

TV AND SLEEP DISTURBANCES

RED LADDER OPTIMIZED LEARNING
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Television has a profound influence on the development of children, and there is a growing body of research pointing to its harmful effects. Studies have shown links between heavy TV viewing and depression and anxiety. Programs designed for children are five to six times more violent than adult shows, and children imitate the violence they see on TV. Children who consistently spend more than 10 hours watching TV each week are more prone to inactivity and obesity than kids who watch less TV. (In fact, we burn less calories watching TV than we do while sitting quietly, doing nothing!) The American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends that children

under two not watch TV at all, arguing that any quantity of TV gets in the way of the social interaction that toddlers development.

But what about the effect of television viewing on sleep? Recent research has now made it clear that television can interfere with sleep for children and teens in serious ways.

As a starting point, note that the average Canadian child watches nearly fourteen hours of television each week. By his or her high school graduation, the average teen will have spent more time watching TV than in the classroom.

A study published in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine suggests that children who spend hours in front of the television could be storing up sleep problems for later in life. Lead researcher Dr. Jeffrey Johnson of Columbia



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TV AND SLEEP

- Limit daily television watching to one hour or less for preschoolers and two hours or less for school-aged children. Use the rest of your child's free time for sports, hobbies, creative play, playing outdoors, for reading and writing, and visits to museums and the zoo.
- Give older children the opportunity to plan their weekly television viewing schedule in advance, but supervise their choices. Discuss the options available. Explain to your child why he cannot watch certain programs. Make your values clear and praise your child for making good choices.
- Consider a two week "holiday from television" or get rid of the TV altogether.
- Don't allow channel surfing.
- Avoid letting small children watch frightening or violent television. Scary images from TV can leave young children with bad dreams, afraid of being alone, withdrawn from friends, and even missing school.
- Choose programs with positive messages and educational value. Remember that the difference between make-believe and reality may be hard for very young children to understand. Limit the amount of violent content older children are exposed to, and monitor their behaviour after watching scary or violent shows, watching for sleep disturbances. Remember, with prolonged viewing, the world of TV becomes a child's or teen's real world.

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University reports that watching three or more hours of TV a day leaves teenagers twice as likely to develop sleep problems when they get older, and that violent or disturbing programs are the most likely to disrupt sleep patterns. Johnson's longitudinal study monitored 759 children, studying them at ages 14, 16 and 22. Fourteen year olds without sleep disorders who watched three hours or more of TV each day were more than twice as likely to have problems with falling asleep or waking up in the middle of the night by they were 16 or 22.

The suggestions are that watching late night television, alongside too little physical activity, leaves viewers mentally and physiologically stimulated, preventing them from falling asleep easily, and that many hours of exposure to the bright light of a television screen throws the sleep-wake cycle out of balance. When ingrained, these two factors may cause persistent problems later. These researchers recommend that for the sake of long term health teens avoid watching more than one to two hours of TV a day, just as they avoid cigarette smoking.

Dr. Judith Owens, professor of pediatrics at Brown University and director of the pediatric sleep disorders clinic at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, examined the sleep and TV habits of 495 public school children in kindergarten through fourth grade. Parents completed one survey of their children's sleep behaviors and a second questionnaire about their child's and family's television viewing



habits. Each child's teacher completed a daytime sleepiness questionnaire about the child. Three-quarters of parents reported that TV viewing was part of their child's usual bedtime routine. Fifteen percent young children fell asleep in front of the TV at least two nights a week, and one quarter of families reported that there was a TV set in their child's bedroom. Although most parents didn't believe that TV had anything to do with their children's sleep problems, the study strongly suggested otherwise.

Dr. Owens found that sleep disturbances were closely related to the total amount of TV a child watched each day and the amount of TV watching at bedtime. The more TV kids watched, the more resistant they were to going to bed, the more anxious they were at bedtime, the greater their trouble falling asleep, and the shorter their sleep over all. Children with TV in their bedrooms showed the greatest sleep difficulties of all.

Parents need to be involved and active in their children's media consumption. They need to watch and listen with their children. If parents establish clear rules about when kids may and may not watch TV, and about the kinds of shows that are allowed, children are likely to be happier and healthier. □

- Don't allow kids to fall asleep in front of the television. Children can become dependent on television to fall asleep.
- Do not allow your child to have a television in his or her bedroom. More and more children and teens have TV's in their bedrooms, where they watch TV unsupervised.
- Don't allow television schedules to dictate bedtime. If your child is interested in a program that goes past her bedtime, record it to watch the next day.
- Create a clear boundary between television time and bedtime. Kids need time to wind down before bed, and television isn't likely to allow this. Make sure television and video games are off well before bedtime.
- Don't allow media use to cut into sleep time.
- The Canadian Pediatric Society has published two parent sheets for promoting good television habits in children titled, "Managing media use in the home," and "Promoting good television habits." They're available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca.

