or two: A trip to the zoo? Pizza and a movie?) for working to break a difficult habit.

No doubt, the task of monitoring kids' media habits is made more difficult by the prospect of working parents and single parent homes. Those parents who find themselves unable to keep an eye on their kids' TV, video, and computer consumption might consider finding quality afterschool programs, making certain homework or chore requirements, developing a level of trust that TV privileges will not be abused, or investigating the products available aimed at limiting and monitoring kids' TV consumption in the absence of parental supervision.

Though establishing clear rules and expectations is a natural start, the better and more enduring part of monitoring involves the clever art of diversionary tactics--that is, introducing kids to pleasures beyond the small screen to make it less attractive in the first place. Homes that heartily encourage art, music, storytelling, reading, imaginative play, sports, and nature will find that television and other electronic entertainment naturally play less central roles in their kids' lives. This "liberal arts" approach to family life is easiest to institute when children are very young, but even families with older, dedicated viewers will see

positive changes if new interests and opportunities are enthusiastically introduced.

If parents can commit to the admittedly hard work of monitoring how much time is spent watching TV and playing computer games, more than half the battle is already won. The other half of the equation--the issue of content--will have been mitigated in part simply by limiting the time of their overall exposure. Yet even with time rules in place, content issues will continue to drive many parents to distraction. Here parents will need to step in, as well.

One of the best ways parents can monitor television's content is simply by watching TV with their kids, serving as clarifiers, translators, and even censors when necessary. Not only does this keep TV on the level of an active family activity, but it also serves as a great forum for values instruction. Demeaning stereotypes can be countered, positive messages can be applauded, consequence-free violence can be challenged, and delicate conversations on difficult topics like sex and racism can be broached. Parental involvement is the ideal, but in the real world parents cannot always be on hand to run television interference. To help them learn to make appropriate decisions on their own, kids need clear guidelines regarding acceptable and unacceptable programs and material. Parents need to determine content limits and, no less importantly, explain their reasoning to their kids. Not only will an explanation make content limits seem more logical and less punitive, but it also gives kids a solid model for their own decision-making processes. Moreover, when kids understand a parent's reasoning, they may be less likely to push the boundaries when they're on their own.

Parents should also get involved in the content debate a wider scale by actively voicing their disapproval (or support, as the case may be) to local stations and national networks. To the extent that network television exists to serve the FCC's famed "public good," parents have a wholly legitimate basis on which to continue clamoring about increasing quality programming for children. More potently, perhaps, to the extent that they are television consumers--watching long strings of commercials for toothpaste and four-wheel drive vehicles--parents have an absolute right to voice their opinions (and then a responsibility to follow up with boycotts and letter-writing campaigns if appropriate). Networks have a knack for developing a considerably more sensitive ear when ratings and profits are at stake. Finally, if parents remain dissatisfied with the current age-based rating system in place, they should continue pressuring both the industry and their state and federal Congressmen and women for a shift to detailed, content-based ratings.

Where kids are concerned, content is a key issue; but again, quality only goes so far. No matter if every program that aired on television was suddenly stellar in content and education motive, it would little benefit kids placed in TV's care hour upon hour each day. To develop into a healthy, independent adulthood,

childhood must be a balance of feeling, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling, fearing, loving, dreaming, and imagining. Childhood is a loud, tactile, messy business; television, video games, and computer activities--kid-friendly or not--are simply too passive, impersonal, and limiting to wholly serve the developing needs of children.

No matter what obligations--real or perceived--the electronic entertainment industry has toward kids and families, no producer, executive board, or network president can be counted on to provide the environment that will ensure a healthy, balanced childhood. This is a job for parents, one more in the hard, but extraordinary business of raising kids.

