

Executive summary

Dr Tanya Byron and Freeview present the Freeview Viewtrition report, an in-depth look at children and television today.

In the report Dr Tanya Byron looks at new research commissioned by Freeview - a survey amongst 1,880 parents and online focus groups with mumsnet.com, as well as the existing research available. The report aims to take a balanced look and show an insight into parents with regards to their children and TV today.

Below is a summary of the key findings from the new Freeview research:

- Parents have said they are confused about the effects of TV on children - survey results and the focus groups showed that parents **feel** both positive about their children watching TV (it is educational, entertaining) but also expressed negative concerns about this (worried about possible bad effects).
 - Parents believe that **TV has positive effects** on their children (80% of those surveyed) – e.g. expanded imagination; broader vocabulary; learnt numeracy skills; entertaining and relaxing.
 - Parents in the survey (67%) also believe **TV can have negative effects** but are less clear what these might be.
- Parents highlight a number of **strategies to enhance and manage their children's TV viewing** – e.g. scheduling viewing times and setting viewing time limits; checking what is being viewed; pre-recording good quality programmes; using red button technology to enhance the viewing experience; watching and discussing programme content with their child; using TV tie-in books.
- For the parents who use **Digital Television Recorders** (DTRs) to manage their children's TV viewing (50% of the total sample) there are a number of benefits – e.g. they

can control how much TV is watched (75% of sample said using a DTR did not increase viewing time); they can make the viewing experience more positive by pre-recording only 'good quality' programmes (50%); they can dictate TV viewing times around family routines (60%).

Below is a summary of the key points raised within Dr Tanya Byron's commentary of existing research:

1 Can TV make children stupid? It is recommended¹ that children under two years old have very restricted/ no screen time as this may be detrimental to neural development and that after that TV time is highly managed and restricted. Recently in the UK it was suggested that this age limit should be up to three years old². However, there have been many studies that have evaluated high quality children's programmes such as Sesame Street and have found that children aged three to five years old who watch Sesame Street for an hour a day are better able than those who don't to recognize numbers, letters and shapes – and when followed up as teenagers at school also showed higher results and more academic abilities (e.g. creativity, reading).

2 Does TV make children aggressive? There is short term evidence of children who watch aggressive programmes behaving aggressively – however these are often laboratory based studies that do not account for the impact of watching in the home. There is also evidence that watching programmes with strong morals and positive social messages impact positively on children. It seems the issue is about choosing age appropriate programmes with positive messages for children to watch.

3 Can TV cause ADHD? A report published by The Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle³ suggested that each hour of television watched per day at ages one to three increases the risk of attention problems, such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), by almost 10 percent at age seven. However a subsequent report from Texas Tech University in Lubbock⁴ found watching TV did not cause ADHD in children and suggested that TV may possibly be used more as a babysitter for tired parents of an overly active child. Also it was suggested that ADHD temperaments existed before TV was ever around, so while TV may be part of the problem; it is not likely the sole contributor to the problem of ADHD.

4 Does TV make kids overweight? Excessive TV time can cut across time being active and reduce metabolic rates, however children become obese for a variety of reasons including poor diet and lack of exercise. When children watch TV they may eat as well (often junk food and snacks) however this is less about the TV itself and more about their lifestyle in the home. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend that time watching TV is monitored and balanced against active pursuits in order to reduce weight gain⁵.

5 Does TV stunt language development? Research suggests that actively viewing age appropriate, educational TV programs with an adult may help language development and increase vocabulary⁶. To be most beneficial, the programme should introduce new concepts and encourage interaction such as word repetition, song and dance - programmes of this nature will provide plenty of opportunity for parents to join in and emphasise the important points.

6 Does TV stop children reading? Some educational TV programmes heavily encourage and promote books for enjoyment as well as learning. If a child enjoys a particular TV character, they may also be keen to read about them in series tie in books that many educational and entertainment series for children produce.

7 Can TV limit children's experiences? Television provides a window on the world - educational and cultural experiences for children and so provides breath and depth of information not locally available to them. Mass media in general may also build cultural understanding, tolerance of difference (e.g. disability, religious differences etc.) as well as awareness of current events, the weather and news.

8 Does TV leads to the erosion of moral values? Lack of screening of TV programmes watched can lead children to be exposed to inappropriate content. Good quality

children's programmes, however, often have strong moral messages (e.g. telling the truth; not bullying; being polite) that are either implicit or explicit. Research has also shown that children as young as seven show excellent skills of critical evaluation and cynicism when it comes to what they watch⁷.

In summary

Parents in the Freeview survey (2008) recognise the value of TV both positively to their children (e.g. educational) and to themselves (e.g. enables tasks to be done) but have concerns about possible negative effects and how to prevent these for their children.

- Television is part of everyday life and woven into the peer culture of our children.
- There is some evidence for short term negative effects in terms of excessive watching (e.g. obesity, hyperactivity) and watching unsuitable content (e.g. aggression); However, there is no evidence to suggest that TV itself is the principal factor in childhood disorders – rather a secondary factor for children who may already exhibit other vulnerabilities (biological, psychological or social).
- Parents recognise the importance of managing their child's TV consumption (e.g. supervised watching, locking off adult channels, watching together, pre-recording programmes for their child to watch, setting time limits).
- Technology now provides the means for parents to filter, monitor, control, limit and supervise what our children watch in order for them to develop a healthy relationship with TV and also over time learn, with us, to evaluate their interactions with technologies such as the TV in a way that affords them benefit and minimises risk.
- Digital Television Recorders are ways in which TV provides solutions to some of these issues for parents.

Conclusion

A balanced TV diet is something that many parents sensibly strive for by restricting time⁸; monitoring programme content, quality and delivery (e.g. via digital TV recorders) and maximising their interaction with their children about what they have watched.