

Mind Over Media: Developing good social and emotional skills

From the time they are infants, children's experiences of the world around them shape their social skills and their emotional well-being. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are all, within their own stage of development, learning how to get along with other people, to respond to them appropriately, and solve problems positively. They are learning the give and take of conversation, acceptable and respectful ways of speaking to others and an awareness of how their actions affect other people, and other people's actions affect them. The foundations of their self esteem are being established, as are disposition, confidence, agreeableness and resilience.

Social / emotional development and the media

Both the amount of media consumed and the quality of that media, are important in the growing child's development of social skills and emotional well being.

Some quality children's television programming, videos and computer games can contribute to children's social and emotional development. Using the media selectively, with reinforcement of key messages by the parent, can sometimes complement the acquisition of social skills, such as cooperation, sharing, empathy and negotiation.

Despite the potential for benefits from constructive media use, it is important to remember the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommendation that children under the age of two should watch no television at all. For older children, the AAP recommends no more than one to two hours per day of quality screen time (AAP, 1999).

Infants (0-1 years)

One of the most important developmental needs of an infant is secure attachment with their primary caregivers. This attachment will form the basis of later social skills development and emotional well being. To set them on the path to good social and emotional skills, spend quality time with infants, responding to their needs and providing them with a safe and stimulating environment. (See YMA's Fact Sheet *Mind Over Media: Developing Healthy Relationships* for more detail on this topic.)

Infants, the media and social / emotional development

Most researchers agree that until the age of 12 months, infants do not really 'watch' television. While they will glance at a TV if it is on, it does not hold their attention for very long.

Research shows that infants are mostly exposed to adult programs watched by their caregivers. An Australian Broadcasting Authority (Cupitt & Jenkinson, 1998) study found that Australian infants were exposed to approximately 44 minutes of television when they were four months old, to just over one hour per day when they were 12 months old.

The impact of exposure of infants to television has not been widely researched, so its potential harm or benefit is not known. The main issue could be if television content is overly distracting for the primary caregiver, and /or if it decreases the time the infant has for uninterrupted exploration and interaction.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- Minimise the exposure of children under the age of two to electronic media.
- If you want to have the television on, select quality programs made for preschoolers, with bright colours, lots of movement and rhythmic sounds (e.g. *Boobah*).
- If you are viewing an adult program while you are feeding or playing with your infant, avoid content that demands your concentration. You may miss emotional cues from your baby that they need you to respond to, or find their demands for attention more intrusive than usual. Look for a blank tape and record the program instead.
- Avoid content that is going to disturb you, including upsetting news coverage. Your infant is still more interested in your reactions than what is on the television and may pick up on your distress.
- Listening to music may provide a more relaxing alternative for both you and your infant.

Toddlers (1-3 years)

As children mature, they learn to moderate their emotional reactions and develop appropriate social skills. It is a relatively 'normal' response of a frustrated two year old to scream, kick or hit. However, toddlers are beginning to learn different ways to solve problems and to deal with having their wishes frustrated.

The transition is due in large part to the development of language and cognitive skills in toddlerhood. At the same time toddlers are learning from their caregivers, which behaviours are appropriate, both from the way their carers respond to them and from the behaviours they see modelled.

Toddlers, the media and social / emotional development

Toddlers are able to pay attention to what they see on television. A study by Mumme and Fernald (2003), cited in Weber and Singer (2004), has shown a marked difference in the way 10 month old and 12 month old infants respond to emotional cues on television. The change is, that by about 12 months of age, infants' emotional responses are influenced by emotional responses they see on television.

Getting along with others

Toddlers imitate much of what they see others do. It is important therefore, to avoid violent programming (more about media violence follows), and creates an opportunity to show a range of good role models through quality children's television programs and videos / DVDs. Many excellent children's television programs model 'prosocial' behaviours such as cooperation, getting along with others and treating people with respect. Children who watch such programs see a range of positive behaviours which they can imitate.

'Prosocial' behaviour—what does it mean?

