Toddlers' Attention Spans Affected By Background TV

Television is often studied for its effects on children. Studies in pediatrics have long said that children under two should not be exposed to television, while children older than two should have their tube time limited to one or two hours a day.

But many parents assume that the warnings apply when kids are actually plonked down in front of the set.

A new study reveals that kids under three are affected even when they're not watching the shows themselves. Background noise may disrupt play and stop children from developing attention spans according to new research, leading to increased risk of behavioral issues like Attention Deficit Disorder.

Experts found that children left in a room with the television on played for five per cent less time, and had shorter play episodes than children in a room without the distraction.

Published in the July/August issue of Child Development, the study was conducted with a group of 50 toddlers at age 12, 24, or 36 months, who were asked to play in a family room-type setting with little adult interaction. They were randomly assigned to play either with an adult-focused game show playing in the background, or without any television. After half an hour, the groups switched.

Even though the program playing was not aimed at the children, reviews of the playtime on videotape revealed the differences in child behavior. During the time the TV was on, they were more likely to move from toy to toy, and had play episodes about half as long as the time without.

Samantha admits her 16-month-old daughter Olivia watches some television, but she limits her daughter's viewing time.

"I read her probably five or six books a day, before naps and before bed, and her favorite activity is to read herself books," Samantha notes. "She's a bookworm."

The recommendation coming from the study is that the television should just be turned off most of the time when small children are in the room. That will give them the free attention to play and learn, and give your attention to them as well.

According to Canadianparents.com, children at just over a year can play by themselves, but enjoy interactive play, especially "putting little things into big things," gentle roughhousing, and some pretend play (like pretending to talk on the phone, shop, or drive the car).
Children at 19-20 months enjoy playing mostly alone but near adults, dressing up and pretending to be an adult, and activities like swings and walks. The magazine reminds parents of the following facts about children's early learning:

- brain development is very vulnerable to environmental influences.
- the influence of early environment is long lasting.
- during the first years, the infant needs to learn to focus attention and interact.

Bearing this in mind, investinkids.ca has the following tips for nurturing your child's development:

- teach and play - play is the work of children, and parents are essential partners.
- answer your baby's happy noises and faces.
- use other happy sounds, like singing or eager words like "wow!" and "awesome!"
- chat with your toddler at playtime.
- invite him to talk about what he is doing.
- show and coach your preschooler on how to handle her feelings.