Ready To Learn

Media Literacy

Research has proven that when children grow up in homes where discussions about television are a regular occurrence, they are much less likely to be negatively influenced by media violence, advertising gimmicks, and depictions of gender and racial stereotypes. Most families, child care providers and educators are aware that watching too much television can profoundly affect children's emotional, cognitive, and social development, but the specifics of why this is so is not widely known. Teaching them to understand how unsupervised television watching can displace important childhood developmental tasks is necessary in order for them to begin to outline specific strategies for controlling TV and video effectively — the first step in media literacy.

DEVELOPING BRAINS REQUIRE PLENTY OF MENTAL CHALLENGES.

The adage, "Use it or lose it," aptly applies to the human brain. The brain must be challenged regularly or else important abilities will be shortchanged and eventually lost. Dr. Marian Diamond, a prominent neuroscientist, has found that the structure of the brain actually changes as a result of intellectual "exercises." By allowing children to passively watch countless hours of adult television, families and caregivers are unintentionally depriving their children of a stimulating mental environment which can seriously affect the rate and quality of brain growth.

On the other hand, by not using television and video in the home to challenge children's thinking, we are missing golden opportunities to use these mediums to support children's cognitive development. By asking questions during television programs and discussing with children what they've seen and heard, adults can pose meaningful mental challenges, nurturing both language and thinking abilities.

PASSIVE TV WATCHING REDUCES THE AMOUNT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY CHILDREN ENGAGE IN.

Physical activity not only builds muscles and coordination, but it is also essential for mental flexibility and growth. Skipping, hopping, jumping, running, and crawling

are all essential for children's emotional and physical development. The natural solution, then, is to get children up and on their feet as they watch television. Have them clap their hands and move to the beat of the music; sing and dance along with the songs; talk back to the characters when they ask questions of themselves or the audience; and use facial expressions to demonstrate how the characters are feeling. Even when the television is turned off, children can be encouraged to act out scenes and dialogues or role-play how they would have worked it out differently.

TALK, TALK, AND MORE TALK!

The key to raising media literate children lies in the power of discussion. Exchanging ideas, questions, and thoughts about what they see on the screen gives children invaluable skills in the art of communication and provides numerous opportunities to try out ideas in a safe environment. Making discussions about media literacy a regular part of television-watching can have a profound impact on a child's understanding of screen content and its influence on themselves and others. Through such interactions, children can gain knowledge and skills that will help them to think, discern, and question media messages. Even the younger children can answer age-appropriate questions to the best of their abilities. For example:

- What do you like/dislike about the program? Why?
- What was your favorite part? Who is your favorite character?
- What is a commercial?
- Are cartoons real? How can you tell?
- What happens when somebody really punches someone?

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

While talking with children about media is critical, families can also be encouraged to build an environment that supports thoughtful viewing of television and media. Suggestions include:

- Balance children's lives. Children should have opportunities to participate in a variety of activities and experiences throughout childhood.

- Carefully decide where the television is placed. Child development experts agree that parents have less control over the amount and content of television-viewing when a television is placed in the child's bedroom. Making TV too accessible for children can have harmful effects on schoolwork and concentration.

- Establish family rules for television-viewing. Some families set daily or weekly allowances of time that the children are allowed to watch television. Rules may also include not watching television while eating or during certain times of the day.

- Address media violence directly. Discussions about media violence can start as soon as a child witnesses an event on television — no age is too young to begin. This opens doors for discussions about how conflicts can be resolved without violence. Adults should strive to monitor television programs, movie rentals and video games to ensure non-violent content.

Sources include but are not limited to: *Children and Television: Images in a Changing Sociocultural World*, by Gordon Berry and Joy Keiko Asamen, Sage Publications, 1993; www.kidsnet.org/medianews/index.html. May 2000

SEE IT ON PBS KIDS