Viewer Questions

1. Many viewers have asked this question: "What are good educational TV shows for kids?"

Joyce and Steven Pokorny of Chicago have suggested the following TV programs as particularly fun and educational for their two children: Out of the Box (entertaining, diverse, and kids can use materials from the house to create music and art), Arthur (diversity, real life issues are discussed and resolved), Little Bear (farm animals work through emotional issues), Amazing Animals (a lizard learns from other animals), Blues Clues (children get to solve problems), and the old standby Sesame Street. Be sure to also try concerts on Public Broadcasting, and to help wind down in the evening, how about cooking shows on the cooking channel.

2. Another parent asked what other sources of media are impacting on my kids that I should be concerned about?

American children spend an average of 6 hours and 32 minutes each day using various forms of the media (television, movies, video games, computer, and the Internet) (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). When simultaneous use of multiple media is accounted for, exposure to the media increases for many children to as much as 8 hours a day.

Over the next decade, some argue that televisions will be displaced by online media including the Internet (Kayany, & Yelsma, 2000), therefore devices to help parents control inappropriate media exposure will need to include these newer technologies. Still, television continues to impact PC activity and Internet use (Coffey, & Stipp, 1997).Much of the research published on problems involving the media has focused on TVs and computer games, with much less published on the topic of Internet and other types of media. As DeAngeles (2000) indicated, in these other areas, such as use of the Internet, studies are scarce, and most are

compromised by self-selected samples with no control groups. Most of the work is from theoretical or philosophical aspects of media use by youth. Clearly, Internet use has increased dramatically in recent years, leading to what some call pathological use, or Internet addiction. Kandall (1998), for example, defines psychological dependence on the Internet as characterized by an increasing investment of resources on Internet-related activities and unpleasant feelings (e.g., anxiety, depression, emptiness) when offline. There are published examples of people who have abused the Internet which resulted in significant impairment to family life (Young, 1996). Greenfield (1999) found that 6% of the 17,251 persons surveyed meet criteria for compulsive Internet use, and over 30% report using the Internet to escape from negative feelings. The vast majority admitted to feelings of time distortion, accelerated intimacy, and feeling uninhibited when on-line. The PI is more cautious in using terms like "Internet Addiction," but clearly some youngsters are spending excessive amounts of time with these types of media, even though there is not yet an extensive literature to cite in these areas. By having our device include these media sources, we feel that our device will be even more attractive to parents. Unfortunately, the literature is not extensive in these areas, however, we feel that extending the device to include the computer and internet usage, in addition to TVs, VCRS and video games, will make our product even more attractive to families whose families have problems with over use of these media.

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Kayany, J.M., & Yelsma, P. (2000). Displacement effects of online media in the socio-technical contexts of households. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 44, 215-229.

Kandell, J. (1998). Internet addiction on campus: The vulnerability of college students. *CyberPsychology and Behavior,* 1, 1.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (1994). Kids and Media at the New Millennium: A Kaiser Family Foundation. Report. Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Young, K.S. (1996). Addictive use of the internet. *Psychological Reports,* 79, 899-902.

3. Another parent asked if there are new sources of exposure to violence that we need to be concerned about?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, exposure to violence in television, movies, and video games is a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents (Media Violence, 2001).A large proportion of this media exposure includes acts of violence that are witnessed in the form of video games (Roberts, 2000). Video games put a child in the role of the aggressor and the child is rewarded for violent behavior. Griffiths and Hunt (1998) maintain that video games allow the player to rehearse an entire behavioral script, and video games could produce dependence as children and adolescents want to play them for long periods of time to advance to higher levels. Television and music videos glamorize carrying and using weapons, and children in grades 4 through 8 prefer video games that award points for violence against others (Funk & Buchman, 1996). Interactive media (e.g., video games and the Internet) are relatively new, and consequently there has been little time to assess their influence, but several studies indicate that these types of media may be even more profound than those of passive media, such as television (Anderson & Dill, 2000, Irwin & Gross, 1995). After playing video games, children exhibit measurable decreases in prosocial behaviors and increases in violent retaliation to provocation, and playing violent video games has been found to account for a 13% to 22% increase in adolescents' violent behavior (The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children. Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, 2000).

