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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the impact of television on young children, with a special emphasis on the relationship among TV, childhood, and violence, and on developmentally appropriate television. Further, the paper provides strategies for parents and early childhood educators to use in taking control of the television. The paper is premised on the following ideas: (1) parents are the real experts on their own children; (2) all children and all families are different; (3) families have different ways of using television; (4) television is not wholly bad--there are both good and bad aspects to television; (5) television influences children--the more they watch, the bigger the influence; (6) talking and thinking about television helps reduce its impact; and (7) early childhood educators can play an important role in helping children think and talk about television. The paper discusses how early childhood educators, in assessing the impact of television on young children's behavior, should consider TV programs in the context of developmental appropriateness. (EV)

**Media Culture and Media Violence:  
Making the Television Work  
For Young Children,  
Early Childhood Educators,  
and Parents**

by

**Wayne Eastman, Ed. D.**

**A paper presented at the  
Third World Forum  
on  
Early Care and Education**

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## ABSTRACT

It is obvious that television plays a dominant role in our society. Television, on its own, is neither bad nor good. It offers many benefits - awareness, entertainment, education and relaxation. Television can also impact negatively on young lives such as promoting passivity, consumerism, and violence. It can detract children from other important activities like reading and playing. How it affects children, family, and early childhood educators depends on how it is used.

It is widely understood that very young children have difficulty separating fact from fantasy. This makes them particularly vulnerable to TV's influences. By the time they are eight or nine, most children have become quite skilled at interpreting TV's messages.

What effect does television have on a young child's behaviours? Violence and aggression is the area of greatest concern to most parents and educators. Research has shown that excessive viewing of TV violence can affect children adversely. Closely allied to concerns about television violence are those about sex and sexuality, and the way they are portrayed on the home screen.

This paper is intended to give an overview of the impact of television on young children, with a special emphasis on the relationship between TV, childhood and violence as well as developmentally appropriate television. Furthermore, the presentation will provide strategies for parents and early childhood educators to take control of the television. Early childhood educators, in assessing the impact of television on young children's behaviour, should consider TV programs in the context of developmentally appropriateness. Developmental appropriateness should be the criterion used for evaluating television programs.

With television intruding into the lives of preschoolers, it is now essential that parents and early childhood educators teach children television literacy. We teach them to brush their teeth, choose healthy foods, etc. and now parents and early childhood educators must also teach children to think and talk about television.

**Media Culture and Media Violence: Making the  
Television Work for Young Children,  
Parents and Early Childhood Educators**

**By**

**Wayne D. Eastman, Ed. D**

**INTRODUCTION**

Television plays a dominant role in our society. Its turned on in Canadian homes on an average of 25 hours a week.

Television, on its own, is neither good nor bad. It offers many benefits - awareness, entertainment, education, relaxation. Television can also have disturbing affects. It can promote passivity, consumerism, and violence. It can distract children from other important activities like reading and playing. How it affects children, family, and caregivers depends on how it is used (Rogers, 1994).

This presentation will consider a range of activities and strategies to help families and early childhood educators take control of television. Furthermore, this presentation is premised on the following ideas: parents are the real experts on their own children, all children are different and all families are different, families have different ways of using television, television is not bad-there are good things about television and bad things about television, television influences children - the more they watch, the bigger the influence, talking about television and thinking about television helps

reduce its impact, and early childhood educators can play an important part in helping children think and talk about television (Rogers, 1994).

Television is a big part of our lives and its impact will continue to grow. Parents and caregivers teach children many rules and skills so they can negotiate the world safely. We teach them to brush their teeth, choose healthy foods, etc. And now parents and early childhood educators must also teach children to think and talk about television. (Rogers, 1994).

#### **EFFECTS OF TV ON YOUNG CHILDREN**

By the time they graduate from high school, many of today's children will have spent more time in front of a TV than in a classroom. According to Statistics Canada (1999), children aged 2 to 11 watch an average of 20 hours of TV a week, while their teenage brothers and sisters spend 18 hours a week at the same activity.

These numbers mean that TV viewing takes up a big chunk of time for many children. As early childhood educators and parents, this raises concerns about how much TV can influence children's behaviour, values and development, and the effects, if any, that TV can have on children's health (Well Beings, 1992).

When we think about how much television children watch, what we really care about is what they are not doing when they are watching

television - things like: reading, playing outside, etc. (Rodgers, 1994). Parents and early childhood educators want children to have lots of time to do other things besides watch television. It is not a good idea for early childhood educators and parents to get into the habit of using television as a child minder, because this results in long periods of unsupervised viewing, sometimes of material that is not suitable for young children. It is generally recognized that a certain amount of viewing is normal and even good for children, as it can be entertaining, informative and socially relevant. A lot of viewing, though, offers decreasing returns. In this, as in other areas, too much of any one thing is not good for young children, experts say. Children's time might be better spent doing things that teach them more about their world and encourage them to develop their talents, minds and physical abilities (Well Beings, 1992).

