

WARNING: TOO MUCH TV IS HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

Fast Facts

- Americans watch an average of more than four hours of TV a day, or two full months of TV a year.²
- 40% of families always or often watch TV while eating dinner.
- Only 14% of 12th-graders who watch TV six hours a day or more achieve proficiency on reading tests, whereas 52% of students who watch an hour or less do.
- By age 18, American children will have seen an average of more than 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 murders on TV.¹⁰
- Virtually all 3,500 research studies over 40 years show a link between watching media violence and committing acts of real violence.
- The proportion of overweight children has doubled since 1980 due, in part, to sedentary leisure time activities such as watching TV.

“Children whose movements are limited because they’re spending their time in front of computers or televisions... are at risk of never fulfilling their potential.”

—Pete Egoscue, Exercise Physiologist

More than four hours a day: that’s how much television Americans watch on average. Watching TV is our most popular pastime, and it seems that we spend about as much time talking about it as we do watching. But what we don’t talk about so much is how all that time in front of the television affects us as individuals and as a society.

As an abundance of evidence makes clear, our television habit has serious, negative consequences. To top the list, excessive TV-watching cuts into family time, harms our kids’ ability to read and perform well in school, encourages violence, and promotes sedentary lifestyles and obesity.

TV Undermines Family Time

Many people feel that they do not have enough time to spend with their families. In fact, according to a *Newsweek* poll, even 73 percent of teens think that their parents do not spend enough time with them.¹

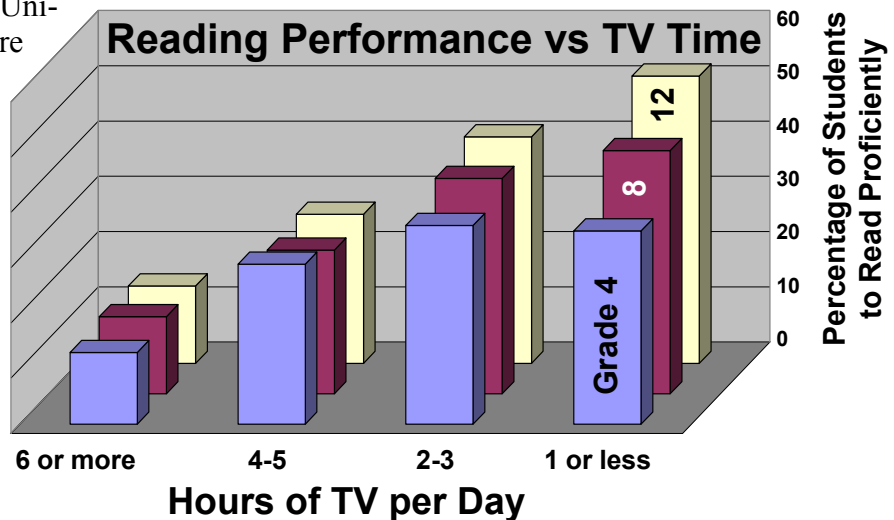
Although often overlooked, television plays a crucial role. In the average American household, the TV is on for seven hours and 40 minutes a day,² and 40 percent of Americans report always or often watching television while eating dinner.³ What’s more, most family members watch different programs in separate rooms.

Families who watch little or no television, on the other hand, often find that they have more time to spend with one another in more engaging and interactive activities.

TV Harms Reading and Academic Performance

Excessive television-watching harms reading skills both by displacing them from our daily lives and, according to some experts, by affecting the physical structure of the brain.

