

'IT'S NOT WHAT YOU WATCH....'¹

Television watching itself affects child development regardless of the programme content. Recent research shows that television watching adversely affects children's thinking, speaking, imagination, senses, physique, feelings, and behaviour. It is important for parents to be aware of these effects.

TELEVISION WATCHING AS AN EXPERIENCE: TV 'Prisoners'

Television watching puts children into a passive, trance-like state where they become 'TV prisoners' – a condition quite different from their active, playful state when not watching. Some parents observed that:

My five year old goes into a trance when he watches TV. He just gets locked in to what is happening on the screen. He's totally, absolutely absorbed when he watches and oblivious to anything else;

He watches in a real trance.

After television watching children can be irritable:

They're cross and irritable after they watch;

After watching they're nervous, bored, disagreeable, slowly coming back to normal.¹

What, then, do children experience when watching television?

TV ADDICTION – 'THE PLUG-IN DRUG'

Marie Winn calls television the 'plug-in drug' because many people find they cannot stop watching. People joke about being 'hooked on TV'. Someone said 'I watch TV the way an alcoholic drinks'.¹

Not unlike drugs and alcohol, TV watching allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state, where worries and anxieties cannot intrude. The typically vacant stare of someone on drugs or alcohol is very similar to the stare of the TV watcher.

The eyes need to be completely passive in order to watch TV i.e. a fixed focus, no voluntary eye movements and a fixed head position. It is as if instead of the imagery arising from within as with day-dreaming, it is produced mechanically for the watcher by the television.

HOW LONG DO CHILDREN WATCH TELEVISION?

Two in three school age children watch TV 3-5 hours daily or 21–35 hours weekly, according to a recent PVE survey. This is as long as children are in school. One in three children dream about late night programmes.¹ In the US surveys show an average of 30 hours per week, and up to 54 hours a week for pre-school children.¹ In West Germany, 80% of all children state that TV is their favourite hobby.¹

CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Children learn so much in their first three years compared to the rest of their lives. They learn to walk, to speak, and experience the awakening of thinking as they grow from being babies to infants. Through play, children develop their knowledge of things, their relationships with other children, their physical control and their imagination. Playing is a child's work, and channels energy constructively into the learning processes. It is essentially active.

Children learn through imitating other children and the adults who tell stories, nursery rhymes, speak with them, and who can provide everyday activities such as baking or making pictures.¹

TV RETARDS BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND BLUNTS THE SENSES

The brain is patterned by the senses, by movement, speech, thought and imagination. As the brain develops, children shift from a non-verbal 'right hemisphere' dreaming consciousness to a verbal, logical 'left hemisphere' state. Television watching prolongs children's dependency on the right hemisphere.¹

The 'brain' strain on children of forming 625 lines composed of over 800 dots appearing 25 times per second, into meaningful images, must be considerable. With the lack of eye movement, this strain can produce sleeplessness, anxiety nightmares, headaches, perceptual disorders, poor concentration and blunted senses. TV watching can produce sensory deprivation.¹

TELEVISION AND SPEAKING

Children learn to speak by talking with real people, not by listening to mechanically reproduced speech. Real people speaking communicate the meaning of words, whereas television only reproduces the sounds, a subtle but vital difference, confusing for toddlers. Television, by emphasising the visual, reduces the need of children to learn how to speak; no verbal response is required of the child; thus speech is discouraged.

Members of a working party on reading agreed that children knew nursery rhymes much less well than previously, largely because of television, which was a 'look and forget' rather than a 'look and learn' medium.¹

TELEVISION ENCOURAGES LAZY READERS

Reading involves concentration, accurate perception, imagination, the comprehension of a story line, and the freedom of the reader to vary the pace. Television, by causing the 'vacant stare' undermines concentration; by an overwhelming visual impact stultifies the imagination; by blunting the senses, interferes with the mechanics of reading; and by emphasising the non-verbal reduces children's enthusiasm for words.

TELEVISION DEPRIVES CHILDREN OF PLAY

Before television, there was a children's culture rich in games, songs and rhymes. Children could play longer, sustain interest more, play dramatically and were more active – according to experienced nursery teachers. Television watching puts children into an untypically passive state in which they are deprived of their true work, which is their play.

A REDUCED SENSE OF IDENTITY

Children develop their sense of identity, of saying 'I' to themselves in meeting real people. The people on TV are unreal, impersonal images, which do little or nothing to awaken a child's sense of self. Hence 'TV children' may tend to relate to themselves and others as things, objects, tools, or even machines. This attitude may later develop into an inability to react constructively in social situations.

