

Unplug the Baby Sitter

Giving your kids over to a TV set to keep them occupied is a horrifying choice.

The Kaiser Family Foundation recently revealed the results of a remarkable study that indicated that children from infancy to age 6 spend an average of two hours a day using electronic media. That's the same amount of time they use playing outside—but they spend only one-third as much time reading or being read to. The study also revealed that one out of four babies under age 2 have TVs in their bedrooms.

I've cautioned parents in this column before to keep the television and computer out in public view. Once you put a TV in a child's bedroom, it'll be tough to get it out.

Needless to say, the results of the study stand in dramatic contrast to the longtime recommendations of pediatricians in the U.S. For instance, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests parents not allow their kids to watch TV at all before age 2. Early childhood is a time when children should be exploring the real world rather than being locked in front of a TV set.

Other studies indicate that older kids with TVs watch almost an hour more a day than kids without them, are at 31 percent greater risk of becoming overweight or obese, and don't do as well in school as other children.

The information shows not only the disconnect between America's parents and their kids but also how much children are being indoctrinated by media from the start of their development. Trust me, most kids will become addicted to

television early enough, so they don't need to begin watching when they are toddlers.

The "branding of children" is a priority of our largest and most powerful corporations because they know the earlier they can get kids to buy their products, the more loyal they'll be for the rest of their lives. So don't think watching TV doesn't affect behavior.

Big business is spending billions of dollars a year on advertising targeted specifically at children because they know it works. I even urge great caution when it comes to so called "educational videos."

Today, the market is flooded with "early development videos" and other programming supposedly created to help young children learn. They are often accompanied by huge marketing campaigns designed to convince parents that kids will fall behind in their development if early learning videos are not in the home. But there is simply no research to support this claim.

The bottom line? Don't give in to the video baby sitter. I understand how busy parents can be, and after cleaning house, washing clothes and more, it's tough to find the energy to keep kids occupied with healthy alternatives.

But giving them over to a TV set is a truly horrifying choice. The extra time and energy parents invest in their children during the early years will more than pay off in educational advancement, healthy living and a more positive outlook.

My wife, Kathleen, and I are friends with an actor couple here

in Hollywood who both work in television. They have decided not to let their children watch TV until after they've learned to read. They believe reading and intellectual development are the most important skills.

Extreme? Perhaps. But considering the powerful impact of reading on achievement, income and job possibilities, I can't think of any TV show that is worth trading for the future of our children.

Take it from me. Read to your kids and help them learn to read. It will create a special connection for you and a brighter future for them.

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