
"Even when my children are enjoying a program that I feel good about. . . the commercial comes on and it's totally inappropriate."

- Baltimore County Parent

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line is that television is a business and businesses exist to make money. Even young children understand about "buying things" so you can begin teaching them about commercials from the start.

Help Your Kids Be Informed Consumers

- Talk about what they're asking you to buy and whether or not it's good for you (like junk food).
- Compare toys you have purchased with the advertising claims. . . have your children redo the commercial based on what they know about the product.
- Make children aware of the amount of time devoted to commercials during their favorite shows. . . time them or count them for fun.
- Help children figure out who the advertisers think are watching by the products you see (like toy ads during cartoons says that the advertisers think kids are watching. . . you can tell by the toys how old they think the kids are, too).
- Be a role model for your children when making your own purchasing decisions.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

The more you teach your children to be active television viewers, the more natural these skills will become. It may be like pulling teeth, at first, but you'll be showing kids a new way to think for themselves.

If you try these suggestions, you'll have a solid foundation from which to grow. You know your family best. So you're bound to come up with many more ideas that work for you and with a little luck. . . your kids will come up with some of their own.

REMEMBER WHO'S IN CONTROL

For now, most televisions still need a human being to turn them on. So, if you and your family make rules about TV and stick to them, you **can** maintain control. With practice, your family will learn good TV habits and critical viewing skills. In any viewing situation -- supervised or not -- they will have tools to interpret what they see.

STARTING GOOD HABITS

Taking control does not mean being a constant censor. Think more in terms of being an educator. Do what works for your family, and be aware that each family member may have different TV needs. Once you've decided to take control of the television, you'll need to think about the role it plays in your life and make choices with your family.

Take Control of the TV. . .

- Make a chart for each family member and record how much, when and what TV they watch during a week.
- Decide what you want to change about your current viewing habits and make rules (how much, when, exceptions to rules, which shows).
- Think of activities you can do together to replace random TV watching (example: plan a "Family Movie Night").

Before TV Takes Control of You

- Set limits on your TV viewing time and preselect shows -- you'll avoid random TV. Be a role model for your children in your own TV habits. Watch programs consistent with the values you are teaching your children.
- Keep the televisions out of kids' rooms and turned off while you are doing other meaningful activities (like family meals).
- Watch TV together and talk about what you've seen.
- Rent, borrow, buy or make videotapes to avoid commercials -- then schedule TV time around your schedule (don't let it be your schedule).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TV VIOLENCE

Parents seem to worry most about TV violence. With more and more certainty, experts agree that violence affects how our kids view themselves, their world and other people.

The more kids are exposed to violence on TV, the more likely they are to . . .

- see violence as an acceptable, quick solution to problems.
- be less sensitive to and less tolerant of other people.
- respond in an aggressive way to others.
- be fearful of their own world and become less trusting. . . especially when they watch TV news.

SOME WAYS TO COPE

We know that there is too much violence on television and we'd all like to do something to change that. In the meantime, we have to help our kids put violence (like all other aspects of TV) into perspective.

Put TV Violence in Perspective

- Tell your child that the violence is "faked" for TV shows. As they are able to understand, tell them how it's done.
- Help your child think of non-violent solutions to TV situations.
- Point out that shows detailing police work are dramatized for television. Let them know that these stories are only on TV because they **don't** happen everyday.
- Reassure children that their world is basically safe. TV news often leaves children feeling unsettled.

JUST FOR PRESCHOOLERS (AGES 2-5)

"It scares me that my young child can be so mesmerized by television that she really doesn't hear me talking to her."

- Prince George's County Parent

PRESCHOOLERS AND TELEVISION

Ask almost any two-year old and they'll happily show you where the TV is in their house. And don't be surprised if they already have a favorite show.

Television is an influence in our children's lives from the start. It seems as soon as they begin to watch, they're hooked.

PUBLIC TELEVISION IS ONLY PART OF THE ANSWER

Fortunately for parents, there is good television for this age group on public and cable stations. . . plus a wealth of videotapes to rent, buy or borrow. But by the time they are 4 or 5, kids are exposed to and ready for the cartoons (and the products sold) on commercial television, too.

Even if your children aren't watching commercial TV at home, they may see the shows or the toys at a friend's house or hear about them from preschool pals. And if they have older siblings, they may be exposed to all sorts of commercial shows at a much earlier age.

THE ELECTRONIC "BABY SITTER"

If we're honest about it, most parents will admit to using videotapes or television to occupy their preschooler for some time each day. It's not surprising because preschoolers demand more time and energy for more hours of the day than any other age group.

The television helps many parents by providing a distraction so that meals may be prepared, bills paid or phone calls returned. A television show that a young child will watch intently for a few minutes gives you a relatively safe place for them to be while you get things done.