Anderson, C.A., & Dill, K. E. (2000). Video games and aggressive thoughts, feelings and behavior in the laboratory and in life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 772-790.

Funk, J. B, & Buchman, D.D. (1996). Playing violent video and computer games and adolescent self-concept. *Journal of Communications,* 46, 19-32.

Griffiths, M.D. & Hunt, N. (1998). Dependence on computer games by adolescents. *Psychological Reports,* 82, 475-480.

Irwin AR, Gross AM. (1995). Cognitive tempo, violent video games, and aggressive behavior in young boys. *Journal of Family Violence*, 10, 337-350.

Media Violence (2001). *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 108, 1222-1226.

Roberts, D. F. (2000). Media and youth: access, exposure, and privatization. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 27(suppl):8-14

The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children (2000). Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. 106th Cong, 1st Session (2000) (statement of Craig Anderson, Professor, Iowa State University,

Department of Psychology)

4. Several individuals have asked about my opinion of the TV show "Survivor", and below I have written my reactions:

Survivors or Gladiators?

Survivor, the unexpected summer hit, has already spawned similar shows like "Big Brother", and thousands of recruits are signing up for a slim shot at being selected for the second run of "Survivor". Most viewers will undoubtedly argue that this fantasy show is just good-natured entertainment, and a refreshing change from the predictable and staged "World Wrestling Federation" extravaganzas and ubiquitous melodramatic soaps.

Enthusiastic "Survivor" buffs were tantalized and stimulated in a way only hinted at by emotional confrontations on our daily talk shows. Who could argue that the survivors' interpersonal betrayals, scheming, and lying were any worse than the blood shed and carnage that we view daily on our favorite TV programs. Even if the darker and seamier side of life was on display, with one participant calling the two finalists a rat and a snake, it could be argued that such glimpses of the brutality within the human condition might represent a healthy antidote to our complacency.

And yet, I can't help but think that the show might have crossed the line, a divider that speaks to values and norms that have become increasingly difficult to envision. I remember the drama that unfolded when I participated in a small encounter group at Brandeis University in the early 70's with the legendary Morrie Schwartz. This group, which included Roger Weisberg and Rosie Kantor, allowed us an opportunity to share and disclose our most private experiences in an atmosphere of respect and honesty. We were survivors of an inner archeological exploration, one which had as much anticipation and excitement as the televised series. We encountered early traumas that were as painful as any insect or sting-ray bites inflicted on the island survivors. Our personas, masks, and vulnerabilities were challenged, tearful crises were an ongoing part of these electrifying sessions, and none of us had the security of an idol for immunity. Our competition was not for a monetary outcome, it was not to uncover the greed and vanity within the human condition, rather, it was to develop insight and self awareness into the wonder and complexity of human behavior, and by doing so we were the true survivors. I am not suggesting that encounter groups, such as the one I participated in, should become the next televised survivor clone. Rather, we need to do more to create intriguing and engaging spontaneous drama that is both entertaining and meaningful.

Are we witnessing a breakdown in the fabric of our communities? Do televised shows, such as "Survivor", merely reflect this tension or do they promote it?

Were we soothed and addicted to the plastic rituals and unauthentic tribal counsel meetings because these false ceremonies and perfunctory celebrations have replaced the sense of community which once magically nourished and transformed our lives? The Romans were mesmerized by the pomp, the majesty, and the cruelty of the gladiator games; it is more difficult to see the dangers inherent in the survivor games, but part of our human spirit is just as surely sacrificed.

