



Television and autism. To watch or not to watch?

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We can look at the issue of television and autism from a couple of viewpoints. The “professional” point of view is probably reasonably clear cut and usually involves a discussion of television and the effects on typically developing children with a host of websites and information about recommended viewing habits and so on. However, for parents of children with autism, the discussion about television becomes much more complex.

Let’s begin with some basic information about recommended time spent watching TV. The American Academy of Pediatrics currently recommends that children younger than two years of age watch *no* television at all, and that older children be limited to 1 to 2 hours per day. Currently, one quarter of children under three years of age in America are watching on average 3 hours TV every day. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006) provided results from the Survey of Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities conducted in April 2006. Children’s (aged 5-14yrs) participation in cultural, sporting and other leisure activities were measured. Their time spent using computers and the Internet and their involvement in homework and other study were also presented. In the previous 2 weeks, 97% of boys and girls had spent time watching television, videos or DVDs and children spent *more* time on this activity than on any of the other selected activities. Children spent an average of approximately 20 hours in the reference period viewing television programs, videos or DVDs. So already we have a problem! Children seem to be watching more TV than is recommended. But does it matter? The simple answer is yes it does matter. Let’s consider this quote:

“Children need to practise — to ‘actively learn’ how to speak, write and think. While TV does hold children’s attention, it does not always engage their minds in ‘active learning’. Other activities like reading and playing do this”. (Raising Children website article)

When we consider the activities of typically developing young children, much of their day is spent playing and therefore learning about themselves, the world and importantly other children when they have structured play opportunities such as at kindergarten or child care and a stimulating home environment. Play is basic to the healthy development and learning of children. So for typically developing children, there needs to be a balance to the day's activities that may include scheduling some TV time as well as opportunities, time and a place for play. Young Media Australia recommends that children under two years should spend "very little time" watching television and for preschoolers "an hour a day is plenty" (of programs made for preschool children). Further, the Alliance for Childhood group advises that computers should not play a significant part in preschool children's lives. So in short, the message for typically developing children is less TV and get out there and play more!

Is it different when the preschooler has autism?

Working in Early Childhood Intervention usually involves home visiting and sometimes working with children and their parents at home. How often is the TV on in the homes we visit? My experience is that the TV is very often on and part of the home environment. Should we worry about this? Should we talk to parents about this? Is it harmful? Does it matter and are the "rules" different when we are thinking about children with autism? In short I think the answer is yes, the rules *are* different. Children with autism do have different needs. For example, play for children with autism can, in fact, be hard work - hard work for the teacher (parents or carers) and hard work for the child who would generally much rather he/she be left alone to do his/her own thing. For most typically developing young children, the day is spent in a combination of activities involving relating to other children and adults in their world, eating, resting and for many hours each day, playing. This range of daily activities is **not** typical for the child who has autism. Lack of creative and imaginative play is one of the diagnostic features and is common to all children with autism. The ability to play generally has to be taught and so becomes a type of *work* for children with autism. They may much prefer to spend their time engaged in rituals and repetitive routines that exclude social contact and interest in what is going on around them. These behaviours can become so entrenched that there is no time left for useful activity. Often one of the obsessional activities is watching particular television programmes or favourite DVDs in a repetitive manner. So probably the best answer to a situation such as this is teaching parents and the child to limit the amount of time spent in whatever their obsessional activities are, including limiting TV time. Increasing functional play skills is often the most positive and practical solution to decreasing obsessional activity, but it does take time, planning and effort. There will also be times when watching TV is a valid "time out" for parents and the child with autism and this is perfectly OK as long as a time limit has been established or TV time is part of a planned approach to managing behaviour and learning new skills.

Positive uses for television

Television can never substitute for children's direct experiences in interacting with the world, but it can sometimes provide children with autism with the kind of content or ideas they need for play. For example, the ABC "Playschool" programme offers suggestions for play in an age appropriate way, mixed with songs, dancing and opportunities for the

child and adult watching with them to join in, interact and imitate. Similarly, the Wiggles and Sesame Street programmes offer educational material in an attractive and appealing package that many children with autism enjoy and find accessible. There is some evidence to suggest that television can be used as a teaching tool for young children with autism. For example, the 'Transporters' program, (Baron-Cohen et al., 2007) is a tool for teaching emotion recognition skills to children with autism. The television program encourages children to look at human faces and learn about emotions. The Transporters program is an animated series where mechanical vehicles show human emotional expressions in social contexts. The program includes 15 five-minute television episodes portraying 15 key emotions. Parents are trained to support their children in watching the programme. Some recent research has also investigated the effectiveness of teaching specific play and social skills to preschool children with autism who watch brief film clips of peers playing and relating to each other in simple turn taking games. It could therefore be argued that for children with autism, television has a valid place as part of a planned education and behaviour management programme.

The importance of play for children with autism

We now know that the earlier play skills can be taught to young children, the better the chance that rituals and routines may decrease. We also know that intrusion on the child's isolation is an important way of establishing contact. This can be done by offering toys and objects and establishing play routines and games that the child finds enjoyable. Teaching the child to play, by themselves and with others therefore serves a number of important functions:

Children with autism can learn about their world through play

Children's ability to communicate relates to their ability to play symbolically. Improved play skills can lead to improved communication skills

As play skills increase, rituals and routines usually decrease

Interactive play can increase social skills such as learning to take turns, sharing, and co-operating

Play with toys provides an opportunity to teach the child new skills that are important for later, formal education – e.g. attending to others, attention to task, turn taking, following instructions, opportunities and topics for conversation.

General Advice for parents:

1. *Limit media time: Limit the time to no more than 1-2 hours a day. ...kids ...need to be reading, playing, talking with you, taking part in more 'active' activities.*

2. *Monitor what shows they watch: This is especially important for parents of very young children. Do not allow any child under the age of 8 to watch any show or movie that has appreciable violent content.*

3. *Watch TV and movies with your kids: If you do, then they will be learning your values, not the program's.* 4. *Discuss the content of the program with them. This is called media literacy, or media education, and like sex education, drug education, or violence prevention education, it begins at home.*

5. *Keep the television out of the bedroom: For parents, controlling the media also means not allowing kids to have television sets in their own bedrooms. Why? Because... How will total TV time be controlled? How can a child's choice of shows be monitored? How much co-viewing is likely to occur?*

From:
American Academy of Pediatrics

Useful websites

1. General fact sheet about children and TV.

<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=122&id=1839>

2. UK National Autism Society fact sheet about autism and play.

<http://www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1250&a=3353>

3. Australian website Essential Baby. "Is TV good for toddlers?"

<http://www.essentialbaby.com.au/parenting/toddler/is-tv-good-for-toddlers-20080515-2ejw.html>

4. Raising children network

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/television.html/context/481#how>

5. Young Media Australia (supported by Govt of South Australia)

http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/01_05_effects_devel.htm#play

6. Alliance for Childhood a US based group that promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development through public education campaigns. Find useful fact sheets such as this one on play.

http://www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/pdf_files/play_fact_sheet.pdf