



Changing the way Americans use television.

Guilt Free TV

By Annamarie Pluhar

Managing television use is one of the toughest jobs of parenting in the nineties. It's a skill that requires constant vigilance, monitoring and negotiation. This is not easy because we are ambivalent about television. For many of us television is a friend, a baby-sitter, and entertainer. It has been with us literally every single day of our lives. And though we know (because we've read articles like this one) that children shouldn't be watching so much, we let them. Children love television, and we simply don't have the time or energy to offer an alternative. So children watch and we justify it.

What's a parent to do? Face the issue squarely, get as much information as you can, discuss it, choose what you want to do about it. In that order. Once you have developed your own rules, never waver, be consistent and hold the line. You can do it. You don't let your children pull a pot of boiling water off a stove, or go outside in barefeet in the winter, do you? You don't because you are clear about the physical harm either action would cause your child. Managing television use is essential if you want to keep your children safe mentally and emotionally, and protect them from harm.

Now let's be clear. Television is not going to go away. Video is a fabulous technology, and there are very creative, caring directors and producers working on making superb videos for children. So there is some good television. However, the fact that you watched television when you were a child and believe that you weren't harmed by it does not mean that your child will have the

same experience. Television content and advertising have changed dramatically in the last twenty years.

There are many, many reasons parents should control television use. Some are obvious such as the violence and sex on television. Others are less obvious. I want to use this article to offer ideas about ways to control television, so let me just give you a list of the subtler reasons why it is important. For more information get in touch with us at The Television Project. Television use teaches children that others will entertain them. It fills their minds with advertisements that tell them what is important about life. TV characters and ads model behavior that parents have to correct. It steals time from their development when they should be; learning who they are, making friends with their siblings, hearing stories from parents, building relationships, using their imagination, growing in self-esteem as they practice skills, participating in household tasks, reading, completing homework, and dreaming. One set of reasons has to do with the content on television, the other set has to do with how the time spent watching television is lost to other developmental needs. Together they make a powerful package.

When watching television.

You should always know what you children are watching. It is okay to say no to a program that

you deem inappropriate. With teenagers you may want to watch it with them once in order to discuss why you are nixing it.

Talk to your children about what they see. Ask them whether what they are watching could happen in real life. Get them to think about what the real life consequences might be of what they are seeing. If it is a car chase and crash, have them think through the hospital, funeral, clean-up. If it is a death, who will be sad about the person dying? Have them count the acts of violence.

Talk to them about advertisements. What is really being sold? The item or the image? How did the advertisement get your attention? Tape advertisements and analyze them. This can be a fun family activity.

Encourage your children to talk back to the set.

Make sure children aren't watching shows inappropriate for their age. Gear what is on to the youngest person viewing.

Don't let children under the age of seven to eight watch TV news. They haven't the ability to understand what they are watching. When the Oklahoma bombing happened, TV stations were deluged with calls from parents. Their children were terrified to go to day care, believing that they would be blown up.

Suggestions for controlling television use

DO

Create rules for television watching and stick to them. Be consistent. Some families allow one hour a day, some a half-hour, others two hours. Some families don't allow television from Sunday to Thursday. Other families allow one total "veg" day and then nothing for the other six days. Some don't allow TV on the weekends.

Take the television out of the most comfortable room in the house. Put it somewhere out of the way or not particularly attractive. Don't put it in anyone's bedroom (including your own). Put it in a closet, cabinet or cover it with a cloth so that it isn't staring at you and the children.

Make sure that young children who are fascinated with buttons can't turn the TV set on.

Limit your own television viewing. Model for your children the behavior you want them to carry into their adult lives.

DON'T

Use TV as a reward or a punishment. For instance, allowing a child to watch TV after they have finished their homework is a reward.

Turn the TV on just "to see what's on". Teach children to use TV guides.

In Summary

Good luck. There are many books and resources to help you. At The Television Project we have a bibliography and an email listserv that you can use to talk to other parents. We also conduct workshops. Controlling television use is a tough job. It is absolutely worth the effort. With practice it gets easier. Every parent who has done so has been glad that they did. Follow these guidelines and you can have guilt-free TV.

For more information contact The Television Project (301) 588 4001 or on the Web at www.tvp.org

Annamarie Pluhar is founder and Executive Director of The Television Project based in Silver Spring. The Television Project is dedicated to promoting healthy TV viewing habits for families.