

Think Outside the Box

*How to turn off the TV and take back your family life.
by Kirsetin Karamarkovich Morello*

Katie Summers, a San Francisco area mother of three young girls, describes her 3-year-old daughter, Caroline, watching TV: "Caroline's seated back against the couch, eyes glued to the action, thumb sometimes in her mouth, with no expression, and she talks to no one."

Sound familiar? It does to me. I have to admit that it's a whole lot easier to prepare dinner, have a quiet cup of coffee, or read the Bible while my children are zoned out with Zaboomafoo. I do try to limit my kids' viewing and make sure they only see programs I approve of. But despite the proliferation of wholesome, educational, and entertaining children's shows, sitting our kids in front of the TV may not be as harmless as it seems.

The statistics are alarming. Each year, most children in the United States spend 1,500 hours in front of the television and only 33 hours in meaningful conversation with their parents. That's about four hours a day involved with television versus just over five minutes involved with parents. Many small children have a favorite television show. And it doesn't take much for a show or two a day, aimed at entertaining and educating a young child, to grow into a 1,500 hour per year habit. Clearly, even the best parents have a hard time reining in the TV monster.

Perhaps that's why the most recent recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is no TV for children under the age of 2. While this may seem extreme, Dr. Jeffrey J. Young, a pediatrician in Green Bay, Wisconsin, does not find it unreasonable. "This is such a critical time of development for children," he says. "An hour of television is an hour that could have been spent in a developmentally appropriate activity." The AAP further recommends that children under the age of 4 be limited to one hour of total screen viewing time per day—that includes television, computer, and video games.

Once children get to the elementary years, the battle to control their television viewing can get even more difficult. That means it's essential that parents decide early on what kind of viewing habits they want to have as a family and stick with those habits as their children grow.

How Much Is Too Much?

My husband and I have wrestled with this question for our kids and ourselves. The key for us has been to consider the kinds of activities that are most important to our family and how they help us grow into the people we want to become.

Once we determined what we'd like to do with our time, we resolved to schedule any TV watching around those priorities, rather than doing it the other way around. The result is that we spend more time talking, getting outside, and playing together than we used to and we're all better off for the change.

Ultimately, the right amount of television viewing is different for each family. As you determine what's best for your family, consider these benefits to watching less television:

Children learn to entertain themselves. When we provide basic tools, our children turn out some amazing creations. Towers emerge from blocks and castles arise from the sandbox. "In today's society, boredom is seen as a major problem and TV is a quick fix," says Dr. Robert Mackinder, a pediatrician in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "Children should have other outlets for their free time: paper, crayons, crafts, games, balls and," he emphasizes, "books."

Children learn crucial thinking skills while entertaining themselves. As educational as many children's television shows are, they are not truly interactive. Shouting "a clue, a clue," at Joe on Blue's Clues is no substitute for a real-life treasure hunt.

Games that actively involve a child stimulate cognitive abilities and develop crucial thinking skills. Dr. Young asserts, "All of the most crucial brain development of a child occurs before the age of 4 years. It makes empiric sense that television watching will influence this critical phase of brain development, changing forever how children react to stimuli."

It encourages problem solving and can lengthen a child's attention span. When children play with Legos, they are forced to think about how the blocks need to fit together to create the image in their mind. Then they figure it out—all by themselves.

Concentrating on finding solutions rather than being constantly stimulated by characters on TV also helps children focus, which can develop their attention span. "Television provides a great deal of rapid-fire stimulation," says Dr. Young. "If this is provided to the brain during vital stages of development, the brain may be trained to seek out this level of stimulation all the time."

It keeps kids moving. A 1999 national study reports that one in eight children (ages 6-11) are overweight, a startling increase from the one in twenty-five children who were overweight in the 1970's. Watching an inordinate amount of television can be a risk factor for childhood obesity. Dr. Young and Dr. Mackinder have both seen the effects in their practices. "The most obvious difference in children who watch a lot of television is evident as soon as they walk in the room. It is their weight!" says Dr. Young. Dr. Mackinder agrees, noting that children who watch an excessive amount of TV "tend to be more sedentary, less likely to engage in sporting activities, have poor eating habits, and have a higher incidence of obesity."

In addition to noting the metabolic factors at work, Dr. Young points to the obvious: "What do we typically do while watching television? Snack." Instead, we can encourage our kids to play tag in the backyard, kick a soccer ball, or ride a bike. By teaching our children that active exercise is fun, we provide the framework for a lifetime of healthy habits.