Most experts do not define heavy viewing but prefer to describe it as watching television to the exclusion of other activities, such as playing or socializing with family or friends. It has, however, been suggested by at least one researcher that four hours a day would be considered more than enough for young children (Well Beings, 1992).

However, it is not always easy to measure exactly how much time is actually spent watching the screen. Studies have shown that young children are likely to talk or play with one another, rather than follow a program, especially if its content is beyond their

understanding (Well Beings, 1992).

Nevertheless, heavy viewing is the one factor associated with most of the negative effects of television. For this reason alone early childhood educators and parents would be wise to set limits as to how much TV they allow the children in their care to watch every day.

**What effect does television have on a child's behaviour?**

It is widely understood that very young children have difficulty separating fact from fantasy. This makes them particularly vulnerable to TV's influences. By the time they are 8 or 9, though, most children have become quite skilled at interpreting TV's messages (Well Beings, 1992).

Violence and aggression is the area of greatest concern to most parents. Research has shown that excessive viewing of TV violence can affect children negatively. Although this does not mean that TV viewing alone causes aggression in children - or in adults - most experts agree that heavy viewing of violent scenes on TV can contribute to violent or aggressive behaviour in everyday life (Well Beings, 1992). The most frequent reasons given for this are the following: Children tend to imitate behaviour they have seen on TV, even violent behaviour (Bandura et al., 1963). Frequent exposure to TV violence can make children think that violence is normal, even in real life (Rabinovitch, 1972; Snow, 1974; Cline et al., 1973; Hawkins and

Pingree, 1980; among others). Children who take in large quantities of televised violence tend to see the world as a frightening place and grow leery of neighbours and strangers. This can cause them either to withdraw from social contact, or to strike out at the dangerous world that they believe surrounds them (Gerbner et al., 1977). Children who see, over and over again, that violence is an acceptable solution to problems on TV, tend to work out their own problems in the same way. Aggressive skills are acquired earlier and more easily than mental and social skills. Children who admire aggressiveness in their heroes and heroines may see little reason for devoting time and effort to learning other ways of solving problems (Singer and Singer, 1988). Experts are careful to stress that the children who are the most affected are the heavy viewers of programming in which violence plays a major part. This leads them to suggest that, in addition to limiting children's viewing time, early childhood educators and parents should monitor the types of shows children watch, and take time to view along with them. This way, they can explain or otherwise defuse any troublesome material (Well Beings, 1992).

Closely allied to concerns about violence are those about sex and sexuality, and the way they are shown on the home screen. Researchers generally agree that young children, because of their limited life experiences, do not understand references to sex on TV. From an early age, however, children are defining their own sexuality and may be

influenced by what they see on TV. For example, leading roles are more often held by men (Well Beings, 1992) than by women, and sex-role stereotyping, although less common than a few years ago, still persists. From such images children can get the idea that men are superior to women, and that jobs or leisure activities that have traditionally been considered masculine are more exciting or worthwhile (Well Beings, 1992).

Other things that concern the experts have been summed up by the American Academy of Pediatrics (1996) in these words:

Television exposes children to adult behaviours in ways that suggest that these behaviours are normal and risk-free. Sexual behaviour and the use of alcohol and drugs are often portrayed in realistic or inviting terms... The message seems to be that "everyone does it". Television characters rarely say no...

Although television viewing is not the only way children learn about sexuality, and drug and alcohol use, the risks of these behaviours are not given equal time on television.

Recognizing that the family is by far the most important factor in forming children's value systems, most experts see TV as a kind of two-way mirror that both reflects and shapes society's values. In the ongoing debate about the good and bad found in all TV -- from sitcoms and soaps to news, documentaries and talk shows -- other observers have remarked that television consistently demonstrates the difference between right and wrong (Comstock and Paik, 1987).

In practical terms, this means that most parents will find that the basic values present in most types of TV programming are those that they are promoting in their own homes. By watching TV with their children, parents can further ensure that the lessons being taught on the screen are those they want their children to be exposed to. Many concerned adults worry that TV advertising may encourage children to want to buy anything and everything they see.

Because of the importance of this question, public pressure has forced the broadcast and advertising industries to regulate themselves so as to protect young viewers who do not understand the commercial intent of advertising or who are unable to distinguish advertising content from programs.

Advertising directed at children (for example, toys or cereals) is now voluntarily controlled under the terms of the Broadcast Code for advertising to Children. Canadian standards, among the most stringent and best-enforced in the world, limit the number of commercials per program and ban overtly exploitative techniques, such as magnifying the size of a product in order to make it more appealing, and promoting certain products, such as drugs and children's vitamins. Regulations in Quebec go the furthest, banning all advertising on children's programs. These controls do not extend to advertising on adult programming. It is no longer believed that TV viewers -- especially children -- remain passive while watching a program. Experts now

generally recognize that TV contributes to children's cognitive (or intellectual) development, and that they think about and reflect on what they see (Hodge and Tripp, 1986). For parents and early childhood educators, this suggests the need to ensure that children are learning what they want them to learn. It is never too soon to begin: in a recent experiment, infants as young as 14 months old learned how to manipulate a toy through televised demonstrations (Meltzoff, 1988). Because children tend to imitate what they see, parent, consumer, medical and health groups have long criticized the types of foods featured or advertised on children's programs such as sugar-coated cereals, pop, candy, desserts, snacks and fast foods. They have noted the poor health habits of many prime-time TV heroes and heroines -- everything from driving without seatbelts to drinking, eating junk foods or indulging in high-risk behaviour. Pressure from these groups has paid off to a certain extent: high risk behaviours like smoking or driving without seatbelts have either disappeared from the small screen, or diminished in recent years.