Researcher Susan B. Neuman of the University of Lowell put it succinctly more than a decade ago—“reading scores diminished sharply for those students watching more than four hours a day”⁴—and today’s data continue to support her conclusion. In 1998, 52 percent of 12th-graders who watched an hour or less of TV a day achieved proficiency on reading tests, whereas only 14 percent of those who watched more than six hours did. Only 27 percent of those who watched four to five hours read proficiently.⁵



Moreover, researchers such as Jane Healy of Harvard argue that watching TV instead of reading may actually influence the physical structure of the brain as it develops, making learning and working in the schoolroom environment difficult.⁶

TV Encourages Violence—“The debate is over”⁷

The evidence is overwhelming: violence on TV promotes violent behavior in real life. Of more than 3,500 research studies on the effects of media violence over the past 40 years, 99.5 percent have shown a positive correlation between watching violence on TV and committing acts of real-life violence.⁸

Watching violent TV at age eight was the strongest predictor of aggression later in life—stronger even than violent behavior as children, according to Dr. Leonard Eron’s 32-year study.

Watching glorified and consequence-free violence time and time again on television influences behavior, especially among children.

Television’s lesson is an enduring one. According to Dr. Leonard D. Eron’s 32-year study, watching television violence at age eight was the strongest predictor of aggression later in life—stronger even than violent behavior as children. The more violent television the subjects watched at age eight, the more serious was their aggressive behavior 22 years later, at age 30.⁹

In addition to promoting violence, TV also desensitizes viewers to real-life violence and distorts viewers’ perceptions of how dangerous the world really is. Television violence dulls the emotional response to violence and its victims.¹⁰

TV Promotes Sedentary Lifestyles and Obesity

Americans, by and large, do not get enough physical exercise.¹¹ We spend most of our free time watching television, which promotes obesity and its related illnesses. According to Dr. William Dietz, Director of the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Centers for Disease Control, “The easiest way to reduce inactivity is to turn off the TV set. Almost anything else uses more energy than watching TV.”

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TV-Turnoff Tips

- Move your television to a less prominent location.
- Keep the TV off during meals.
- Designate certain days of the week as TV-free days.
- Do not use television as a reward.
- Listen to music or the radio for background noise.
- Cancel your cable subscription and use the money for books.
- Don’t worry if children claim to be bored. Boredom passes and often leads to creativity.

The prevalence of obesity among adults and children is increasing. The Centers for Disease Control report that 27 percent of adults are obese nationwide and that obesity and its attendant health risks account for an estimated 300,000 deaths a year.^{12,13} The proportion of young children who are obese jumped from just over four percent in 1965 to over 11 percent in 1994.¹⁴ Childhood obesity is a leading factor in the unprecedented rise of Type II (“adult-onset”) diabetes among adolescents.¹⁵

What’s more, sedentary children risk suffering from other ailments later in life, including chronic pain, heart disease, falls from dizziness, and migraines—as Pete Egoscue has put it, “Children whose movements are limited because they’re spending their time in front of computers or televisions . . . are at risk of never fulfilling their potential.”¹⁶

1) “Teenagers want more . . . family time?” *Christian Science Monitor* 5/2/00. 2) Nielsen Media Research, 2000. *2000 Report on Television*. 3) Gentile and Walsh, 1999. *MediaQuotient: National Survey of Family Media Habits, Knowledge, and Attitudes*. National Institute on Media and the Family. 4) Susan B. Neuman, 1988. “The displacement effect.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 13(4): 414-440. 5) National Center for Education Statistics, 1999. *NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States*. 6) Jane M. Healy, 1990. *Endangered Minds*. New York: Touchstone. 7) American Psychological Association, 2000. “Psychiatric Effects of Media Violence.” APA Factsheet Series. 8) Michael Rich, American Academy of Pediatrics. Statement before the Public Health Summit on Entertainment Violence, July 26, 2000. 9) Testimony of Leonard D. Eron, Ph.D. on behalf of the American Psychological Association before the US Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, March 31, 1992. 10) American Medical Association, 1996. *Physician Guide to Media Violence*. 11) *Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health*, 1996. 12) National Center for Health Statistics, 2000. *1999 National Health and Nutrition Examination*. 13) National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2000. *Physical Activity and Good Nutrition*. 14) National Center for Health Statistics, Health, US, 2000. 15) National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2000. *Promoting Better Health for Young People*. 16) Pete Egoscue, 1998. “Children Are Hurting for Some Exercise.” *New York Times* 5/10/98