

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Make TV More Than Just a Babysitter

from the American Counseling Association

Yes, TV is a great way to keep the kids quiet and out of the way for a few minutes. But are we doing our children any favors when we allow, or even encourage, unlimited TV time?

Researchers estimate that children ages 2 to 5 spend an average of 32 hours each week in front of the TV. For kids 6 to 11, the average is about 28 hours per week. Add in the time for video games and the number of hours in front of a glowing screen grows even greater.

And no, this isn't a good thing. Studies have linked excessive TV viewing to childhood obesity, aggressive behavior, lower reading skills and poorer academic performance.

The answer is not to ban TV, an almost impossible solution guaranteed to bring family fights and little success. Instead, try to make the TV experience a positive and beneficial one.

Start by being selective about the programs your children can watch. There's a great deal of educational programming, not only on PBS, but also on the Discovery, Learning and History channels. Also visit your local library for educational DVDs.

Experts advise limiting the amount of TV allowed, and setting appropriate times for watching. Homework, household chores and family conversations should take priority and be the means for earning the right to watch TV. If you set certain hours for getting homework done, then TV is simply not an option during those hours.

Another important change to make is simply watching TV with your children. It's a chance both to relax and to talk with your kids about their activities and interests. Make that TV time interactive by discussing the shows you're watching together. Let your kids explain what's good or bad about a show, and share your own opinions with them.

Your own example will also affect how your kids view TV. If your behavior is simply to plop in front of the TV and channel surf, the message to your children is that TV is just a way to kill time, rather than being a means for finding information or entertainment.

Setting controls and being actively in charge of TV watching does take time and effort, but the result can have significant benefits for your children. It can help them see TV as an educational and entertaining experience, and not just a place to waste countless hours.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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