On the other hand, TV has had, and continues to have, good effects on children's health. Of special note are campaigns designed by governments and public-interest groups to change behaviour and attitudes towards a variety of health-related issues: mental illness, substance abuse, seatbelts, cancer, heart disease, pregnancy, AIDS. Also of interest is the growing use of television in institutions for

children with behavioural problems where specially designed programming can encourage acceptable behaviour, or in hospitals where TV can be used to treat various ailments. It can relieve the anxieties of young children about to undergo surgery, or simply to offer companionship and entertainment (Well Beings, 1992).

At least one research study (Dietz and Gortmaker, 1985) has found a relationship between heavy TV viewing and obesity in some children and adolescents. The reasons that were suggested include:

- . the fact that watching TV requires very little energy compared to other activities;
- . TV viewing replaces activities that use up more energy;
- . the habit of snacking often accompanies TV viewing;
- . high-calorie food is advertised or otherwise featured on TV;
- . favourite TV stars, who may eat a lot without ever seeming to gain weight, are imitated (Well Beings, 1992).

Researchers tell us that television does shape our children's understanding of the world. Television violence makes some children more aggressive and others more fearful. Television affect children's health, their eating habits and their ideas about people. The more children watch, the more television affects them. Research also tells us that the more children talk about television, the less television affects them (Rodgers, 1994).

At home, there are two ways to deal with the effects of television on children. First, manage television more effectively. Think about

what you watch and when you watch it, be choosy about what you watch and sometimes choose not to watch. Second, talk about television when children ask questions, look and listen more carefully and play games while you watch (Rodgers, 1994).

How can you tell if your child is watching too much television? Start by looking at your child's life as a whole and complete the following quiz.

**WATCHING TOO MUCH?**

QUIZ Part :I	YES	NO
(1) Does my child play outside?		
(2) Does she play imaginary games?		
(3) Does he play with other children?		
(4) Does she enjoy music?		
(5) Does he have a special interest/activity?		
(6) Does she do cerebral activities?		
(7) Does he do chores?		
(8) Does she take part in outside activities?		
(9) Does he enjoy being read to?		
(10) Does she participate in physical activities?		

**KEY:** If you answered yes to 4 or more questions about your child, then your child's life includes a variety of activities.

If you answered yes to 6 or more, your child's life is pretty full. Television is just one part of it. Your child probably doesn't have a problem.

If you answered no to 7 or more questions about your child, then perhaps tv is taking over.

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Mind the Set, 1994.

There is a link between exposure to television violence and violence in society. The effects of television violence on children can have a serious impact on school/centre, on play, and on home life (Rodgers, 1994). Fact, the more TV violence children see, the more likely it is that they will think that violence is a normal part of life. Children who watch a lot of violence believe that it is alright for people to be violent. Fact, watching violence makes both children and adults more likely to act in violent ways, like shouting, bullying, and play and real fighting. Fact, watching violence scares children. They start to think of the world as a dangerous and scary place. Fact, real life factors can make children vulnerable to television violence. The effects of TV may be stronger on children who have experience with real violence, children who live in poverty or who have been abused or neglected. Fact, talking and thinking about television makes children less vulnerable to TV violence. Children learn nonviolent ways to handle problems from adults who watch TV with them and who suggest other ways of solving problems (Rodgers, 1994).

Television can have two major effects on children's health. First, children who watch a lot of television, are less physically fit. They spend less time running, jumping, etc. and doing all the other things that help children develop strong hearts, lungs, and muscles. The second effect is on children's nutrition and their ideas about eating. Children are more likely to choose foods they see on TV

commercials and that means their choices are not very healthy. About a quarter of all commercials are for food, but fresh fruit and vegetables are hardly ever shown. The foods that are advertised contain lots of sugar, salt, and fats. During children's shows, there are more high sugar cereals advertised than any other food (Rodgers, 1994).

Time after time parents note that their children's behaviour seems to deteriorate just after they finish watching television; this post-television crankiness represents a Re-entry Syndrome. Post-television crankiness is an important signal to parents. A young child's behaviour is a parent's most valuable source of information about the child's mental state and emotional and physical well-being. An understanding of children's behaviour pattern, of how their behaviour reflects inner equilibrium, is essential to successful child rearing (Winn, 1985).

As the evidence mounts that the viewing of television by preschool children does not lead to significant learning gains, the question arises: how much do three - and four - year olds actually understand of what they see on television? A number of studies of children's actual comprehension of TV material find that while children enjoy programs intended for their age group, their understanding of what is happening on the screen is very small (Winn, 1985).

