



Effects of the media from a child development perspective

“Show me a child at the age of seven ...”

Child development theory has educated teachers and informed policy makers for 50 years. In the last decade, the same strong foundation of child development principles has been applied to identify the risks of prolonged or inappropriate exposure of children to the media.

The term ‘early childhood’ generally refers to the years of a child’s life from birth to about seven. The central developmental needs in the early childhood years are:

- Developing a sense of trust and safety
- The need for autonomy and connection
- A sense of empowerment and efficacy
- Developing a gender identity
- Understanding how people are alike and different
- Developing a sense of morality and social responsibility
- The need for meaningful play.

Developing a sense of trust and safety

Children need to feel that the world is a safe place and that people can be trusted. This allows them the freedom to explore their world and approach new experience with curiosity and openness.

What is appropriate television

Appropriate television presents to children a world where people are predictable and can be trusted and where they treat each other with love and kindness.

What children see on commercial TV

Many programs present a world filled with violence and evil, where ‘bad guys’ threaten the safety of ‘good guys’. An underlying message of instability and threat is repeated over and over again in many children’s programs giving children the impression of a threatening and unsafe world where danger is never put to rest.

Conclusion

Violent and scary television programming is developmentally inappropriate because it undermines children’s sense of safety and security. Such programs do not show children how to resolve conflicts non-violently and can heighten children’s anxieties about their own safety.

The need for autonomy and connection

It is important for children in the early years to do an increasing range of tasks for themselves. At the same time they also learn to participate more and more in relationships with others.

What is appropriate television

Developmentally appropriate TV shows children ways to act autonomously while maintaining a positive connection with others. It should present a world where people help and support each other, while maintaining their own independence.

What children see on commercial TV

Many cartoons and other children’s programs present the themes of separation and connection as if they are mutually exclusive. Autonomy is commonly equated with violence and hurt toward others and connection with helplessness and victimisation.

Conclusion

Television programming that presents its characters as being *either* autonomous *or* in relationship don’t help children to develop the idea that they can be *both* independent and connected to others.

A sense of empowerment and efficacy

Children have to develop a sense that they can affect their world and feelings of inner strength and belief in themselves as competent and capable people. To do this, children have to learn exactly what actions, skills and words will have what kinds of effects in different situations.

What is appropriate television

Appropriate television programs make children feel that they can make a positive difference in the world. It shows a wide range of things that people can do to bring about positive change.

What children see on commercial TV

On many children’s programs the characters display empowerment and efficacy only by using weapons and violence. Using words and wits to solve problems is not often shown.

Conclusion

Much of current children’s television programs undermine development by failing to provide content that helps children develop a sense of empowerment. There are very few



characters that serve as role models for achieving positive effects in non-violent ways.

Developing a gender identity

The more broadly children approach the question of what it means to be a 'boy' or a 'girl', the more they are likely to develop to their full potential. Children need to be shown that boys and girls can do a wide range of things, many of which are common to both sexes.

What is appropriate television

Appropriate television provides models of both sexes engaging in a wide range of activities. Children need to see complex characters who embody characteristics traditionally thought of as both male and female in order to open up possibilities for themselves.

What children see on commercial TV

Many of the popular children's shows present a very narrow range of behaviour options to boys and girls. Males are muscle-bound characters who like to fight especially with big weapons. Females are sweet, kind and often sexy, spending a lot of time caring about how they look.

Conclusion

TV can give children a restricted picture of what it means to be a boy or girl, exaggerating a tendency for stereotyping naturally occurring in young children.

Understanding how people are alike and different

Young children are in the process of learning about who they are as individuals and as members of a broader society, about how they are alike and different from other people and about how people of diverse backgrounds and experience treat each other.

What is appropriate television

Television has the potential to expose children to diverse people and to show them how people can respect and learn from each other.

What children see on commercial TV

Many children's television programs promote suspicion, intolerance and even violence against those who are different. Racial and ethnic stereotypes are common.

Conclusion

Much of the TV that young children see today impedes their ability to develop an appreciation and respect for differences among people. Few models are presented that show how differences among people can enhance human experience or broaden horizons.

Developing a sense of morality and social responsibility

Young children are developing ideas about morality, justice and how people should treat each other. Children's tendency to divide things up into categories—either all good or all bad, all right or all wrong—makes them particularly susceptible to material presented in simple black-and-white terms.

What is appropriate television

Television should provide children with many opportunities to learn about being responsible and moral members of a community; they should see people who treat each other with kindness and respect, help one another, and work out problems without resorting to violence.

What children see on commercial TV

Most commercial television programs present one-dimensional characters who are either 'all good' or 'all bad', who lack the complexity of real human character. Questions of social responsibility and morality are not raised when good characters attack and maim bad ones.

Conclusion

Much of commercial TV undermines the development of morality and social responsibility. It shows that violence is a justified and even glamorous way to resolve conflict.

The need for meaningful play

Play is basic to the healthy development and learning of children. Through the process of play, children can master experiences that may have been scary or difficult for them, they can learn to think creatively, take risks and solve problems. Children need to be in charge of their own play—they need time, space and props to encourage them.

What is appropriate television

Television can never substitute for children's direct experiences in interacting with the world. However, it could provide them with the kind of content they need for play.

What children see on commercial TV

Many themes on commercial television programs are removed from children's experience and understanding. Play becomes merely imitative rather than creative. Single purpose toys marketed along with these shows further the tendency to imitation.

Conclusion

Children's television does not help children meet their developmental needs through play. Not only does television cut deeply into play time, it also provides a narrow range of content for children to use in play.



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