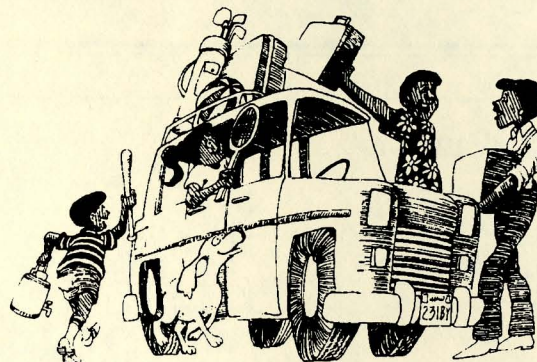


Kids, Food, and Television

*Ann A. Hertzler, Mick Coleman, Elaine D. Scott**

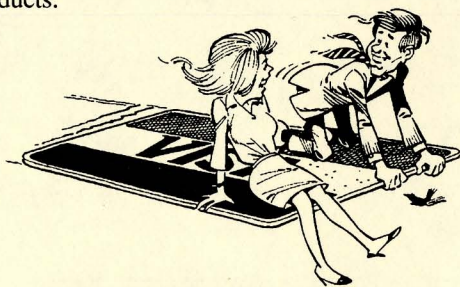
Television is a major form of entertainment for children. Young children watch 25 to 54 hours of television a week or about four hours of television a day. They see almost 20,000 commercials a year. Most children will have spent 22,000 hours watching television by the age of 18.

Television does more than entertain children. It also teaches children about choices and about values like right and wrong, cooperation and selfishness, dependence and independence, health and sickness, understanding and prejudice, negotiation and violence.



Television Ads

Television ads for food, toys, or kitchen products teach children consumerism. They learn what products are available, what the products do, and perhaps some ideas about how to compare products.



Children learn how an item fits the lifestyle of a family from cartoons, soap operas, situation comedies, and detective shows. Consequently, children may develop unrealistic ideas of how people live. Rarely are television characters involved in food planning and selection, comparison shopping, consumer redress, managing a family budget, working out family problems, or shopping for credit. Yet the families portrayed on TV suffer no ill effects from not doing these things.

In addition, TV family members appear to always be involved with other people and are frequently going places. In reality, families spend a great amount of time watching television. When children see these discrepancies they may achieve the television lifestyle.

Food

Nutritionists are teaching families what foods to include and what foods to limit. Do TV food and product ads fit this goal? Do families and children know what they are buying?

- How does the food contribute to the family's health and well being?
- What is the sugar, fat, and sodium content?
- Is the food form or style OK for storage in the home; for preparation by family members such as young children or the disabled?
- Is the product better than another choice?
- Is the product needed?

Other Products

Advertising creates a desire for a wealth of consumer products such as sandwich cookers, pizza bakers, and crepe makers. Questions to ask are:

- Will it be used?
- Is it worth the money?
- Will another appliance do the job?
- Is it durable or will it break?
- Is it safe?
- Can it be repaired?
- Are additional items needed to use it such as special pans for microwave ovens?
- Where will it be stored?

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TV Content

Young children are influenced by television differently than older children. But both are attracted by fast-paced action, special effects, zoom shots, and rapid changes in scenery and characters. Most television programs and commercials contain all of these features. Many toys are created with a TV program in mind so that the program becomes one long commercial (e.g., Transformers or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles).

At age 3, children begin to follow the characters and stories they see in cartoons and television programs. By age 6 or 7, children begin to understand the interpersonal relationships, behavior, and moral messages contained in television story plots. However, even school-age children are unable to fully interpret the subtle satire and symbolism used in many programs and commercials.

Fantasy



People flying, turning into monsters, surviving fire, eating weird things, and coming back from the grave are fantasies that children have difficulty distinguishing from reality. The event can amuse the child during viewing, but horrify the child at night.