Television viewing reduces children's play. This issue is especially relevant for preschoolers because virtually all the activities young children engage in during their waking hours fall into the category of play. Clearly the two - or three - or four - year olds who spend two or three hours daily watching TV are spending significantly less time playing than if they did not watch television at all. Not only does TV viewing lead to a reduction in play time; there is evidence to suggest that it has affected the nature of children's play, particularly indoor play (Winn, 1985).

Since play is clearly a vehicle for many of the child's most important learnings and the means whereby he is able to practice and develop behaviours necessary to his success as a social being, what are the consequences of the loss of play time in today's children (Winn, 1985)?

#### **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE TELEVISION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

Children have central developmental needs in the early years, which must be met for their healthy development to occur. For early childhood educators, developmentally appropriate practice means working with children in ways that support and promote their optimal development needs. We can use the same definition for assessing developmentally appropriate television for young children (Levin ,

1994). The chart on the following page considers a developmental framework for assessing television germane to young children.

A very disturbing picture emerges when children's early developmental needs are used as the criteria for assessing current TV programming.

<b>A DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING TELEVISION</b>		
<b>Developmental issues -</b>	<b>What children see on TV -</b>	<b>What children should see -</b>
To establish a sense of <b>trust and safety</b> .	The world is dangerous; enemies are everywhere; weapons are needed to feel safe.	A world where people can be trusted and help each other, where safety and predictability can be achieved, where fears can be overcome.
To develop a sense of <b>autonomy with connectedness</b> .	Autonomy is equated with fighting and weapons. Connectedness is equated with helplessness, weakness, and altruism.	A wide range of models of independence within meaningful relationships and of autonomous people helping each other.
To develop a sense of <b>empowerment and efficacy</b> .	Physical strength and violence equals power and efficacy. Bad guys always return, and a range of ways to have an impact are not shown.	Many examples of people having a positive effect on their world without violence.
To establish <b>gender identity</b> .	Exaggerated, rigid gender divisions-- boys are strong, violent, and save the world; girls are helpless, victimized and irrelevant to world events.	Complex characters with wide-ranging behaviours, interests, and skills; commonalities between the sexes overlapping in what both can do.
To develop an <b>appreciation of diversity</b> among people.	Racial and ethnic stereotyping. Dehumanized enemies. Diversity is dangerous. Violence against those who are different is justified.	Diverse peoples with varied talents, skills, and needs, who treat each other with respect, work out problems nonviolently, and enrich each others' lives.
To construct the foundations of <b>morality and social responsibility</b> .	One-dimensional characters who are all good or bad. Violence is the solution to interpersonal problems. Winning is the only acceptable outcome. Bad guys deserve to be hurt.	Complex characters who act responsibly and morally toward others-- showing kindness and respect, working out moral problems. taking other people's points of view.
To have opportunities for <b>meaningful play</b> .	Program content is far removed from childrens experience or level of understanding. Toys are linked to programs promoting imitative, not creative play.	Meaningful content to use in play, which resonates deeply with developmental needs; shows not linked to realistic toys so that children can create their own unique play.

**SOURCE:** Levin and Carlson-Paige, Young Children, July, 1994.

Ideally children's media would provide program content to help children engage positively with the issues most basic to healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development. Instead, we find that healthy growth is seriously undercut by practices that trivialize and distort children's basic developmental concerns and undermine their ability to resolve them (Levin, 1994).

The fact that television programming seriously threatens children's play only serves to increase the negative effects of TV on children's development. In losing control of their play, children are losing a vital resource for making sense of experience, for learning, and for gaining the equilibrium they need for healthy development (Levin, 1994).

#### **TELEVISION USE IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM**

Because TV can have such varied effects on children's lives and health, early childhood educators should be cautious about making it part of their daily routine. Generally, however, the problems associated with heavy viewing do not apply to children in child care and after-school programs. Research clearly shows that children involved in formal child care programs tend to spend much less time watching TV at home. Of greater interest to early childhood educators, then, is the considerable body of research that claims that moderate TV

viewing can be **good** for children; that is the good effects of television (Well Beings, 1992).

Parents have long been aware of the unique influence of TV on their preschool-age children. They have observed that, even with toys around them and their mothers in the room, infants will turn or roll towards television and watch the color, movement and sounds coming from the screen. They have also noted that children as young as 2 years of age show preferences for certain TV programs, and by 2 1/2 can recognize gas station signs and sing jingles from TV commercials.

Research, however, has only recently concerned itself with investigating the positive relationship between TV and the pre-school-age child. The results of these studies so far indicate that the effects of TV viewing are not all bad. With the help of interested adults, good television -- television that has been carefully crafted for its audience -- can stimulate, enrich and improve the lives of young viewers (Well Beings, 1992).

Of particular significance to parents and early childhood educators are findings that suggest that TV can positively influence behaviour and give children values that help them deal with the world. Evidence shows that children who watch programs with positive social themes are more likely to exhibit behaviour such as thoughtfulness, helpfulness, cooperation and sharing. Furthermore, research indicates

that programs designed to produce positive social attitudes have twice the impact on behaviour that violent ones do, not only increasing viewers' feelings for others but also lowering their antisocial tendencies (Well Beings, 1992).