Your values become their values. As children grow and watch more network and cable TV, they are exposed to an overwhelming array of messages that do not reflect biblical standards. Obviously, there's plenty of sex and violence to avoid. But even "safe" programs often send a clear message that wealth, beauty, and power are fundamental to happiness.

Having a particular anything, including a toy, a friend, a body shape, or a car, won't ever produce contentment so limiting our children's exposure to people who say otherwise is imperative. In direct contrast to what network and cable TV assert, the apostle Paul tells us "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Tim. 6:10). None of us wish this emptiness for our children. Instead of allowing the television to usurp our authority, we can reclaim control. We can keep these strangers and their harmful messages out of our homes.

You'll have more family time. When the TV is on, the family is tuned in but not to one another. If we want our kids to value family time, we have to demonstrate that it's a priority. "Children model parental behavior," notes Dr. Young. "Parents need to turn off the television, pick up a book, write a letter, or go for a walk."

We can also use the hour or so of reclaimed time for devotions, prayer, or Bible study—activities that draw the family closer to one another and to God. When we spend time before God as a family, our children learn to make worship an integral part of their day. Older children have the chance to ask serious questions about putting spiritual beliefs into practice. Perhaps more importantly, we have the chance to answer.

Making Less TV a Reality

In the beginning, children of all ages (not to mention Mom and Dad) will need help redirecting their energy. There will be difficult moments but this is a hill worth climbing. Not only is this an opportunity to build healthy habits in our children, it is a chance to create the family life we want them to remember. Here's how:

Explain what you're doing. Most children thrive within defined parameters. There's no need to have a philosophical discussion with a 3-year-old. Simply explain that this is a new family rule, and that your child will be playing more fun games or reading books instead. Older children might want to know why you've made this change, so explain it in positive terms. Let them know that you and your spouse will be watching less TV, too—we'll get to that in a moment.

The children don't have to agree. God has given parents authority in our homes as well as the responsibility of raising children who honor him with their lives. We make the decisions, even when our kids protest. Dr. Young encourages parents to "stress from the beginning that television time is a privilege, not a right."

Provide lots of alternatives. "We have long known that the more areas of the brain that are used in activities, the better the learning that occurs," says Dr. Young. Try something new. Try something old. The important thing is that we engage our children's imaginations. Take a trip to the library, make clay sculptures, rediscover nature, or play cards (remember Go Fish?). In time, your children will learn to make their own fun.

Set the example. "Children's viewing habits tend to mimic their parents," says Dr. Mackinder. If we want our kids to be creative thinkers, to enjoy exercise, and to watch very little television, we must model that behavior. Dr. Mackinder stresses, "Moderation is the key. Television is not an evil entity." He acknowledges that many parents occasionally put on a video to get a little time for themselves. "It's okay," he says. "Just not every night."

Simply put, there is more time for family when the television is off. We can stop rushing through dinner so our kids can watch their favorite show or hurrying the children to bed so we can watch our favorite show. Doing so will give us the freedom to savor the moments that ultimately define our lives.

Katherine Vermeer, a Michigan mother of five, says it was wonderful when her family gave up TV entirely for a month and a half last year. "We had more time for reading, playing the piano, games, and just talking to each other," she says. While Katherine admits that turning off the television gave her five children more opportunities to argue with one another, she contends that they also learned something about how to work out their differences.

If you're not ready to get rid of the TV for good, try limiting your viewing for a month. Be intentional about finding other activities to occupy your family's time. At the end of the month, you might find that you've discovered a whole lot more than you've missed.

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Too Much Tube?

Seventy-five percent of teenagers (ages 13-17) know where to find the zip code 90210, made familiar by the television show Beverly Hills 90210. Only 25 percent of teenagers, however, can name the city where the U.S. Constitution was written (Philadelphia). Here's some additional food for thought from the Center for Media Education (cme) and the A. C. Nielsen Company:

In 1950 10 percent of American households had one television

By 1954 this number increased to 50 percent

Since 1978, 98 percent of households have had at least one television

In the average American home, the TV is on 7 hours and 12 minutes per day

25 percent of children ages 2-5 have a TV in their bedroom

52 percent of children ages 5-17 have a TV in their bedroom

54 percent of 4-6 year olds, when asked, said they would choose watching TV over spending time with their father

The average child sees between 20,000 and 30,000 TV commercials in a year

The average American youth spends 900 hours per year in school

The average American youth spends 1,500 hours per year watching TV

59 percent of Americans can name the Three Stooges

17 percent of Americans can name three Supreme Court Justices

—KKM

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