

Most children younger than 2 years watch TV despite warnings

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Approximately 40 percent of three-month old children and about 90 percent of children age 24 months and under regularly watch television, DVDs or videos, according to a report in the May issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

"The public health implications of early television and video viewing are potentially large. There are both theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the effects of media exposure on children's development are more likely to be adverse before the age of about 30 months than afterward," the authors note. Recent studies suggest that what children younger than two years watch and whether they watch it alone or with a parent may be important for their vocabulary development.

Frederick J. Zimmerman, Ph.D., of the University of Washington, Seattle, and colleagues, conducted a telephone survey of 1,009 parents of children age 2 to 24 months. The study analyzed four television and DVD content categories: children's educational, children's non-educational, baby DVDs/videos and grown-up television (such as talk shows or sports programming). Average daily viewing, reasons parents gave for their child's viewing, who was present during viewing and socio-demographic factors were reported.

The median age of initiating viewing was 9 months. The average amount of viewing time for the children was 40.2 minutes per day. At 3 months of age children watched less than an hour per day and by 24 months they watched more than 1.5 hours per day. "Approximately half of the

viewing was of shows that parents reported to be in the children's educational category," the authors note. "The remaining half was approximately equally split among children's non-educational content, baby DVDs/videos and grown-up television."

Of the reasons given by parents for allowing television and DVD/video viewing, 29 percent believe that television is educational or good for their child's brain, 23 percent believe that it is enjoyable or relaxing for their child and 21 percent believe it gives them time to get things done while the child is entertained. Parents watched with their children more than half the time.

Researchers also reported that compared with children without siblings, children with two or more siblings were less likely to view grown-up television and watched about 18 minutes less per day in all content types.

"These results suggest that it may not only be the amount or content type that children view, but also the role of siblings in helping to process this content that may affect whether television viewing helps or hinders development," the authors conclude. In addition, "these results suggest that the widespread notion that parents turn to television only as an electronic babysitter is a misconception...Parents are clearly hungry for truly educational content for children younger than 2 years. More research is urgently required to determine whether it is realistic to produce genuinely educational content for children younger than 2 years, and if so, what it would be."

Source: JAMA and Archives Journals

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