A positive correlation has also been discovered between TV and the development of reading skills. Reiser et al. (1984), Saloman (1977) and others argue that well-designed and regularly viewed materials can motivate and teach elementary reading skills. They also suggest that TV enables children to become interested in a wider range of books and can stimulate interest in reading through dramatizations of stories (Well Beings, 1992).

Findings linked with *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* further suggest that young viewers are better able to name geometric figures, recognize letters and words, and discuss themselves and their surroundings than peers who have had no experience with these programs. Although child development theory has identified particular average ages at which children develop these skills, there is plenty of evidence that practice in skills such as matching identical pictures and memorizing letters and sounds can improve them. Many preschool educational programs can offer this practice (Well Beings, 1992).

In addition to these observations, it is also widely recognized that television **can**:

1. increase conversational abilities;
2. satisfy some of the young child's thirst for knowledge;
3. motivate creativity;
4. bring an awareness of global issues, such as ecology, into children's lives in a way they can understand;
5. motivate critical and evaluative thinking;
6. give children ideas for play;
7. entertain (Well Beings, 1992).

However, TV **cannot** do these things alone. Simply bringing the child and the TV into physical proximity does not automatically result in a healthy and fruitful interaction between the two. TV's impact depends on three basic factors (Well Beings, 1992).

First, what children learn from TV depends on what they bring to the screen. Factors such as age, sex, intellectual ability, family background, level of skill development, emotional maturity, and even how tired or alert they are at the time of viewing, influence how children respond to a program (Well Beings, 1992).

Secondly, any consideration of learning from TV depends on what the screen brings to the child. Content is very important. Public television offers non-violent, socially positive programming that

encourages viewer interaction, and both commercial and cable networks deliver powerful informational pieces. Only if children are directed towards these types of programs can TV teach them what they need to know (Well Beings, 1994).

Lastly, and most importantly, what young children learn from TV is directly related to the amount of time parents and early childhood educators give to the viewing experience. Research provides conclusive evidence that adults who watch and discuss television content with children greatly enhance children's learning. Both intellectually and socially, then, television has the greatest impact when it is reinforced and modified by the adults in the child's world (Well Beings, 1992).

The following guidelines are based on the preceding factors and offer further suggestions for ensuring that learning from TV does take place in the child care setting:

Early childhood educators should select programs. Good programs are respectful of children's ages, abilities, needs and emotional maturity. For example, very young children, particularly those unfamiliar with stories, do not have fully developed logical thinking skills. For them, programs like *Polka Dot Door* (TV Ontario) and *Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood* (PBS), which demonstrate links between cause and effect and show how things are done without recourse to visual and

auditory attention grabbers, are the most appropriate. A good rule of thumb is to choose a program the way one would choose a good book for a child (Well Beings, 1992).

Sharing the viewing experience will allow early childhood educators to verbally review and reinforce learning, and provides the information necessary for developing suitable follow-up activities.

Learning takes place whenever early childhood educators encourage children to interact with what they watch, rather than absorb visual and sound images passively. Every time early childhood educators sit down to watch TV, they should be prepared to talk about the program.

Early childhood educators can talk about what the children might see. For example, if the program is about farm animals, early childhood educators can prepare the children for viewing by having them predict what animals they might see. Getting children to really think about what they will be viewing gets their minds in motion (Ell Beings, 1992).

During viewing it is a good idea to talk about what is happening, asking questions such as, 'Do you think this is real? Do you know anyone like that? What do you think will happen next? Why do you think that?' (Well Beings, 1992).

After viewing early childhood educators can talk about what was seen and heard. New ideas can be reviewed and program content discussed by asking questions such as, 'What was your favourite part of

the program? What didn't you like? Was anything scary? Did anything surprise or confuse you?' (Well Beings, 1992)

Always reinforce and extend the learning. Information and examples of skills need to be reinforced by experience if they are to be of any use to young children. Whenever possible, early childhood educators can turn a TV lesson into an expanded learning experience by following up with play activities: shape newly learned letters in play dough; draw numbers, letters, words, shapes, or characters with the names printed close to their pictures; re-tell a TV story and have children role-play a new ending; and make cut-and-paste pictures of simple words introduced on the screen. There are a variety of ways to reinforce and extend the learning stimulated by TV (Well Beings, 1992).

Early childhood educators can check out the public television networks in their area to see which programs can be purchased or legally copied. TV Ontario, for example, allows educational non-profit organizations in Ontario to copy off the air most children's program broadcast during school hours. These programs can then be shown at more appropriate times (Well Beings, 1992)

A further advantage of using videotapes is that early childhood educators can preview programs for content. The following proven strategies can be used to improve learning from TV:

Keeping in mind you objectives, focus attention on specific program content before the program beings. Directions such

as, "Watch carefully and tell me what lesson the fox learns," or "After the program, I want you to tell me what you learned about keeping the neighbourhood clean," actively involve children in their viewing and help ensure that they will remember what they have seen.

