

Less TV Opens Doors to Literacy



Fast Facts

- American children watch nearly three hours of television every day.
- Children spend more time in front of the tube each year than they do in school.
- Children who watch six or more hours of television per day score significantly lower on reading proficiency tests than those who watch one hour or less.
- Studies involving more than 400,000 students find that television is bad for academic achievement.

“...too many children are spending too little time reading and too much time watching mind-numbing television.”

– Former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley

American children spend more time watching television than any other waking activity. In the course of one year, children will watch more than 1,000 hours of TV, while spending only 900 hours in school. What will kids learn in those 1,000 hours?

They'll learn that violence solves problems. By age eighteen, the average American has seen 200,000 acts of violence on TV, including 16,000 murders¹. They'll also learn to stay inside and watch, rather than going outside and exercising, a trend that is leading this generation of young people to be the most overweight and sedentary in our nation's history. And they'll miss out on some of life's most important lessons: how to interact with peers, and how to compromise and share in a world full of real people.

There's another crucial skill that children are not developing when they are watching TV: reading. What's worse, studies show that TV-watching isn't just distracting our kids from the books, it is standing between them and academic success.

In today's information-based economy, reading is both an essential skill and a simple pleasure. Yet many children are growing up hooked on TV, with poor reading skills and little interest in books. This year, American children will spend four times as many hours watching TV as reading for pleasure.² Numerous studies in recent years, including research from the Kaiser Family Foundation, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the California State Department of Education, and others, have established a connection between our TV habit and faltering reading scores.

Too much TV time harms reading in four key ways. Fortunately, experts suggest ways we can fight back:

Time: The Crucial Element

Like any important skill, learning to read takes time and practice. Unfortunately, American children do not have much time left over after they spend an average of three hours each day watching the tube.³ Although children who watch more than 10 hours of TV weekly fare worse academically than those who watch less, American children continue to watch an average of nearly twice that amount.⁴

In 2000, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found again that the students who watch the most TV suffer academically. Results were plain: students who watched six or more hours per day earned the lowest scores on average while students who watched an hour or less per day earned the highest scores on average.⁵

ACTION: By limiting or eliminating TV-time, you can give your child a real reading boost. Start with a few basic rules: no TV on weeknights, no TV before school, and no TV in your child's bedroom. You can also set time-based limits allotting, perhaps, one hour per week of TV time. You may hear some complaints at first, but you will be doing your kids an enormous favor by putting reading and learning first.

The Written Word: Essential to Literacy Building

Successful readers have broad, strong vocabularies. When it comes to building literacy skills, TV is all talk, but without many useful words. In fact, the average children's book comes with a greater vocabulary set than most prime time TV shows.⁶ Moreover, the act of reading fosters habits of analysis, questioning, comprehension, and rationality. Television, with its emphasis on emotion, image, and speed, fails to contribute to the development of these key skills.⁷ There is simply no replacement for the education that comes through the written word.

□ ACTION: Make it easy for your kids to read by making books available to them, and encouraging them to use the public library. Keep as many appropriate books around the house as possible, and ask relatives to consider giving your children books at birthdays and other holidays. Also, some families make a weekly trip to the public library to stock up on books and to help kids learn how to use these amazing facilities.

Reading for Pleasure: Key to Becoming a Reader for Life

True literacy combines fundamental skills with an enthusiasm and respect for reading and learning. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrates that children who read for fun are better readers. Additionally, those who read a wide variety of styles and genres are more likely to have fun with reading and to make it a permanent part of their lives. Students who read for pleasure every day scored almost 10% higher on proficiency tests than those who never read for fun.⁸

□ ACTION: Read with your children. If you can, set aside time each day, or a few times each week, to read to your child, or have your child read to you. Also, make sure to talk to your child about the book that he or she is reading. Ask them about the story, and help them with new vocabulary words. Encourage your child to try new genres and writing styles.

Brain Development: Book Minds vs. TV Minds

We know that experience shapes the networks and pathways that constitute the physical structures of our brains. So, while children who spend time reading will develop ‘book minds,’ child development experts, like Jane Healy, tell us that “brains of youngsters who spend lots of time in front of a TV set ... may be expected to develop differently.”⁹ Developmental psychologist Tannis MacBeth studied three Canadian towns, one without television and the others with, and found that children who were just beginning to acquire reading skills fared better in the TV-free town.

Once television was introduced, their advantage disappeared. Spending so much time with television made it difficult for children to automatically recognize entire words, rather than seeing collections of letters. Without this ‘automaticity,’ reading becomes a chore.¹⁰

□ ACTION: Consider living without TV. With evidence mounting about the negative effects of television-watching, many families are making their homes TV-free. It is especially important for young children to have the opportunity to absorb real life experiences, so that they can develop the skills they will need for success farther down the line. If this seems too difficult, participate in events like TV-Turnoff Week and carefully limit and monitor your child’s television watching year-round.

In order to become skilled and comfortable readers, our children need encouragement, support, and most importantly, time away from the tube. The support you give your child now could mean everything for his or her academic success in the future.

TAKE ACTION!

■ **Limit TV-viewing at home. Make rules about school nights and mornings. Take the TV out of your child’s bedroom.**

■ **Always make books available to your children. Take trips to the public library. Give books as gifts.**

■ **Read with your children. Ask them about the books they are reading. Encourage your kids to try new genres and writing styles.**

■ **Consider living without TV.**

¹ Senate Judiciary Committee Staff Report, 1999. *Children, Violence, and the Media*.

² Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999. *Kids and the Media @ the New Millennium*.

³ Nielsen Media Research, 2000. *2000 Report on Television*

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, 1990. *Nation’s Report Card 1990*.

⁵ National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000. *Fourth-Grade Reading 2000*.

⁶ Carol H. Rasco, 2000. “A Smarter Summer: Less TV.” *Burlington Record* 6/14/00

⁷ Neil Postman, 1985, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, 2000. *Fourth-Grade Reading 2000*.

⁹ Jane M. Healy, 1990. *Endangered Minds*. New York: Touchstone

¹⁰ Tannis Macbeth, 1986. *The Impact of Television*. Orlando: Academic Press

For information on TV-Turnoff Network’s pro-literacy grammar school programs, “More Reading, Less TV” and “More Poetry”, call (800) 939-6737 or visit our website, www.tvturnoff.org. You can also learn more about literacy programs across the country through the National Education Association’s Read Across America.

RealVision, an initiative to raise awareness about the impact of television, is a project of TV-Turnoff Network, 1601 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 303, Washington, DC 20009 P (202) 518-5556 F (202) 518-5560 www.tvturnoff.org