5. One parent asked the following question:

I have a three year old son and I am just discovering the world of children's media. I have come to discover that the current rating system for movies does not appear to be adequate, in my opinion. I have mistakenly rented some G rated movies which were not appropriate for a three year old. And in my opinion they were too violent for older children as well. Do you know of any organizations advocating the ideas outlined in your article. There once was an organization, Action For Children's Television. However, I do not think it exists any longer. I would like to become more involved in this very important issue. Thank you for your time,
Jeanie Porterfield

Find out about family friendly movies on film and television from the Dove Foundation . Another site has rating systems for evaluating TVs and inventories to evaluate a families' media us: National Institute on Media and the Family.

6. How do I protect my child's privacy on the Internet?

Check this link for online Saftey Rules for young kids.

Here is another good site: Social Media Safety

Another good site is: A Comprehensive Computer Safety & Security Guide

Here are two blogs Marylyn Brooks, a volunteer librarian thought you might find interesting: blog.safetyclicks.com and safelibraries.blogspot.com

Adrienne Roberts, a library specialist in Georgia, and her kids are learning to safely surf the internet, and they recommended the following site: Website Safety for Kids & Teens

Mary, a viewer of our website found The Expert Guide on Kids' Home Security helpful in preparing youth for independence, tips that can help keep youth safe, crime prevention and more.

Kelly, a mentor at a local community, sent me this link suggested by her kids that has an important topic to cover: http://community.directliquidation.com/computer-guide-to-online-safety-and-viruses/.

Nancy Hopeck contacted me regarding an idea from a group of children that she is mentoring at a local community center. Nancy said that as they were looking at my website, they suggested that I might make available to others this excellent site on internet safety resources: http://www.whoishostingthis.com/resources/protect-kids-internet/

7. The most frequently asked questions concern issues of TV and violence. Sites in the next section might be checked out for some interesting sources of information of this topic.

Other Good Web Resources on TV and Violence

Below are several web sites with more information on the effects of TV viewing on kids:

An article about kids and tv from American Academy of Pediatrics:

Check out this site for the effects of anger when viewing violence television programming.

Information on an innovative anti-violence project can be found at this site.

Even MTV gets into the act in this site about educating youth about violence prevention.

The Center for Media Literacy is another good resource for a better understanding the effects of the mass media on youth and families.

GetNetWise is another great site for kids and gives online safety guide.

New Mexico Media Literacy Project, posts news, information and free materials of use to teachers, students and parents Kaiser Foundation report.

Find out about family friendly movies on film and television from the Dove Foundation.

This site has rating systems for evaluating TVs and inventories to evaluate a families' media us: National Institute on Media and the Family

Slide Show

If you would like to see a powerpoint slide show on one of my talks, just click on the words:

Book Abstract:

REMOTE CONTROL: A SENSIBLE APPROACH TO KIDS, TV, AND THE NEW ELECTRONIC MEDIA

As an individual deeply concerned about the changing nature of childhood, Dr. Leonard A. Jason brings his expertise to Remote Control: A Sensible Approach to Kids, TV, and the New Electronic Media. Designed for parents, educators, and other concerned individuals, the book seeks to help families understand and, if necessary, reduce the role that television, video, and computer activities play in the lives of children.

Remote Control comes at a time when childhood in America is shifting uncomfortably before our eyes. Bright days of discovery and imagination are being squeezed out by sober new realities. Today's social and economic forces, often demanding early responsibility and heavily structured schedules, seem to pluck the child right out of childhood. Advances in technology also impact the youngest generation. Television must now be considered a childhood staple, serving alternately as baby-sitter, friend, entertainer, and convenient means of escape. American children watch an average of 3½ to 4 hours of television each day, with about 25% of kids viewing between 4 and 11 hours daily. From Big Bird's education agenda to the sex and violence of adult programs, television's images and ideas powerfully attract young viewers. Sophisticated video games and computer activities further capture the attention of children, and in the background we hear the television and computer industries promising more--and more interactive--fun for the future.

