



Shape Up America!

Healthy Weight for Life

TOWARD A FAMILY SUMMIT ON SCREEN VIEWING

By Barbara J. Moore, PhD

About 2/3 of America's children have a television in the bedroom.^{1,2,3} If parents were to convene a family summit on home screen viewing policies, the odds are that children and parents would have some pretty strong opinions about removing the TV and other screens from bedrooms or limiting the use of screens to a maximum of two hours per day.

There is a growing body of evidence linking screen viewing with decreased play,⁴ increased caloric intake⁵ and body fatness,^{6,7} and a heightened risk of childhood obesity.^{8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18} leading to subsequent serious health problems.^{19,20,21,22,23} On the other hand, qualitative research²⁴ shows that the institution of new family policies to limit recreational screen viewing time or removing screens entirely from the bedroom will meet with stiff opposition from children and from parents themselves.

Research shows that parental limits on TV and other media screens is helpful for preventing childhood obesity^{25,26,27} but it has many other benefits such as less interference with homework²⁸ improved quality of sleep²⁹ and improved relationships within the family and with peers.³⁰ Parents have asked for guidance and support to implement changes in screen-viewing policies,³¹ so this article focuses on issues and barriers that have been identified by parents in managing screen time policies.

Monitor Content

Tip #4 for screen smart parents urges them to monitor the content of programs that children are viewing through the various media channels they use every day. The goal is to know what your child is watching and to look for quality educational programs that will convert screens into a tool that can enhance learning. Nearly all parents report concerns over exposure to sexual content, violence and foul language but they are also concerned about academic success and a child "tuning out" because of excess viewing.³² Here are methods parents say they use³³ to limit media usage or restrict program content:

- Limit access to only approved shows
- Limit access to only approved channels
- Limit access to only certain types of programs (e.g., educational)
- No TV after a certain hour of night
- No TV on school nights
- No TV after school
- No shows with "nasty talk" or "grown-up shows" or music videos
- No channel changing or channel surfing
- Select and pay for specific cable channels that are appropriate and trusted
- Program remote controls or use a chip to block certain program content
- Require children to ask permission before watching a given show

Although they are practical, the problem with these suggestions is that they are mainly negative. They don't help parents identify quality programs that children would benefit from. Enlisting

children to work with parents to identify educational programs^{34,35} is something to discuss at the family summit.

Remove Screens from the Bedroom (Tip #5)

The presence of a TV in the bedroom is associated with heavy TV viewing³⁶ and obesity.^{37,38} But removing the TV from the bedroom of a child can be difficult and some parents recognize that they too have heavy viewing habits that may have to change.³⁹

The goal here is to move screens out of the bedroom to a place where parents can monitor both viewing time and program content. One study showed that parents underestimate the amount of TV viewing by children by 63%⁴⁰ but this study also showed that 6 to 7 year olds are using TVs, videos and computers for nearly 4 hours per day⁴¹ and older children average 6 hours per day. This reflects the confusion reported by parents⁴² over what constitutes “screen time” – which is all screen viewing for entertainment (i.e., non-educational) purposes. An important consideration is the negative impact of screen viewing on sleep patterns, duration⁴³ and the quality of sleep^{44,45,46} – which plays a central role in maintaining good health and academic achievement as well as obesity prevention.⁴⁷ A ringing cell phone in the middle of the night is an obvious disruption of sleep that parents may or may not be aware of. The location of TVs, videos, DVDs and cell phones in the bedroom invite late night texting and screen viewing that can delay bedtimes or interrupt sleep. The content of shows can cause nightmares and delay the onset of sleep or cause sleep disturbances.⁴⁸ The removal of screens from bedrooms should be included on the agenda for the family summit.

Promote Mindful Viewing

Tip #6 calls for mindful viewing which means turning on the TV to watch a selected program and turning it off when the program is finished. Purposeful viewing extends to other media. One family has a rule that only video games that involve other family members are permitted. Mindful viewing means no background TV. Kids are exposed to “background TV” when the TV is on even when no one is really watching or when children are exposed to shows that are not meant for them (i.e., adult programming). An adult watching a favorite program is less responsive to a young child who may be in the room⁴⁹ and children are distracted from developmentally important activities by the TV and other screens. The goal here is to be selective about viewing and avoid channel surfing, especially in the presence of very young children who should not be exposed to inappropriate adult program content.⁵⁰ And remember...keep the TV off when no one is actually watching.

Watch With Your Child – Avoid TV as Babysitter

Tip #7 urges parents to watch TV and other media along with your young child and to avoid using the TV as a babysitter. The goal here is to monitor your child’s reactions to program content and be prepared to answer questions or concerns. Children need guidance when watching certain programs and many children under the age of 8 lack the skills to understand the distinction between programs and commercials.⁵¹ Marketers intentionally blur the boundaries between the two by having cartoon characters step out of a program and into a commercial. Nor do young children understand the persuasive intent of commercials – the fact that someone is trying to sell them something. Parental involvement can help children learn to make these distinctions and can help turn them into more discriminating consumers of media.

“What We Do In Our House”

Tip #8 Urges families to arrive at a consensus about the management of screen time and the enforcement of media usage policies. The goal here is to discuss and agree on issues such as program content, whether screens are permitted in bedrooms and the establishment (and enforcement) of time limits on media usage for recreational purposes. Everyone should be clear about: “This is what we do in our house.”

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