

Study supports limiting television time for children

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Children who spend more time watching television spend less time interacting with their family and playing creatively, report researchers from The University of Texas at Austin and Harvard Children's Hospital in the journal *Pediatrics*.

By studying children's activities over 24-hour periods, Dr. Elizabeth Vandewater and her colleagues provide evidence for the first time that supports the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) television viewing recommendations.

AAP recommends that children under the age of two should not watch television and children older than two should watch no more than two hours of television daily.

“When AAP made these recommendations, we actually knew nothing about how much time infants and toddlers were spending in front of the screen,” says Vandewater, lead author and associate professor of human ecology at The University of Texas at Austin. “Now we know that time spent watching television is negatively related to time spent with parents.”

While television time impinged on familial interactions for all age groups, Vandewater found this to be strongest in older children, ages nine to 12, because they spent less time with their parents overall.

“Though AAP is specifically concerned about younger kids, I would

urge parents to consider how television is impinging on their time with older kids as well,” says Vandewater.

Children spend more time watching television than any other single free time activity, and Vandewater and her colleagues want to understand how this affects childhood health and behavior.

They surveyed time use in 2,900 children ages 12 and under around the United States and analyzed all of the children’s activities over two 24-hour periods, one randomly chosen weekday and one weekend day. A child’s primary caregiver was generally responsible for entering data into time-use diaries. The researchers compared television use with time spent on homework, reading, creative play (such as arts and crafts), active play (such as soccer) and interaction with parents and siblings.

Increased time watching television was associated with decreased time interacting with parents and siblings and playing creatively.

The researchers also found that older children who spent more time watching television spent less time on homework.

Television did not interfere with reading or playing outdoors, though it is a commonly held belief that it interferes with these activities.

“It’s certainly true that American children are less active than they need to be, but I wanted to know whether or not that’s television’s fault,” says Vandewater. “The evidence doesn’t really bear that out. If television is implicated in a problem like childhood obesity, it’s likely something about the content, not the time spent watching it.”

Other researchers on the project include Dr. David Bickham of Harvard Children’s Hospital in Boston and Dr. June Lee of Sesame Workshop in New York.

Source: University of Texas at Austin

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