- "...generosity, cooperation, adherence to rules, delay of gratification, friendliness nurturance, sympathy, persistence" (Van Evra, 1998)
- "...friendly interaction, aggression reduction, altruism and stereotype reduction" (Mares and Woddard, 2001)
- "...actions that benefit another person without any expected reward" (Berk, 2003)

Research consistently shows that prosocial effects of television are much stronger and persistent when adults actively label and comment on television content. (Mares and Woodard, 2001). For example, "It was kind of James to share his toys with his friend; now they can have some fun together". The toddler left alone in front of the television does not benefit from the caregiver's perspective, which supports the toddler's ability to identify prosocial behaviours and think critically about the circumstances surrounding them.

Using non-violent solutions to interpersonal conflict

Young toddlers are attracted to bright colours, fast movement, faces of babies or other children and adults speaking directly to them. Cartoons offer fast paced, colourful action, and toddlers will be attracted to them, but unfortunately they generally also contain a high degree of violence. Even cartoon violence is not good for the toddler's developing sense of understanding of the social world.

There is now an abundance of evidence which shows that media violence has both short and long term consequences. In the short term, aggressive behaviours increase immediately after watching media violence. In the long term, exposure to violent media limits the individual's ability to generate alternative solutions to conflict.

What medical experts say about media violence

Four major US medical groups (the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Psychological Association (APA), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and American Medical Association (AMA)) summarised their position as follows:

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- Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behaviour.
- Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitisation towards violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs.
- Entertainment violence feeds a perception that the world is a violent and mean place. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviours and a mistrust of others.
- Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Young children exposed to violent programming have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviour later in life than children who are not so exposed.

Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children: Congressional Public Health Summit (2000)

It has been found that viewing patterns (both the amount of watching and the program type) established in toddlerhood, persist into the preschooler years, and that viewing patterns established at the preschooler stage persist into and through primary school years (Josephson, 1995). This is a compelling reason (a) to start early with putting limits on the amount of television watched, and (b) to encourage familiarity and affection for programs that, although slower in pace, contain more valuable lessons.

Confidence and self-esteem

Dr Martin Seligman (1995) believes that an important factor in the development of a child's self esteem, is the experience of mastery. Infants who realise that it is they who are making a noise by rattling a rattle, toddlers who are feeding themselves and preschoolers who are choosing their own clothes for the day, are all experiencing mastery. After they have mastered a new skill, the feeling of success will help them to develop the confidence to try out another more difficult skill, and so on.

This positive feedback loop occurs when the child explores their environment and plays with toys that respond to them in a consistent way, whether they be crayons, building blocks or dolls. Seligman comments that watching television does not assist in the development of mastery, but is enthusiastic about the potential for computer games to be used for this purpose. (Seligman, 1995). It is important to remember that computer games need to be carefully chosen, and always used in moderation.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- Choose children's programs where characters treat each other with respect and solve problems by talking about them and helping each other. Examples are *Sesame Street*, *Bananas in Pyjamas* and *The Teletubbies*.
- When you observe prosocial behaviours in these programs, comment on them, giving them a name and showing approval. (For example, "B1 and B2 were good friends to Rat in the Hat when they gave him a surprise birthday party")

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- Learn games and songs from the media and play or sing them with your toddler after the television is turned off. The viewing is extended in a social way.
- Avoid violent media as much as possible, including cartoons and other slapstick violence.
- If toddlers are exposed to media violence while you are watching with them, show disapproval of that behaviour (For example, “If someone hit me on the head, it would really hurt, and I wouldn’t think it was funny at all.”)
- Choose computer games where your toddler can solve simple puzzles or master skills to move from one level to the next. The US site Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) has a good list of recommended games for all ages.
- Limit total screen time to one hour per day—provide real life opportunities for social interaction in which your toddler can learn by experience how to get along with children of the same age, and / or observe how adults cooperate and enjoy each other’s company.

Preschoolers (3–5 years)

Older preschoolers are learning to fine-tune the way they speak and can participate relatively competently in the give and take of conversation. They are starting to form friendships with their peers, and more and more of them are learning to get along in group care settings such as child care, kindergartens and preschools. Imitative play is still very important.

Preschoolers, the media and social / emotional development

Children in the three to five year age range are starting to look for meaning in the content of what they see, so will be able to follow simple stories in programs made for preschoolers or follow some of the content of adult television programs to which they are exposed.

