

Thoughts on Television, Video Games and the Internet

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The amount of time children, teens and adults spend watching television, playing video games and surfing on the internet has more than doubled over the past 30 years. On average, children spend much less time playing with friends and more time playing with remote controls, joysticks and keyboards. Extensive research has repeatedly informed us of not only this growing trend, but its impact on children's development in social areas.

First, extended time watching television, playing video games or surfing the internet takes time away from important social interactions. Children need social interactions in order to mature and to be able to relate to others as adults. Children who have difficulty in social situations are often happy to escape the painful interactions with others. Thus, they are less likely to learn the necessary social skills they need to get along. Interacting is healthy and pragmatic!

Secondly, watching television, playing video games and net browsing are often passive, 'no brain' activities, requiring little imagination. The mind is a passive recipient of the action on the tube. Video games are only slightly different. Whenever a person plays a new game, they need to problem solve for strategy and use thinking skills. This part may be only slightly beneficial, however, as typically children and teens play these games on a repetitive basis. When games are played over and over again, they become 'no brain' activities that actually decrease brain functioning, not enhance it. The brain is like a muscle, the more that it is used, the stronger it becomes. The more time it spends in passive activities, the weaker it becomes. Research confirms these findings: achievement and performance in school are inversely related to the amount of time spent watching television or playing video games. Thus, the more television, video games, or net browsing in a child's life, the higher likelihood of weak academic performance.

Thirdly, it is important to acknowledge that television and video games are not an appropriate place to learn values and problem solving skills. Watching television shows depicting glorified violence, sarcasm and unhealthy problem solving strategies is no replacement for active parenting. With the fast pace of today's society, let's all be conscious about not allowing television and video games to become the prime source of instilling the lifelong importance of and practice with character values/traits in our children. And remember, despite the professed sophistication from some students about not feeling scared or upset about what they see and hear on television and in movies, many children develop strong fears relating to this exposure. That's why limit setting by adults is not only safe but subtly reassures children of how adults really do know best.

You can help your child develop healthy social skills by establishing firm and fair family rules for watching television and playing video games. Some suggestions may be to limit the amount of time per day for these activities to a reasonable amount---and always enforce the limit. Also, supervise your children's use of these resources so you are aware of what they are watching and interpreting. Discuss television and internet usage with your child. Finally, tell your child that their brain, like the rest of their body, is a muscle that requires exercise and care.