



THINK outside THE BOX

Playing, exploring and interacting with siblings contribute to social development – something watching TV cannot offer your children. By Lungile Khumalo

The first two years of a child's life are considered to be a critical time with regards to brain development. Therefore, children under the age of two should not watch TV at all. This is according to Anna Rodrigues, play therapist and counsellor, as well as coordinator at Highway Area Children's Assessment and Therapy Team. Anna stresses that though TV and technology

have broadened our horizons in many facets of life, they can inhibit a child from playing, exploring and interacting with siblings, friends and parents – which all contribute to learning as well as physical and social development. Brain growth happens in direct response to external stimulation, so real-world experiences – like talking to your child about the potatoes you're peeling – are, in fact, more educational

than watching TV programmes aimed at boosting the child's intellect.

DANGERS OF TOO MUCH TV

According to Anna, there are many dangers associated with watching too much TV, but the most common include:

- **Poor school adjustment:** Watching TV doesn't involve any thinking or participation; so once a child starts school, it is difficult for them to adjust to the requirements expected in a classroom.
- **Obesity:** Sitting in front of a TV for about four hours a day can lead to eating too much junk food. And junk food teamed with no physical activity leads to an overweight child.
- **Increased hearing problems:** A child who watches TV could just be bored and have nothing else to do but stare at moving images without really listening and understanding the content. In such cases, children end up relying mainly on what they see to understand the content instead of being fully "there", hearing what is being said.

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An aspect of TV viewing that is just as "dangerous" as the amount watched is WHAT is being watched. Unmonitored TV viewing leads to all sorts of inappropriate programmes being watched by your children, which can have a bad or negative influence on them.

The two main areas of concern are:

- **Violence:** Viewing violence and aggression on TV has multiple detrimental effects on a child. It can create anxiety and aggressive behaviour; the child may start fearing that something bad might happen to them, become desensitised to violence and can end up believing violence is a means of getting what you want (it works on TV, so why shouldn't it work in real life). Very simply, violence on TV breaks all the rules we try to teach our children. We say hitting, punching and kicking others is wrong, but it's okay on TV if it's being done by the "good guy". This can be very confusing for a young child who's trying to understand the difference between right and wrong. Worst of all, the "bad guys" on TV often don't get punished for their bad behaviour, so in a child's eyes this could be perceived as "right to do". Especially for very young children, violence, aggression and scary things can frighten them as they are unable to tell the difference between reality and fantasy. This often leads to nightmares, bad behaviour and insecurities.
- **Risky behaviour:** Getting drunk, driving under the influence, smoking, taking drugs, explicit sexual scenes (often premarital sex) and swearing can be seen by young people as "the cool thing to do", leading to moral values being abandoned in favour of a "Hollywood" lifestyle. This in turn leads to children talking to and treating their parents and elders in a disrespectful manner – only because it's perceived to be cool.

Likewise, sex scenes can result in the youth losing all respect for sexuality,

with teens who watch lots of sex on TV likely to participate in sexual activities much earlier than those who don't watch sex on TV. Sexual behaviour on TV is often seen as "casual", with no negative consequences like unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases; and because of this, youngsters may want to be "just like them" in order to feel older and more worldly.

THE ANSWER

Research by Dr Dimitri Christakis, a paediatric researcher at Seattle Children's Hospital in the USA, found that putting our time and energy into improving what our children watch – not just how much they watch – can have a positive impact on their behaviour.

"Watched in moderation, the TV does have a place in the home...but there are strict ground rules," advises Anna. She says:

- Don't be afraid to take authority in your home – and start by limiting TV viewing time.
- Monitor what your children watch.
- Be selective about the programmes watched.
- Ban TVs from the bedroom.
- Don't allow TV viewing at supper time or while doing homework.
- Opt for family viewing time – sport, children's movies, educational programmes.
- Don't leave the TV on all the time – this encourages kids to watch just because it's on.

FUN ALTERNATIVES TO TV

There are dozens of ways to have fun without the TV – just let your imagination run wild. These include:

- Playing outside – soccer, swing ball, hide and seek, etc.
- Playing board games or doing puzzles.
- Reading, dancing or listening to music. Perhaps even learning to play a musical instrument.
- Playing cards and learning card tricks.
- Taking up a hobby like painting or knitting.



A good environment in the first 1 000 days of a child's life includes loving care and a nurturing, safe space free from stress and harmful substances.



How best can I care for my baby?

When you decide to have a baby, think about your child's care. Loving parents and an attentive, consistent caregiver can be a good team to ensure the best first 1 000 days.

How should I nurture my baby?

Take care of your health and well-being, and get support from your partner, family and friends. Your baby wants to see, touch and smell you. Smile, talk and sing, and make frequent eye contact. Also hold your baby close to bond and help them feel safe and loved. Avoid situations where there is smoking, drinking and a chance for violence because it can interfere with the baby's development.

How do I ensure a safe, healthy environment?

Check for the following at home and at the child's care centre: a care plan for sick children, enough space, ventilation and light, safe drinking water, clean toilet facilities, a clean area for food preparation and the safe storage of anything that could be harmful to children.

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