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Media Effects on the Young Child

Television programming, advertising, and other forms of electronic media directed at the very youngest children in our society are on the rise. Unfortunately, this upsurge has not been accompanied by a similar growth in our knowledge of how new media may impact young children's cognitive, social, emotional or physical development. And because young children's development at this stage of life is rapid and malleable, media usage could have a significant impact.

The Staggering Statistics:

The statistics concerning media usage in the average American home are staggering.

- Nearly all children, 99 %, live in homes with a TV set and more than half have 3 or more TVs in the home.
- Slightly over 1/3 of 2-7 year olds have a TV in their bedroom, and about 25 % of 0-2 year olds have a TV set in their room!
- The vast majority of children 0-6 year olds are growing up in a home where the TV is an almost constant presence.
- Almost 75% of children ages 0-6 years of age have a computer in their home and about half have a video game player.

The statistics regarding usage by our youngest children are startling as well.

- Although the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television viewing for children under the age of 2, four out of ten (43%) of children 0-2 watch TV everyday and 1 out of 5 watch DVDs everyday.
- Almost three quarters of infants and toddlers have watched TV before the age of 2.
- Children 0-6 years of age spend about 2 hours a day with screen media, about three times as much time as they spend reading or being read to.
- About half of all children under age 6 have used a computer and by the time they are in the 4-6 year old range, 70 % have used a computer.

The Problem from a Child Development Point of View:

Infants and toddlers are **sensory learners**. They need to explore objects and have contact with people in their environment in order to grow cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally. The opportunities to do these things don't come from passively watching television. TV can get in the way of exploring, learning and interacting.

Young children, 0-7 years of age, have immature concepts of identity and reality. They may believe that all or nothing they see on TV is real. And because they have only beginning logic capabilities, they often cannot follow a story line or find the message in a

program. Young children have difficulty seeing the whole picture and may focus on isolated events, coming to their own impressions or conclusions.

Children and Media Violence:

The average child who watches 2 hours of cartoons per day may see nearly 10,000 violent incidents each year. And the number of prime-time programs with violence has steadily increased over the past several years. The accumulated research concerning children and media violence clearly demonstrates a *correlation* between viewing violence and aggressive behaviors.

Beyond that, media violence sends false messages. Violence on TV is often rewarded and seldom has negative consequences. The sheer prevalence of media violence sends the message that violence is everywhere and makes the world seem like a scary place. This is especially troubling because young children need to feel the world is safe in order to approach new experiences with curiosity and openness. Violence on TV is often justified, especially if perpetrated by the “good guy”. Cartoons often depict violence as being funny and don’t show the true consequences of violence.

Many researchers believe that children age 7 and younger are particularly vulnerable to the affects of violence because developmentally they cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. And some children may be affected more than others.

Advertising and Young Children:

It is estimated that children are exposed to 30,000 to 40,000 commercials each year. Advertising to children is big business. Advertisers spend billions of dollars each year advertising to children and with good reason. Children have great influence on what their parents buy. And advertising to children is a very successful way for advertisers to build a solid consumer base.

Children don’t understand the purpose of advertising. Under the age of 8, most children don’t understand that commercials are for selling a product. Children 6 and under are unable to distinguish program content from commercials, especially if their favorite character is promoting a product.

Especially troubling are the food and beverage messages to which children are being exposed. 2/3 of all food messages targeted to children are for snacks, candy and breakfast foods. Less than 2 % of TV commercials are ones that promote a balanced diet. And there is growing evidence that TV advertising for food is shaping our children’s food choices and eating habits.

Research shows that TV viewing is a contributing factor to childhood obesity which is now reaching epidemic proportions. TV viewing is a sedentary activity which lowers the metabolic rate and may take the place of physical activity. And research shows there is a correlation between the amount of TV watched and likelihood of obesity.

What can we do as parents and educators?

We all need to get involved. Parents need to implement steps to curb children’s viewing habits and make informed choices as to what their children are watching. And research needs to vastly increase so that we can better understand the effects of media usage on the youngest members of our society.