More about media violence

Having no exposure at all to violent content on TV or in computer games is still the best strategy. Like toddlers, children in this age group will imitate behaviours they see, both in their families and from television and videos.

Superhero play, that is acting out roles such as Superman or Spiderman, can be a feature of this age group. Preschoolers who have been exposed to these heroes in the media, will tend to simply imitate the violent behaviours they have seen, not realising that they will hurt in real life. However, with adult mediation, they can be encouraged to develop positive and cooperative ways of playing the superhero, using a range of problem solving options. Children who have not been watching violence on TV, particularly cartoon violence, will find it easier to extend superhero play in constructive ways because their imagination is not limited by the same predictable ‘scripts’.

The give and take of conversation

Positive role models are important for children learning how to refine their language skills. Time spent conversing with

adults, older children and their peers is the best way for children to develop these skills. Television programs where adults talk directly to children and each other, in simple language, also provide good opportunities for learning.

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- Be with your child while they use the media. Have them sit on your lap to play a computer game, or sitting close to you when they watch television, or videos. You are still the best teacher of social and emotional skills.
- Choose computer games that show co-operative and helping behaviours.
- Choose television programs where adults talk to children and invite them to participate, and talk to each other in simple but meaningful ways. Examples of such programs are *In the Box* and *Sesame Street*.
- Avoid violent media, especially glamourised violence performed by an attractive hero with whom they can identify, and where violence has no real life consequences.
- If your preschooler is exposed to violent content, help them develop critical viewing and empathy by asking questions about what the characters are doing, whether they think it would hurt in real life and how they might be feeling.
- Be mindful of the language used in the adult programs to which your preschoolers is exposed. If the banter includes people being belittled or verbally harassed, your preschooler may think this is an acceptable, or amusing way to talk to people.
- Limit total screen time to one hour per day—provide real life opportunities for social interaction.
- Have dinner at the table (with the TV turned off).

Limit TV to only one hour a day! But how?!!

Try these strategies for reducing TV time:

- Keep a diary of your child’s television and video viewing habits, so that you know exactly how much TV your child is watching, what programs and in what situations. You may see areas where reductions could most easily be made.
- Using the weekly TV guide, have your child tell you what programs they really want to watch, and have them highlight or circle them.
- Keep yourself informed about the advantages of watching less television, e.g. improved literacy skills, enhanced social skills and better physical outcomes.
- Help your children make a list of activities they enjoy other than watching TV.
- Read *The Berenstain Bears* and *Too Much TV* by Stan and Jan Berenstain (First Time Books) with your preschooler.

- Take the TV out of their bedroom.
- Put the TV 'to sleep' by covering it over with a blanket.
- Use blank stickers to make colourful 'no television' stickers with your child. Place one on the calendar every time your child has a day without television.
- Have a look at the US site TV Turnoff Network (<http://www.tvturnoff.org>) for some ideas.
- Set a weekly limit, and say 'no' to more TV after they have reached it.

Information in the section has been adapted from Dennison (2004)

Media violence and Brainmapping

Dr John P Murray (2001) published one of the first studies which used functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to examine brain patterns when children were exposed to media violence.

Areas of the brain stimulated by media violence-Dr John P. Murray (2001)

- used fMRI to research the impact of media violence on the brains of eight children (5 boys, 3 girls), ages 8 to 13 years.
- children's brains were scanned while watching violent and non-violent video clips.
- three areas of the brain were activated during the violent video clips: (a) preparing the body for 'fight or flight'; (b) enabling the body to 'think about moving'; and (c) committing the event to long term memory.
- results suggest that media violence not only arouses and engages, but is also treated by the brain as a real event worthy of being stored in long-term memory, and used to 'guide' future behaviour.

Conclusion

Parents and caregivers are a child's most important teachers of social and emotional skills. Limiting total media time to no more than one hour of quality viewing and / or computer

use per day, allows plenty of time for children to explore and practise their own social skills, develop confidence in their own abilities and spend time in 'real life' conversation.

Quality children's programs or videos will re-inforce good social skills particularly if you label and comment on these behaviours. Keeping the television in a public space, and out of the child's bedroom, will help you to take advantage of these opportunities.

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