Use the pause function (common to most VCRs) to stop the tape at a key moment to check comprehension and have children predict outcomes or read words from the screen.

Use the VCR's memory function to review the tape. By activating the memory button at the beginning of an important segment, you will be able to review content, reinforce concepts, check for detail, even sing a song.

Use a videotape and a VCR to segment, using only that portion of a program that focuses on your learning objectives.

Try viewing a program or segment without sound to allow children to invent stories to match TV pictures or examine special effects that make a production appear to be real.

When a conscious effort is made by a caring adult, TV can bring a wealth of exciting ideas, images and information to its young viewers. However, it is important to remember that TV is not a babysitter with which to leave children for long stretches of time. Rather, it is a tool for educating and entertaining, and as such it must be used with discretion, wisdom and caution (Well Beings, 1992).

The issues surrounding the use and abuse of TV are complex. Research clearly outlines the possible harmful effects of unrestricted TV viewing upon young children. At the same time, it suggests that good things can happen to children who view good programming used wisely, TV can have a powerful and positive impact on learning and socialization, and for the parents and early childhood educators of preschoolers, these latter findings remain the most significant (Well Beings, 1994).

#### **TV GUIDANCE**

Prior to considering TV guidance, several facts will be put forth. In 1991, the Ontario Medical Association stated that TV watching is a leading cause of sleeplessness, depression and hyperactivity in children. It is estimated that by the time kids graduate from high school, they will have spent only 11,000 hours in school, and more than 22,000 hours in front of the tube. It has been documented that U.S. - made children programs have an hourly average of 43 violent acts (Today's Parents, May, 1992).

Below is a list of positive steps families can take germane to TV guidance:

1. When your child is watching TV, watch with him. You need to know what he's watching, what he likes or dislikes. Talk about what you see on TV together.

2. Limit the amount of time that the television is on. Be selective about what you allow during the time allowed.
3. Provide alternatives - reading to him, music, crafts, etc.
4. Be careful about indiscriminate viewing of news programs. Children who watch a lot of news can become desensitized to acts of violence, and they can become anxious about what they are witnessing worrying about what they see on the news will happen to them.
5. Plan special viewing times with your child. Go through the TV listings together. Find shows the whole family can enjoy and then schedule them as a family event.
6. Notice when the TV is left on just for background noise and turn it off.
7. Become politically involved. If you see things that you find offensive, write to the station that aired it, and to the Canadian Radio - television and Telecommunications Commission.
8. Set the example by not watching too much TV yourself. Children whose parents are always glued to the tube are more likely to become heavy watchers themselves.
9. Try not to use the television as a babysitter. Even very young children can be affected by what they see. If you're busy and can't play together, set up toys and activities your little one can handle on her own, such as building blocks, colouring books, tea sets.
10. Don't watch adult programming in the company of your child, and don't assume that he is not paying attention just because the show is not a 'children's show.' Even leaving the television on while you and your child are engaged in some other activity can be distracting for him, and set a pattern of TV dependence. Turn the television off, and listen to music. Many children's books come with accompanying music or story tapes.
11. Be aware that sometimes a child will be unintentionally exposed to adult programming. If your daughter is restless or ill in the night, for instance, and comes down to 'sleep'

on the couch while you are watching a late-night program, she may be exposed to inappropriate scenes.

12. Use your VCR to record children's shows, and then have the child view those tapes instead of the TV programs. Share your VCR tapes with friends.
13. Talk with your child about what is real and not real on television. Talk about the concept of acting -- relate acting to a game of make-believe. Also, talk about cartoon characters. You might occasionally want to ask your child if the characters are real, and what would happen to real people and animals if they were in similar situations.
14. Be aware of your child's reaction to what she is watching. If she is becoming agitated or aggressive, turn the TV off and do something else together. (Today's Parent, May 1994)

#### **CONTROLLING THE TV: PARENTAL INITIATIVES**

Managing TV more effectively means being choosy about what and when you watch. It also means sometimes choosing another activity instead of watching TV. Some parents help their children manage their TV viewing with formal rules about how much they can watch and what they can watch. Others manage less formally, turning off the TV when they feel it has been on too long or changing the channel when they think the program is inappropriate (Rodgers, 1994).

Think about what your goals are in managing television. You can write them down, talk about them, and remember your goals may change as you grow and change. Here are several sample goals: to have my child see less violence; to make sure my child is watching shows that are right for his age; to help my child enjoy good TV programs; to prevent

my child from learning stereotypes; to encourage my children to play outside more; and to help my child learn to manage TV on her own (Rodgers, 1994).

To achieve your goals, you can talk to your family about the way they use television. You can provide them with guidelines for using TV in the home. You can make rules about television. If you make rules for your children or give them guidelines, make sure that they really achieve your goals. So you want your child to play outside more. If you tell her that she cannot watch cartoons, it may or may not help. A better rule might be that she can watch TV after she has played outside (Rodgers, 1994).

