



Health and Safety Notes  
California Childcare Health Program



# Electronic Media and Young Children

Television is a daily presence in the lives of most young children, and video games on consoles and computers are also widely used by children. But how does exposure to television, computers, electronic games and other such media affect children's health and development? Researchers and children's advocates agree that television and other types of screen media are not appropriate activities for very young children, and that older children should be carefully monitored, and kept within safe time limits, when viewing or playing on any such media (KFF, 2005).

As an early care and education professional, you are more than just a child care provider; you are also a family educator and a role model for positive caregiving. By educating families about the dangers of electronic media and by creating a sensible media policy in your program, you can make a lasting difference in the lives of the children in your care.

## What are the dangers of television and electronic media for young children?

Television and electronic games can have a negative effect on children's physical and emotional health, social development, academic skills and behavior. Below are some of the suspected negative effects of electronic media on children.

**Poor nutrition and obesity.** Children need time for active play and exercise. Daily vigorous play helps them to develop muscles and to maintain cardiovascular fitness. However, viewing television and playing games on electronic consoles or computers are sedentary ways to pass time and provide no physical benefits. Additionally, children who view television are vulnerable targets of advertisements for food products of poor nutritional value (AAP, 1999). Healthy and nutritious foods are rarely

presented in television advertising targeted at children. Research has shown that children who spend extensive amounts of time watching television programs are at increased risk for overweight and obesity in childhood and also later in life.

**Television and electronic media displace social interaction.** Time spent watching television or playing a computer game is time not spent engaged in a creative activity, or interacting with other people. Television viewing is an especially passive experience, offering no opportunity to interact or respond. When the amount of time spent in front of the television or sitting at a game console is prolonged, it can displace social activities such as play, or even conversation. Spending too much time with electronic media can be an isolating experience, with a negative impact on the development of social skills (AAP, 2001).

**Violence and aggressive behavior.** Many television programs and electronic games feature situations of violence and destruction. Research studies have shown that children exposed to violent images are initially frightened and traumatized. With repeated exposure, they can become desensitized to the real effects of violence. Children exposed in this way may act aggressively, with no sense of consequences (AAP, 2001).

**Tobacco and alcohol.** Movies and television programs glamorize smoking and drinking. Additionally, television and movie characters are often shown indulging in substance use. These images send the dangerous message to children that substance use is normal, or even attractive, adult behavior (AAP, 1999).

**School readiness.** A recent study showed that exposure to general television programming in early childhood is associated with inferior academic

skills at school age. The children in the study who were regular viewers of mainstream television had smaller vocabularies and less developed math skills compared to children who viewed no television or children's educational programs only (Wright, 2001).

**Attention problems.** Another recent study tracked a group of children across time. The researchers found that exposure to television at a very young age is associated with attention problems later on. The children in the study who spent more daily hours viewing television at ages 1 and 3 years had higher rates of attention problems at age 7 years (Christakis, 2004).

## What can we do?

Below are several tips for protecting children from the adverse effects of electronic media.

- Television and electronic media are inappropriate for children from birth to 24 months, under any circumstances. Educate parents not to use television to entertain or educate these youngest and most vulnerable children. Infants and toddlers need frequent human interaction for social, emotional and cognitive development.
  - Child care settings should consider a television-free policy for children of all ages, particularly if the children are being exposed to electronic media at home.
  - For children age 2 years and over, caregivers and parents should limit television viewing to educational programs designed for children. In child care settings where there is some television present, children should be exposed to it only for short periods of time.
  - Don't leave young children alone with television or electronic games on. Stay with them to monitor the content of the media and their reactions.
  - Answer any questions they have about what they are seeing. Television and other electronic media should not be used as a "baby sitter" of young children.
  - Teach children to be critical viewers of commercial messages.
  - Evaluate the nutritional value of foods promoted on television, and offer children healthy alternatives.
- Educate families to create and implement an electronic media policy at home. The policy should provide children with clear guidance about how much and what types of programs and games are permitted. All of the adults in the setting should agree on the policy and enforce it consistently.

## References and Resources

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