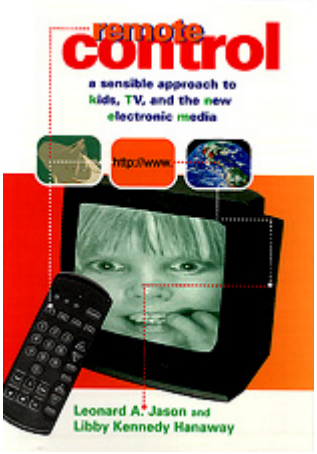
As television and computer technology assume a growing presence in the daily lives of children, the need for objective, up-to-date information about this trend becomes evident. Remote Control offers a balanced, non-biased appraisal of the current research in the field of television viewing and computer activities. Specific topics include: violence, sex, stereotyping and commercialism on television and in video game content; passive versus active viewing; children's comprehension of television; children's attraction to television; and the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional risks of excessive viewing.

Importantly, Remote Control is not one long litany of television's evils. In fact, the entire second half of the book is dedicated to teaching families how to better manage television in their lives. Though Dr. Jason's area of expertise involves

reducing children's viewing through behavior modification techniques, we realize that different families have different needs. To that end, we have detailed a broad range of mediation strategies ranging from simple family rules to the use of high-tech computers that tally kids' hours in front of the TV set. The book concludes with a chapter on how to live both with and without television. Readers will learn how to maximize television's positive potential and how to maximize their own lives when the TV is off. To help families get started with new endeavors, we end the book with a list of 101 fun and simple things families can do together.

At the heart of Remote Control is the belief that kids need more opportunities to simply be kids. Television is not all bad, but childhood is too short and fleeting to be spent solely learning its charms. There are trees to climb, friends to meet, books to read, and a world to explore. Reducing the role of television in their lives frees the time for these simple, yet somehow essential pursuits.

Our work has focused on evaluating several products, and our findings appear in the following book. Jason, L.A.,& Hanaway, E.K. (1997). *Remote control: A sensible approach to kids, TV, and the new electronic media* . Sarasota, Fl.: Professional Resource Press. (You can order this book by writing to Professional Resource Press, PO Box 3197, Sarasota, Fl., 34230-3197.) Check out this site for more information: Remote Control



About the Authors of this Book

Dr. Leonard Jason has written and edited ten books in the field of psychology, has contributed over 40 chapters in psychological books, and has published over 700 articles in professional journals. He is a current or past member of the editorial boards of eight psychological journals. Past president of the Division of Community Psychology of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Jason has received several media awards from the organization.

As the leading expert on psychological strategies for reducing television viewing in children, Dr. Jason serves as a well-respected source for the media. He has been interviewed by a many national magazines, including: Psychology Today, Parenting Magazine, Woman's Day, New Woman, Scholastic Choices, Reader's Digest, Woman's World, and Ladies' Home Journal. In addition, he is frequently interviewed for articles appearing in a variety of newspapers and wire services, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, United Press International, USA Today, the Chicago Tribune, and the Chicago Sun Times.

Elizabeth Kennedy Hanaway has a B.A. in Journalism and Mass Communications and has an M.A. in History. She works as a free-lance writer.

Below are articles on television viewing and kids written by the authors:

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Using Earn TV

For over 20 years, I developed and evaluated devices to help parents regain control of their children's TV viewing. My first inventions involved a token actuated meter. Children earned tokens for homework or good behavior, and the token could then be inserted into a meter, and the meter allowed the child to watch TV for 30 minutes. Parents liked this device, and the children were able to reduce TV viewing and increase other activities. I have then decided to automate this system to make it even easier to use. My most recent invention, called Earn TV, is described below.