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The content of violent programmes may affect children's behaviour, for children learn by imitation.¹ However, the nature of the TV experience **regardless of programme content** may cause anti-social behaviour. Relating to others more as objects than as human beings, a result of TV watching, can contribute to violence. Also, the television experience gives an illusion of participating in an activity when in fact one is totally passive, so that children who are heavy viewers are less able to judge the feelings, expectations and problems of others in real life social situations.

THE EFFECTS OF RADIATION AND ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

Radiation and artificial light may affect children's health and vitality adversely. The scientist Ott found that beans' growth in front of a TV set was distorted by toxic radiation into a vine-like growth, with roots growing upwards out of the soil. Ott questioned what the excessive absorption of artificial light might do to children.¹

HAS TV ANY EDUCATIONAL VALUE?

Which is better qualified to teach a young child, a machine, or another human being?

Experienced teachers have noted that children who watch quite a lot of television retain very little of its content after a short while. (The 'Look and FORGET' Medium.) This could be due to the fact that the children are not called upon to be active; they are not engaging their will power and creating their own imaginative pictures. The impression left by the TV images is superficial.

The American programme 'Sesame Street' was specially designed to help disadvantaged pre-school children catch up cognitively and verbally with those from more fortunate backgrounds. A 1975 survey suggests that 'Sesame Street' widened the achievement gap, and that light viewers exhibited more gains in learning than heavy viewers.¹

WHAT CAN WE DO?

If you feel, after reading this, that you would like to change your family's habits with regard to television watching how should you go about it? First make sure that both parents are in agreement. Then realise that it will be difficult to get rid of television without putting other things in its place, especially if your family have been heavy viewers.

1. Restrict firmly the number of programmes watched or, if you are resolute enough, get rid of the set altogether. Or put it away and use it only for very special occasions.
2. Offer alternative activities of a creative sort, e.g. crafts, puppetry, dressing-up, drawing and painting, modelling, pets, various hobbies, sports, music, dancing, nature studies, gardening.
3. Encourage reading of well written books. Read aloud to little ones.

4. Aim at a positive and warm family life, interesting mealtimes, bedtime stories, singing, nursery rhymes etc. Plan meaningful festivals at Christmas, Easter, and so on.
5. Try to find other people in your neighbourhood who think the same way and help each other.
6. Send to the address overleaf an account of any interesting experiences you have had while watching television and references of any books or press reports on the subject.

A DECISION OF THIS SORT MEANS, IN MOST CASES, A CERTAIN SACRIFICE ON THE PART OF THE PARENTS. ARE YOU PREPARED TO DO SOMETHING FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR CHILDREN?

¹ Marie Winn, *The Plug-in Drug*, Viking Press, New York 1977 Bantam Books and Penguin

² Quotations from Winn

³ Winn

⁴ PYE survey, *Children and Television* Jan 1978

⁵ Winn

⁶ Kiemmer, *Kinder vor der Flimmerkiste* (Children in front of the Box)

⁷ See Doctor Eva Frommer, *Voyage of Discovery from Childhood into Adult World*, Pergamon Press.

⁸ Winn

⁹ See Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, as reviewed by Anne Karpf in the Times 6.7.1978.

¹⁰ *The Teaching of Reading* by the Association of Assistant Mistresses.

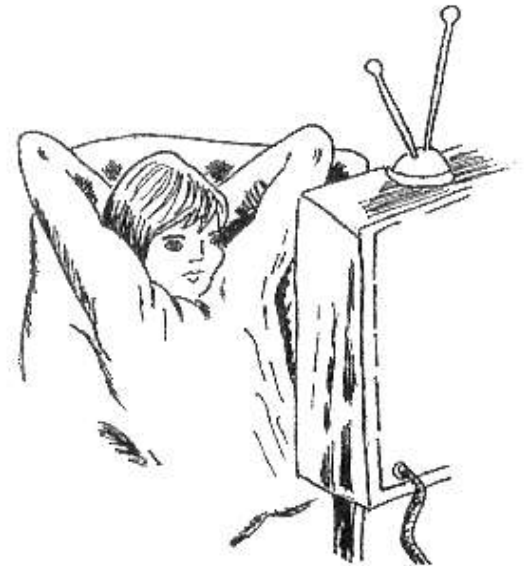
¹¹ See Winn.

¹² See *Sex, Violence and the Media*, Eysenck and Nias 1978.

¹³ See Ott, *Health and Light - The Effects of Natural and Artificial Light on Man and other Living Things*, Devin Adair, Old Greenwich, Connecticut, 1973.

¹⁴ *Sesame Street Revisited*, New York Russell Sage Foundation 1975.

T E L E V I S I O N



and Child Development



Thoughts for Parents and Teachers
about the effects of television
watching on young children