

## Prof: Mute television during family time, holidays

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Too much television during the holidays can mean less face time with family members and friends, says a Purdue University communication researcher.

"No matter the source of noise, we often fail to appreciate how other sounds in the room can disrupt the efficiency of our conversations," says Glenn Sparks, a professor of communication who is studying the effect TV has on how people relate to each other. Sparks recently completed a study on this topic with Hannah Kirk, a former graduate student in Purdue's Department of Communication.

"The television has become a standard part of our environment in such a way that we hardly even think about it," Sparks says. "The TV is literally just a piece of furniture to us, and we forget it's there even when it's turned on. Yet, the background noise still distracts us and diminishes the quality of our communication."

This phenomenon is especially important to think about during the holidays because families and friends are getting together, he says. Many relatives see each other for short periods of time, and it may be their only time during the year to visit.

"These are people you don't get to see often, and when the environment is cluttered with TV noise, it impedes the quality of interaction," Sparks says. "Our research shows that when the TV is on, we are distracted, reduce eye contact and don't listen as well when others talk."

Television sets are in people's homes, businesses, waiting rooms and lobbies. Sparks says that nearly 99 percent of American households have at least one TV, and many Americans have more than two in their home. Instead of gathering in front of the television set, Sparks suggests that families spend time during their holiday visits playing their favorite games or gathering for conversation in a room without a TV.

"People ought to consider turning the TV off when they are in the family room with others," he says. "When you do that it may attract some attention because the familiar background sounds are suddenly gone. But it may be a great way of forcing the conversational participants to pay more attention to each other, and that is what we often really desire when we are visiting with each other."

Sparks' research relates to some questions raised in his book, "Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships," that he co-authored in 2002 with Will Miller. Sparks is interested in ways electronic technology — from TV to e-mail — affects how people relate to each other. Sparks' recent study with Kirk reported the results of an experiment and was presented in November at the National Communication Association meeting in San Antonio.

The participants in the study were asked to bring a friend. After completing consent forms and waiting for the study to begin, the friends sat together in a room with a TV that was either on or off. The friends' interactions were recorded for 10 minutes, then they were separated and asked to complete questionnaires about the quality of the conversation and interaction they had with their friend while waiting. Sparks and Kirk observed that talking and eye contact decreased significantly when the TV was on. When the TV was off, participants looked at each other about half of the time, but when the TV was on this decreased to one-quarter of the time.

They also found that 94 percent of the people who weren't watching TV reported they enjoyed their conversations during that 10-minute period with their friends. When the TV was on, only 67 percent said they enjoyed the conversation.

"These findings may be quite intuitive, but we were still surprised by the magnitude of the effects," Sparks says. "The fact that so many of the participants enjoyed their conversations more when the TV was off is a bit surprising because so many televisions are left on in rooms where friends converse. If a conversation turns out to be boring, it may be nice to have the distraction of the TV in the room, but people need to consider that the TV itself may be decreasing the quality of interaction."

Some studies do show that television can facilitate conversations and encourage people to interact by watching a favorite show together.

"TV can be used to inspire a social connection," Sparks says. "However, we need to be cautious when the TV is on but not the primary focus of attention. There is a risk that these situations can hinder relationships."

Sparks is interested in similar studies that focus on the effects of different kinds of TV content. He says it may be possible that some types of shows are more distracting than others. His work is supported by the Department of Communication, which is housed in the College of Liberal Arts.

Source: Purdue University

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