If there are several television sets in the house, parents might connect an Earn TV to each set. Earn TV could also be connected to computers if a child is spending too much time interacting on the internet as opposed to interacting and playing directly with other children. If a child's television viewing is restricted to only one TV set, then only one Earn TV is needed. The child needs to earn time by doing one of a variety of activities before being able to watch TV. There are three ways the Earn TV device can be used. Parents can put a certain amount of time in the device each day as a reward for doing all chores. Parents can reward their

children by giving them paper tokens, and the tokens can be later exchanged for TV viewing (i.e., the parent would accept the paper token, and put a certain amount of TV viewing in the Earn TV). Finally, a timer can be placed around the child's wrist or leg. When the child engages in activities (e.g., rides a bike), time is earned, which can later be placed into the Earn TV meter in order to turn the TV on for periods of time.

Once the Earn TV meter has been connected to the TV set, children can be told how to play the Earn TV game. They will now need to wear the timer during certain designated activities. It is also important to be very precise in explaining what types of activities earn television viewing. As examples, a child might be able to earn time for any of the following activities: homework, extracurricular reading, chores, games, sports, playing musical instruments, playing with friends, etc. Some activities do not expend actual movements, so when these activities are engaged in, the timer is not being activated. So, if a parent wants the child to read for an hour, and then be able to watch TV for a half hour, the parent just gives the child a paper token and this can later be used to earn a half hour of time. Also, if a child is sick, and the parent wants the child to be able to watch TV without exercising, time can be just inserted into the Earn TV meter.

Changes in viewing television are seen very quickly. With children having to earn the right to watch, they begin to try out new activities. In one or two weeks, dramatic changes in the children's TV viewing are evident. We generally find that after about 4-6 weeks, the children have shifted their interests into more productive activities. At this time the Earn TV can be removed, however, if excessive viewing does return, the children are informed that the Earn TV will be re-established.

I have published an article in *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, entitled "Reducing excessive television viewing while increasing physical activity." In this study, a 9-year old male was provided the opportunity to watch TV contingent on exercising on a bicycle. During the pre-intervention period, the child spent an average of 3.9 hours each day watching TV and 2.5 hours playing Nintendo. At a five month follow-up, after using our program described above, the child's TV viewing was 1.8 hours daily, with no time spent with the Nintendo. Although no weight measurements were recorded, the mother reported to the investigators that her child had lost weight, and that he had previously been overweight. A second study with this device was published in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, entitled "Case study: Reducing TV viewing and corresponding increases in physical activity and subsequent weight loss."

Devices Currently Available

There are now devices to block out objectionable material on the internet (see products below). Software however is no substitute for parental guidance. There

are millions of web sites and many have not been rated by the Recreational Software Advisory Council or Safe Surf.

Token TV- This device allows parents to control their children's TV viewing. Kids either earn or are given tokens, which turn on the TV for 30 minutes.

Time-Scout- This device can be used on any electronic product (TV, computer, etc.), and uses a credit card to provide children certain amounts of viewing time.

TV Allowance - A computer that helps limit overall time TV is on.

Family Safe Media - specializing in parental control devices such as v-chips, internet filtering, and other technologies for kid-safe media.

TVBlanket - TVBlanket is an electronic device that automatically detects and blocks commercials while you are watching.

Tri-Vision International Ltd./Ltee - full service manufacturer and distributor of consumer, commercial and industrial electronic products. Developer and manufacturer of the V-Chip.

Cyber Patrol -Cyber Patrol can block out objectionable material on the internet.

TVInhibitor - A picture helps reduce TV viewing.

Cybersitter - Cybersitter can be reached at this site.

Surfwatch - Surfwatch can be reached at this site

TV-Turnoff Network (Formerly TV-Free America) is a nonprofit organzation that encourages children and adults to watch less television in order to promote healthier lives.

Conclusion

Although there are thousands of studies investigating the effects of TV watching on children, there has been little work devoted to what can be done to help children reduce their televiewing. TV locks and computers to limit TV viewing are beneficial, but they do not specifically encourage new behaviors. The V-chip will help parents reduce offensive violence, but in addition to limiting certain types of programs, there is a need to reduce the overall amount of TV viewing and to encourage other behaviors. There is a need for new products that can both reduce TV viewing and help children develop new activities like exercising.

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