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Is It Okay to Let My Baby Watch TV?

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 Word Count: **708** Date: **Mon, 2 Jun 2008 2:53 AM**

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There are two schools of thought on this. One says that babies under two years of age should not be allowed to watch any TV; the other says that limited amounts of high-quality educational TV accompanied by adult interaction are fine - and may even be beneficial. When DVDs are used correctly, the repetition and familiarity they provide can actually aid learning.

However, no TV at all is better than unsupervised watching. No TV at all is also better than any watching of entertainment-based programs - and that includes shows such as cartoons, which may be designed for kids, but are really not suitable for babies.

What can happen to babies who watch the wrong sort of TV, or watch TV unsupervised?

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[Child experts](#) in the US have noted a correlation between high TV exposure in babies and [toddlers](#), and the incidence of attention-deficit [hyperactivity disorder](#). It's possible that watching TV's rapidly shifting images could have a negative impact on brain development in the very young (high-quality educational programs should not have rapidly shifting images though).

Parents should note that even DVDs marketed as educational may be harmful to babies; if they are watched without supervision, that harm is multiplied. In August 2007 Dr Dimitri Christakis and Frederick Zimmerman of the University of Washington published a report on the effects of popular programs such as Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby. They found that for every hour per day spent watching the DVDs, babies learnt six to eight fewer new vocabulary words than babies who had never watched TV. Many of the programs were devoid of language content. But even when it came to shows designed to enhance language acquisition, Christakis says, "Videos of native speakers of languages fail to teach children as well as live speakers do." That's why it's important for an adult to speak or sing along to the DVD being shown.

In October 2007 the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) - which advises that the under-two's not be allowed to watch any TV - published a report on the effects of TV exposure in early childhood. Consistent exposure to two or more hours of TV per day, the academy found, was correlated with a greater incidence of [sleep](#) and behavioral problems, as well as less developed social skills. Notes the AAP, "Under age two, talking, singing, reading, listening to music or playing are far more important to a child's development than any TV show."

Shouldn't I follow the advice of the American Academy of Pediatrics to the letter?

Yes - if that's the decision you're most comfortable with. It's worth noting, though, that the type of exposure the academy looked at in its study was unsupervised exposure to entertainment-based programs. We, like the academy, would advise you to spare your baby this sort of TV exposure for at least the first two years.

Many parents and teachers find, however, that high-quality educational TV programs complement interactions with their babies and facilitate learning. Robert Titzer's Your Baby Can Read! and Rachel de Azevedo Coleman's Baby Signing Time! are good examples. The Titzer DVDs show parents the best way to read, repeat and talk about words; parents can also read along with the narrator and talk to their baby about the pictures onscreen. For parents teaching sign language to their baby, Coleman clearly demonstrates how to model signs - a big help and confidence boost to parents learning [sign language](#) along with their baby. The songs that accompany the lessons are fun and catchy, with babies' enjoyment of the DVDs increasing as they get to know the music.

How can I be sure I'm getting the balance right?

Interacting with your baby while watching is key. Besides that, you should ensure your baby watches no more than one hour of TV per day. To start off with, you might like to keep it to 15 minutes at a time - your baby will probably find it hard to pay attention for any longer. You can increase the duration later, when your baby starts to recognize and understand the program - and especially, when interactions become a two-way affair.

About the Author

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