Listed below are some guidelines parents can offer their children. What to watch: we don't watch shows with fighting in them, we'll choose your programs together, and we can watch the following show together. How much to watch: two hours of TV per day, 5 programs per week, only on weekends, and one program to watch after chores (Rodger, 1994).

Listed below are some tips and techniques for managing television more effectively: have children, even very young children, make their own television guides each week; use the videotape recorder - shows don't have to be watched when they are broadcast, video tape them and watch them at a convenient time; find out what programs other people recommend; use the weekly television listings - don't turn on the TV to

see what is on, instead open up the TV listings and check to see if there is something on that you or your children want to watch, and only turn on the TV if there is something good on; give children other things to do - get out puzzles, craft materials, etc; keep a list of shows you like - tape it to the TV, you can do the same with a list of shows you don't like; and be a good role model (Rodgers, 1994).

One good technique for using television effectively is to keep a family TV record. Keep a record of your families TV habits: day, time turned on, time turned off, shows watched, and who watched. At the end of a week, add up the number of hours of TV watched by the family: who watched the most, who watched the least, and who watched together. Think about the shows your family watched: cartoons, children's shows, etc. (Rodgers, 1994)

Watching and talking about TV should be a technique used by all families. Here are some questions and guidelines to help the family start talking as they are watching.

There are lots of reasons to talk to children about what they see on TV. Children come to television without all the same general knowledge that adults have, so sometimes their understanding of what they watch on the screen is less than complete. When you talk to them about what they watch, you can fill in the gaps (Rodgers, 1994).

Here are some questions to help get conversations about TV started: Is this real? How does it make your feel? Do you like it?

What don't you like about it? How do you think it will end? How do the people in the show feel? As you talk, you can draw children's attention to things that are important, like the differences between reality and television or like how violence is used (Rodgers, 1994).

These questions will help to alert children to the purpose of commercials and some of the techniques that advertisers use: What are they selling? Do we want the product, Why? Do we need that product, why? (Rodgers, 1994) TV is a great starting point for discussions on a wide range of difficult topics - violence, etc. If you have an older child, the following questions are relevant: Do you think they handled the problem well? Has anything happened like this to any of your friends? (Rodgers, 1994).

Conversations are better than lectures for getting across ideas to our children. Until they are about 10 years old, children have troubles understanding abstract ideas, like: all people are equal, violence is not the only way to solve problems. We can help them understand these kinds of ideas by showing them how they work in real life (Rodgers, 1994).

Explain to children what a stereotype is in words they can understand. Give them some examples of stereotypes and then ask them to give you some examples of stereotypes so you can find out if they understand (Rodgers, 1994).

Here are other things you can discuss with your children: how people look on TV, TV kids, and violence.

Get children thinking about what they watch, by turning TV into a treasure hunt. Ask preschoolers to look for one thing at a time, just commercials, for example. After you and your child have identified a few commercials, move on to another item; for example, good guys, a song you know, bad guys, puppets, cartoons, real people, people your age, people doing something you are not allowed to do, someone who is sad, and someone who is supervised (Rodgers, 1994).

Here are several child development facts germane to television and preschoolers (age 2 to 5): interest in TV is growing, they have trouble following and remembering stories, they may know TV isn't always real, they look at TV when a commercial starts, they pay a lot of attention to commercials, they don't know there is a difference between commercials and programs, they trust commercials, and they are likely to imitate things on TV.

Other games and activities to get children thinking about the television include: who advertises, name that problem, how will it end, slogan mania, TV rating books, letter writing, call in a comment, TV without a picture, and TV without sound (Rodgers, 1994).

Television influences you and your family, but did you know that you can influence TV? Your letters and phone calls can make a difference. Advertisers are companies with products to sell.

Advertisers realize that if people watching don't like the programs, they won't buy the products advertised. Also write or talk to broadcasters who put programming on the air, to government officials, to your member of parliament, and to organizations such as the Alliance for Children and Television (Rodgers, 1994).

The following seven suggestions, as outlined by the Canadian Pediatric Society (1992) can help parents eliminate mindless viewing and ensure that children take advantage of one of the most powerful informational and entertainment tools at their disposal - the television: supervise TV viewing, watch with your children, talk about what you see, expand the TV experience, provide your children with other options, be a good role model, and become more 'television literate'.

**TAKING POSITIVE ACTION: THE ROLE OF ECE'S  
IN HELPING CHILDREN/FAMILIES  
COPE WITH TELEVISION**

Television can foster positive social behaviour, it can increase conversational and reading abilities, it can motivate creativity, and it can satisfy some of the young child's curiosity for knowledge. In accomplishing these ends, however, the role of the interested adult is critical. The following guidelines will help ensure that both early childhood educators and children gain the most from their viewing experiences: select programs wisely; watch with the children; talk to

the children before viewing, during viewing, and after viewing; reinforce and extend the learning from viewing a TV program, and where legally possible, tape program from TV (Well Beings, 1992).

There are many ways that child care professionals can help children gain some control and 'get the power' to deal with images and issues presented on TV. It is very important to realize that children today know much more than they understand. They want to look and sound like the adult images they see portrayed on TV but they still feel and think like children. Because of their lack of experience, children interpret information about the world differently than adults (Stone-Zukowski, 1994).