Fantasies can teach unrealistic food behavior—living in cookie and candy land; food growing everywhere without scientific knowledge or work to produce it; food appearing from nowhere without preparation effort and without the cost of purchase; and royalty or heroes receiving free food. The characters are rarely shown eating a variety of foods or being concerned about nourishment.

Be aware of cartoon shows or stories that children watch alone. Ask questions about “pretend ideas” and “real ideas.”

- Where does food grow?
- Who gets free food?
- Do people live in cookie land?

Stereotyping

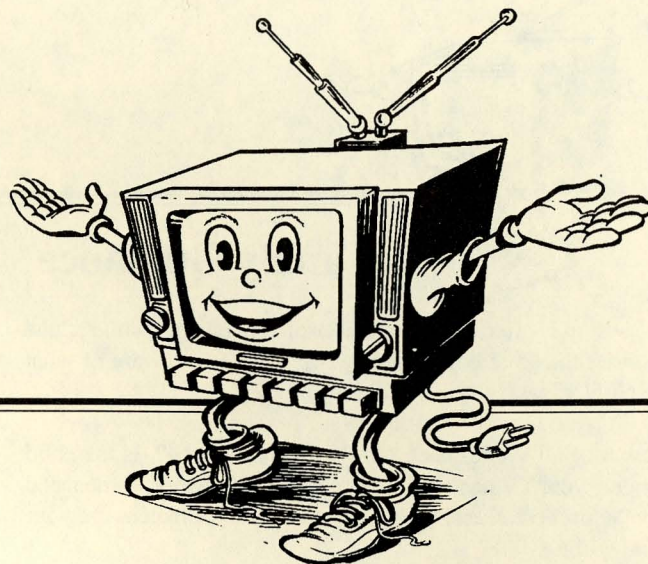


Some programs and commercials present negative stereotypes: Women are sometimes depicted as sexual objects; men as unthinking brutes; other ethnic groups as bad; single parents or working mothers as irresponsible; women as doing all of the food-related roles and housework; and children as being incapable of food selection and handling. In addition, the voices introducing or narrating programs and commercials are often male.

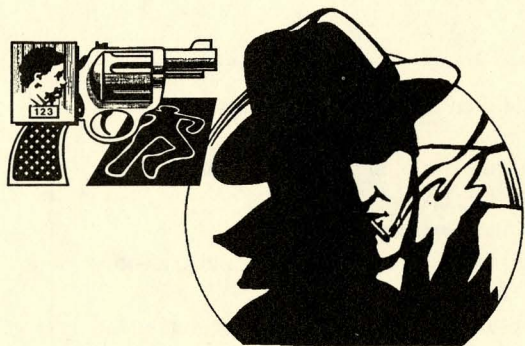
What foods do main characters buy, prepare, and consume? Do women do the buying, preparing, and cleaning up? Are men, women, and children stereotyped by the foods they eat or prepare?

Have each family member tell or write down the number and types of stereotypes they see during a TV program. Compare the answers with what your family and other families do.

Four program categories are shown below so that you can think about the content of TV shows and ads. What activities can you add to do with children while they watch TV? Families can teach responsible behavior by being aware of what children are watching and by structuring activities that teach their family values. Use these suggested activities to help you develop your own to make television viewing a productive time.



Violence

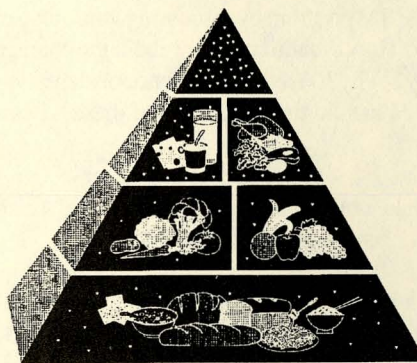


Eighty percent of prime-time TV programs are estimated to have at least one violent incident an hour. The average is 7.5 an hour. During Saturday morning cartoons, almost 25 violent incidents per hour occur.