There's nothing wrong with that, if you know what they are watching (and you've watched it with them) and you take time to set limits and help them learn about TV.

When You Watch TV With Your Preschooler. . .

- Let him know that television is "pretend;" that TV shows tell stories (just like books) and someone made them up for you to watch.
- Watch cartoons carefully and point out when "real life" won't work that way. . . like dropping an anvil on a person's head.
- Ask your child to solve TV problems without violence.

Make TV Fun (and Build Preschool Skills)

- Watch a favorite show and have your child retell the story with her own ending.
- Count commercials. . . practice writing the numbers as you go.
- Use an egg timer or stop-watch to time commercials. . . watch the clock to see what time shows begin and end.
- Spot junk food and healthy food on television. . . talk about good nutrition.

More Things to Think About

- Start with "your rules" but as your child gets older have him help make rules, too.
- Pay attention to what your preschooler watches with you (or a sitter). . . soap operas, the news talk shows. You may need rules for a sitter and yourself!
- Collect fun things to do and put them in a "Quiet Box" to offer (instead of TV) when you need a few minutes of quiet. Include crayons, puzzles, stickers, paper, etc.
- Build a videotape library. . . borrow them from friends, record good programs from television. . . ask that gifts be tapes rather than toys.

JUST FOR SCHOOL-AGED KIDS (AGES 6-11)

"I don't like my children to watch cartoons. . . they become so passive. . . they just sit and stare. . . and I hate the violence."

- Baltimore City Parent

SCHOOL-AGED KIDS AND TELEVISION

School-aged kids are in a kind of television limbo -- there is very little good programming made especially for them. Most kids in this age group are watching shows too simple or too sophisticated for them. Yet, by some estimates, this group of kids watches the most television. . . especially cartoons and sitcoms.

Advertisers have a field day with school-aged kids, too. With each show comes a new line of dolls, games, toys or action figures. . . and a video game, too.

THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO START GOOD HABITS

Kids, at this age, are hungry for information about the way the world works and still like doing hands-on activities to learn. This combination of interests opens the door for lots of creative ways to teach them about TV.

And with the growing independence of this group comes more choices. . . and less interest in their parents as entertainment. Cultivating a hobby or special interest at this age will give your child an appealing alternative to TV.

When You Watch TV With Your Child. . .

- Ask your child to compare what she's seen on TV with people, places and events she's read about or talked about in school.
- Talk about how realistic a show's plot or characters may be. Do they seem like they could be real or not?
- Point out make-believe from the reality -- some children in this age group still have trouble sorting it out for themselves.

When You Watch TV with Your Child. . . (Cont'd.)

- Talk about stereotypes you may see. . . television often presents its own reality.
- Point out times when a TV character behaves in a way that is not consistent with your values.
- Pick television shows the same way you would a movie (be an advocate for a rating system, too).
- Find non-violent solution to TV problems.
- Discuss these things during commercials. . . you won't be interrupting the show and your kids will have less time to be "sold."

Use Television to Learn

- Ask your child to draw a picture or write a short report about a show he's seen.
- Make your own TV "guide". . . listing only the shows you will be watching that week.
- Show your child that cartoons also are found in comic books and in newspapers.
- Get a book about TV production techniques. Learning about how TV is made takes much of the power and glamour out of it.
- Issue tickets or tokens for TV time each week. Have your child earn them for good behavior or chores. She can even make the tickets as an activity.
- Look at TV products and/or toys on regular shopping trips, to see whether the claims are realistic. Toys or food advertised on TV are rarely as exciting close-up.
- Help your child write letters to television stations or to TV people to let them know what kind of job they're doing.

JUST FOR YOUNG TEENS (AGES 12-16)

"The sex and violence add to a general loss of innocence way too soon. . . that distresses me."

- Frederick County Parent

"... and even when you find a program with value, it may be full of commercials sending the wrong messages about sexual behavior and consumption."

- Prince George's County Parent

TELEVISION AND YOUR TEENAGER

Television can offer you and your teenager a springboard for discussing important issues and events. It's not always easy to bring up such topics out of the blue but, once the door is opened by a TV character. . . it's fair game.

You also may find that TV gives you a way to encourage reading or further study for your teen around topics of interest. And you can teach your teenager how to be her own advocate on important issues.

Teenagers may resent the interference in their viewing choices and -- as with many other things -- give you a hard time about rules and limits. As much as you can, let them make the choices with your help.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Be sure that you choose your times wisely to discuss issues you've seen on television. During the show may not be a good time. . . or when her friends are over. . . or when you're arguing about something else. Be careful to pick a time when you're both ready to talk. Try to find some good in her choices, even when you disagree.

If you choose the wrong time to discuss that smirk or knowing laugh he gave to some sexual message on TV, for example, you may lose the chance to talk about it. Better to bring it up later (or during the commercial) than to embarrass him when it happens.