For example, children under the age of six are in the preoperational stage of development. At this age, they cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. They have great difficulty processing and coping with violence and human tragedy. Dr. Benjamin Spock recommends that children under four years of age have little or no exposure to violence in the media (Stone-Zukowski, 1994).

The following are some suggested activities for helping children cope with the television and giving them a sense of hope about the future:

1. Discussion: assure children that you share their concerns. When dealing with young children ensure that they know trusted adults are there to protect them.
2. Knowledge: Provide opportunities for children to learn how

movies and television shows are made. You can have children visit a TV station, make or draw cartoons about TV shows, make a video, and make a commercial.

3. Critical Viewing: you can teach critical viewing skills by: discussing alternate ways of solving problems other than violent solutions; seeking out positive role models; investigating related historical facts, for example, the Ninja Turtles were named after famous artists; and doing a survey of favourite TV shows and learning why they are so popular.
4. Critical Choices: Encourage children to make critical choices about the shows they watch on TV. Help parents recognize the importance of making choices that fit with their family standards. Learn about the rating systems established by the CRTC. Provide resources for parents and children that will help them make choices.
5. Fantasy: Encourage opportunities for children to express their feelings in ways that feel good, are non-threatening and removed from reality. This can be done by: role playing monsters, creatures from outer space, dinosaurs, and fairytale characters; singing and writing songs about the rain forest animals, etc.; telling true or make-believe stories and using puppets to share concerns; and expressing feelings through visual arts, for example making a piece mural.
6. Action Groups: Children can work with adults to become aware of various lobby groups and government agencies that can have a positive impact on the issues raised on TV. For example, the children can: learn about conflict resolution practices, declare a war toy free zone at their centre, learn about environmental issues, and contact the CRTC (Stone-Zukowski, 1994).

As professionals working with children, we can help them understand the role of television and deal with the issues facing them in our world. This can be done by planning our curriculum so that it provides opportunities for children to share their views, gain

knowledge, go beyond TV visions, develop critical viewing skills, make critical choices, build on resources, work together with parents, and have the freedom to play (Stone-Zukowski, 1994)

**ORGANIZATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS TO  
ASSIST PARENTS AND Early childhood educators**

Below is a list of organizations and publications which may be of some benefit to parents and early childhood educators:

1. The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. The CBSC administers the application of the new TV violence code and handles complaints about TV violence. Address:

P.O. Box 3265  
Station "D"  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6H8  
(613) 233-4607

2. Canadian Radio-television. Telecommunications Commission. The CRTC is a regulatory body that oversees the radio and TV industry and issues licences. THE CRTC monitors the resolution of complaints about television directed to the CBSC. Address:

CRTC  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N2  
(819) 997-0313

3. Citizens Against Violence on the Screen. A volunteer advocacy group concerned with the amount of violence children are exposed to in all forms of entertainment.

CONTACT  
Georgina Gaba-Hanash  
215 51st Avenue  
Lachine, Quebec H8T 2W3  
(514) 634-1429

4. Alliance for Children and Television. A non-profit advocacy organization working to improve the quality of children's programming. The Alliance presents annual awards for high-quality children's television programs produced and telecast in Canada. Address:

234 Eglinton Avenue E  
Suite 405  
Toronto, Ontario M4P 1K5  
(416) 482-0321

5. The Vanier Institute of The Family. A national voluntary organization monitoring family trends and assessing public policies in terms of their impact on Canadian families conducts research in the area of family violence and violence and Children. Address:

120 Holland Avenue  
Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 0X6  
(613) 722-4007

6. London Family Court Clinic Violence Prevention Services and Research. A non-profit children's mental health organization conducting research in the area of violence in the media and the effect on children. Address:

254 Pall Mall ST.  
Suite 200  
London, Ontario N6A 5P6  
(519) 679-7250

7. Your Child and TV Violence (Pamphlet)  
Federation of Women/Teachers' Associations of Ontario.  
Order from FWTAO, 1260 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario,  
M5R 2B8.
8. Television and Your Children: A Guide for Concerned Parents. By Carmen Luke, Kogan, and Woo, 1988.

9. Unplugging the Plug-In Drug By Marie Winn, Penguin Books, 1981.
10. The TV Smart Book for Kids. By Peggy Charren, E.P. Dutton, 1986.

## SUMMARY

Television plays a dominant role in our society. It is turned on in Canadian homes on average of 25 hours a week. Ten years ago we had a handful of channels to choose from; today, we can select from over fifty. For children it has become parent, teacher, and playmate.

Television, on its own, is neither good nor bad. It offers many benefits- awareness, education, etc. Television can also have disturbing effects. It can detract children from other important activities like reading, playing, family responsibilities, and dreaming. How it affects children depends on how it is used.

Because nearly everyone watches at least some TV, we often take it for granted. Hence, this presentation is intended to provide activities and strategies to give parents, children, and early childhood educators the tools to take control of television.

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