

When kids watch a lot of TV, parents may end up more stressed

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There's bad news for parents who frequently plop their kids in front of the TV to give themselves a break: It might actually end up leaving moms and dads more stressed.

Why? Because the more television that kids watch, the more they're exposed to advertising messages. The more advertising they see, the more likely they are to insist on purchasing items when they go with their [parents](#) to the store—and perhaps make a fuss if told "no." All that, researchers say, may contribute to parents' overall stress levels, well beyond a single shopping trip.

The findings come from a University of Arizona-led study, published in the *International Journal of Advertising*, that explores the potential effects of children's television watching habits on their parents' stress levels.

"The more advertising children see, the more they ask for things and the more conflict is generated," said lead study author Matthew Lapierre, an assistant professor in the UArizona Department of Communication in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. "What we haven't looked at before is what the [potential effect](#) is on parents. We know kids ask for things, we know it leads to conflict, but we wanted to ask the next question: Could this be contributing to parents' overall stress?"

The study suggests that it could.

There are a few things parents can do, perhaps the most obvious of

which is limiting screen time.

"Commercial content is there for a reason: to elicit purchasing behavior. So, if this is a problem, maybe shut off the TV," Lapierre said.

Of course, that can be easier said than done, he acknowledged.

Another thing parents can try, especially as advertising geared toward children ramps up around the holidays: Consider how they talk to their kids about consumerism.

The researchers looked at the effectiveness of three types of parent-child consumer-related communication:

—Collaborative communication is when a parent seeks child input on family purchasing decisions—for example, saying things such as, "I will listen to your advice on certain products or brands."—Control communication is when a parent exhibits total control in parent-child consumer related interactions—for example, saying things such as, "Don't argue with me when I say no to your product request."—Advertising communication is when parents talk to their children about advertising messages—for example, saying things such as, "Commercials will say anything to get you to buy something."

They found that, in general, collaborative communication is associated with less parent stress. However, the protective effect of collaborative communication decreases as children's purchase initiation and coercive behaviors—such as arguing, whining or throwing temper tantrums—increase.

Both control communication and advertising communication are associated with more purchase initiations and children's coercive behavior, the researchers found, suggesting that engaging less in those

communication styles could be beneficial.

However, when children have higher levels of television exposure, the protective effect of engaging in less advertising communication decreases.

"Overall, we found that collaborative communication between parents and children was a better strategy for reducing stress in parents. However, this communicative strategy shows diminishing returns when children ask for more products or engage in more consumer conflict with parents," said study co-author Eunjoo Choi, a UArizona doctoral student in communication.

The study is based on survey data from 433 parents of children ages 2 to 12. The researchers focused on [younger children](#) because they have less independent purchasing power and spend more time shopping with their parents than older kids, Lapierre said.

In addition to answering questions about their [communication](#) styles, the parents in the study also responded to questions designed to measure:

—How much television their child watches in a day.—How often their child ask for or demands a product during shopping trips, or touches a product without asking.—How often their child engages in specific coercive behaviors during shopping trips.—Parent stress levels.

Advertisers find a way

Lapierre acknowledged that the way people consume entertainment is changing. With the rise of the DVR and streaming services, many viewers are no longer being exposed to the traditional advertising of network or cable TV. However, advertisers are finding creative ways around that, through tactics such as product placement and integrated

branding—incorporating product or company names into a show's narrative—Lapierre said. And advertising toward children remains a multibillion-dollar industry.

"In general, more television exposure means more exposure to commercialized content. Even if I'm streaming, if I I'm watching more of it, I'm likely seeing more integrated branding," Lapierre said.

Advertising aimed at children—which often features lots of bright colors, upbeat music and flashy characters—can be especially persuasive, since, developmentally, [children](#) aren't fully capable of understanding advertising's intent, Lapierre said.

"Advertising for kids is generated to makes them feel excited. They do a lot of things in kids' [advertising](#) to emotionally jack up the child," Lapierre said. "Children don't have the cognitive and emotional resources to pull themselves back, and that's why it's a particular issue for them."

More information: Matthew A. Lapierre et al, Take a deep breath: the effects of television exposure and family communication on family shopping-related stress, *International Journal of Advertising* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2020.1820205](#)

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