More than ever, there are critical societal issues that we have to talk about with our children. Parents can use all the help they can get. And, here, television can be an ally.

When You Watch TV with Your Teenager. . .

- Ask his opinion. Find out what he's thinking about what he sees.
- Use the opportunity to discuss issues you see on TV.
- Relate TV to the real world. Television reduces very complicated issues/situations to simple solutions. . . it can leave a teen feeling frustrated about his own ability to solve problems.
- Talk about advertising techniques and production techniques. Teens can go beyond product claims and really analyze what advertisers and shows are trying to sell.

Ways Your Teenager Can Relate to TV

- Keep an atlas by the TV and using it to read about places in the news.
- Read the book before watching a movie on TV and compare the two.
- Use books to expand topics introduced by television.
- Borrow or rent a video camera to "play" with camera angles and learn about TV photography.
- Write an original TV script or rewrite one that already aired.
- Watch the TV news, then read your local newspaper to compare the way stories are presented by each.
- Express opinions about television programming by writing letters to local and national executives.
- Become politically active through television. Write letters to elected officials and organizations based on TV news coverage.

"I wish I could persuade networks that there is tremendous value in good, family-oriented programs."

- Howard County Parent

SO, YOU STILL WANT TO CHANGE WHAT'S ON TELEVISION. . .

Let's face it, if there were unlimited good choices in children's television it wouldn't be such an issue for parents. Critical viewing skills, limits, better viewing habits are all great ways to cope with what television currently offers. But working with what's out there doesn't mean we should let broadcasters off the hook.

THE CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ACT OF 1990

Commercial television broadcasters are required, by law, to air programs specifically designed for children. The Children's Television Act says that broadcasters must serve the "educational and informational needs of children" between 2 and 16 years old. The Law also says that stations must air some programs which are specifically designed to meet those needs.

Commercials also are regulated by this Law. Any program, for children 12 years old or younger, is allowed to run 12 minutes per hour of commercials on weekdays. On weekends the limit is 10.5 minutes per hour.

HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO

The real "teeth" in this law is that every station must demonstrate how they are serving children when they apply for their broadcast license renewal. This is a public process and any member of the community may read the application and provide comment.

You and your neighbors can work with stations in your community to be sure that these requirements are being met. Children also can have a role in letting stations know what's good and bad about their programming.

DON'T STOP THERE

Television writers, producers, executives, etc. also need to hear from you. Let them know when they've done something wrong (or something right) to encourage more "family friendly" television choices.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN TELEVISION FOR KIDS!

IN MARYLAND AND YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

Join the Maryland Campaign for Kids' TV and help improve the choices for children on television. The Maryland Campaign for Kids' TV is a Statewide effort to:

- Educate parents, teachers, community leaders and others in how television affects kids and how they can develop critical viewing skills in children
- Promote quality children's programming on television stations broadcasting within Maryland
- Make sure Maryland TV stations comply with the Children's Television Act

The Maryland Campaign monitors all commercial TV stations that are in or broadcast into Maryland and issues an annual "Report Card" on their compliance with the Children's Television Act. Community groups around the State work directly with local broadcasters to encourage better programming and increase the choices on TV for children of all ages.

The Maryland Campaign gives presentations to community groups and organizations on television and kids and how to develop critical viewing skills in our children. The Campaign also publishes a quarterly newsletter on current news and research about TV and kids.

The Maryland Campaign for Kids' TV will be examining the effects of TV violence on children and how we can work to decrease its harmful influence on the lives of our children.

AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The Center for Media Education, through its Campaign for Kids' TV, is working in Washington to promote quality programming for kids and to ensure that children's interests are well served by the media.

The Campaign has been leading the national effort to strengthen the Children's Television Act, coordinating a coalition of more than a dozen groups -- including the PTA, the National Education Association, and the National Black Child Development Institute. The Campaign's investigative research on broadcaster compliance with this new law made headlines when they exposed how the TV industry was labeling cartoons such as *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones* as educational. Their report led to Congressional hearings on the Children's Television Act and forced the Federal Communications Commission to develop new proposals for enforcing the law.

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO JOIN THE
MARYLAND CAMPAIGN FOR KIDS' TV,
CONTACT:**

Maryland Campaign for Kids' TV
Advocates for Children & Youth
300 Cathedral Street, Suite 500
Baltimore, Maryland 21201
Tel (410) 547-9200
Fax (410) 547-8690

**TO JOIN THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN
FOR KIDS' TV, CONTACT:**

Center for Media Education
Campaign for Kids' TV
1511 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 628-2620
Fax: (202) 628-2554



MARYLAND CAMPAIGN FOR KIDS' TV

A Project of Advocates for Children & Youth
and Ready At Five
300 Cathedral Street
Suite 500
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

HELP YOUR KIDS BECOME TV CRITICS