A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Turn Off the TV

Television and Video Viewing Time Among Children Aged 2 Years — Oregon, 2006–2007

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the *MMWR*, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

For many children, television has become baby sitter and best friend. A recent CDC study in one state found that nearly one in five two-year-olds watched two or more hours of television each day, and a similar proportion have a TV in their bedroom. Excessive television viewing by young children can result in several developmental and health issues.

Dr. John Oh is a researcher with CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service and he's joining us today by telephone to discuss the excessive TV viewing habits of young children. Welcome to the show, John.

[Dr. Oh] Thank you for having me, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] John, why are children spending so much time watching TV?

[Dr. Oh] Multiple studies have looked at this particular question and they found that parents give several reasons for why their children watch TV. First, parents think it has educational value. Secondly, they do it to provide some entertainment for their kids. And thirdly, they frankly, use it as a babysitting tool. Putting the child in front of the TV frees up parents to do other things around the house. Now I want to emphasize, Bob, the first point about education is that when we look at infants watching TV, despite marketing to parents, there really has not been any study that's shown any educational benefit from having your infant watching TV. Instead, you know, interactive activities are thought to be much better for the young child, in terms of healthy brain development. So these are going to be things like talking with your child, reading, playing, and singing together. These are thought to be much healthier than watching television.

[Dr. Gaynes] I mentioned earlier that one in five two-year-olds is watching two or more hours of television each day. How much does viewing time tend to increase as a child gets older?

[Dr. Oh] By nine months of age, about half of children are starting to watch television and videos, and the amount it increases per year in the child's life is about one hour per day per year of the child's life. Eventually, children will watch on average between maybe three and six hours of television in a typical day, the peak years being around 11 to 14 years of age. As a child gets older, as they become teenagers, they tend to watch slightly less. This only includes time watching television and videos. It doesn't include computer screen time or video games or other forms of interacting with the media.

[Dr. Gaynes] What kinds of problems can excessive TV viewing lead to?

[Dr. Oh] You know, the biggest concern is childhood obesity. As you know, we have an epidemic of childhood obesity. One out of three kids is thought to be overweight or obese. These numbers have tripled in the last generation. There's a pretty strong association between excess television viewing and childhood obesity. But beyond that, if you look at television viewing, particularly in infants and preschoolers, there have been shown to be negative impacts on learning, language, attention, and classroom engagement. So I think it's important for parents to understand that, even though it seems kind of benign and safe and harmless, television viewing actually has some harmful effects on the child.

[Dr. Gaynes] John, what would be considered a reasonable amount of TV viewing time?

[Dr. Oh] Well the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued guidelines for parents and caregivers and for children that are under two years of age, they actually discourage any sort of TV or video viewing. There's no evidence that it's healthy for the child and, if anything, there's probably some harm. For children that are two years of age and older, one to two hours a day of high quality programming is the most that the Academy recommends. But Bob, it's not just the amount of programming, it's the content and the quality. Clearly, content is important. We want educational-type programming that's not violent, that's age-appropriate for the child. The context is also very important. It's much healthier for a child to be watching television along with a parent so that they can interact and talk about what they're seeing on the screen, versus the child just watching the TV on his or her own.

[Dr. Gaynes] What can parents do to decrease the amount of time their children spend watching TV?

[Dr. Oh] I think the most important thing is parents to model the behavior that they expect in their children. I think it's a credibility problem if parents themselves are watching four to six hours of television per day and then expect their children to watch less than one to two hours of television per day. In addition to that, it's very important to develop and enforce family rules regarding how much TV a child can watch and what they can watch. It's also important to remove a television from the bedroom. In our study, we found that children that had a TV in the bedroom were twice as likely to watch excess TV, compared to those that didn't have a TV in the bedroom. We always encourage that, you know, children benefit better from doing more outings, outdoor play, doing things, rather than just, you know, sitting in front of the television. Now, we all understand, as parents, that we're busy these days and sometimes, although we may want our children to play outdoors, you know, it may not be safe or the weather may not be very good, so it can be a challenge, but yet, it's very important for parents to think of other ways that their child can be creative and to do things other than watch TV.

[Dr. Gaynes] Where can listeners get more information about strategies to decrease the TV viewing time of young children?

[Dr. Oh] Yes, two websites I would really recommend - one is www.letsmove.gov. This is the website that's trying to reduce childhood obesity and reducing television and video viewing time

is an important component on it. There are some important practical tips that are located there. And the other one is www.healthychildren.org. This is a website established by the American Academy of Pediatrics. If you type in the keyword "television," it will present a range of very practical tips on what the Academy feels about television viewing.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, John. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. John Oh about the excessive TV viewing time of young children.

Removing the TV from a child's bedroom is a good first step towards reduced viewing time. Other strategies include reading to children, encouraging exercise and outdoor play, and participating in activities that promote physical and educational development.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Bob Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC.*

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.