Some researchers believe that children copy or model the many violent acts performed by TV heroes. Children often repeat these acts because they think it is OK to treat others badly like the television heroes sometimes do.

Ask your child how it feels to be hurt. Encourage your child to identify with the victims of television violence, not the aggressors. Ask your child to think of ways to resolve problems other than the violent ways shown on TV.

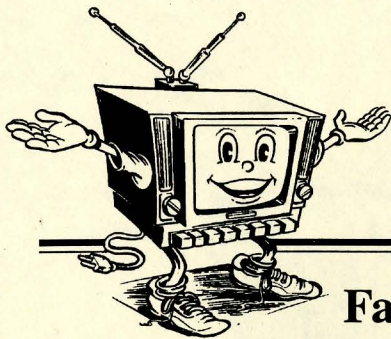
Health



Hidden messages are difficult for preschoolers to distinguish from the advertised product. Smiles, active characters, and lots of friends support hidden messages which suggest that the product promotes a healthy lifestyle. Fun, health, love, happiness, belonging, and excitement are some hidden messages. Thin people are portrayed as ideal and as healthy in advertisements and in show content. This image encourages even grade school children to diet.

Be alert to advertising messages embedded in TV programs. It is no coincidence that certain soft drinks are shown, that particular cars are driven, or that specific air lines are traveled.

Discuss with children the motives behind advertising and the means of selling products. Make a game of identifying the number of commercials that occur in an hour, the hidden messages, and the methods advertisers use to promote the messages. Take the child comparison shopping.



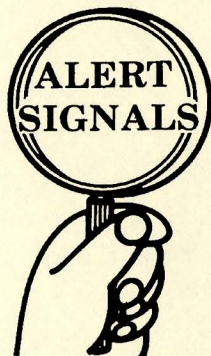
Family Guidance

Television is often used as an electronic babysitter while adults do other things at home. Many parents are not aware of what the child views.

How much TV does each family member watch? Is the child copying your TV habits? If you read, do housework, garden, and engage in recreational activities and hobbies, chances are your child will too.

A concern over children watching so much television is that it is one-way communication. The television speaks and the child listens. Children learn best through hands-on activities, asking questions, exercising, manipulating objects, and experiencing new relationships. To counteract the TV, provide alternative activities for the preschooler; art projects, picture books, blocks, outdoor play, helping in the garden or with meals. These activities also contribute to the mental, physical, and social development of young children.

1. Identify TV programs that the entire family can watch together. If the child watches a TV program alone, be aware of the content of the program and the commercials. Be able to talk about it and to ask questions.
2. Follow up the TV program by discussing what happened on the show. How did the child feel about the characters and the story? Why? Was there violence or stereotyping or fantasy? What did the child think of these? Discuss your values.
3. Touch the child while watching television. Hold the child in your lap or pat the child occasionally.
4. Talk about how your family is different from or similar to the family shown on television. See pages 2 & 3 for questions and games about fantasies, violence, stereotyping, and hidden messages.
5. Encourage children to watch television programs that teach:
 - values you believe in such as cooperation, trust, honesty, sharing, and academic skills;
 - new words and new ideas;
 - family relationships that you want the child to identify with;
 - new information about nature, science, geography, and everyday living skills;
 - about food and consumerism.
6. Be selective in programs that the family or the child watches and limit the amount of time spent watching television. Post in a prominent place those times when the television is to be turned off such as mealtime or homework time. Use a kitchen timer to keep track of the time that preschoolers watch television. When the timer rings, the child knows that it is time to turn off the TV



Alert Signals

The following "alerts" signal that it's time to review this page for hints on interacting with the child:

- When the child declines activities with family or friends in order to watch TV.
- When the child desires a TV product because "everyone has one" but only the TV character has the item.
- When the child refuses to actively comparison-shop for food, toys, or other products and wants only the TV product.
- When the child becomes dissatisfied with family lifestyles and what the family can afford.