

Mind Over Media: Developing a realistic understanding of the world

In the first five years of their life, children start to form their own picture of what the world is like. Ideally this view will include a sense of personal safety and happiness within the world, optimism that they can deal with the world's challenges and an appreciation of diversity among people. In the early years they learn important lessons about the difference between fantasy and reality. They rely on 'reality checks', that is the reactions of their primary caregivers, to appropriately develop and refine their feelings and behaviours. Ideally in these early years, children will develop a sense of optimism about their ability to contribute actively and positively to their world.

The media and the development of a realistic understanding of the world

Good quality television, computer games and selected websites can help children explore past, present and future worlds and to develop understandings about the world they live in, including natural environments, human ingenuity and cultural diversity.

Infants (0–1 years)

The most important developmental need of an infant is secure attachment to their primary caregivers. (See YMA's Fact Sheet *Mind Over Media: Developing Healthy Relationships* for more detail on this topic.) Secure attachment provides a solid foundation for the development of other skills such as cognitive skills and creativity.

Infants, the media, and a realistic understanding of the world

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children under the age of two should watch no television at all, because of their need for more direct interaction with their caregivers. In addition to this, some concerns have been expressed about exposing infants to some forms of violent television, as some studies have shown that even infants can imitate what they have seen on television. Television violence often includes features that attract the attention of infant viewers, such as high levels of activity, changes of position, scene or character and noise. (Josephson, 1995, p12)

Here are a few strategies that will help:

- Minimise the exposure of children under the age of two to electronic media.
- Provide your infant with a number of objects on the floor within their reach, or near them if they are mobile, that will enable them to safely explore their environment and learn about cause and effect by grasping, handling, pulling and pushing the objects
- Avoid violent television. Even though your infant will not be able to discern exactly what is happening, they may be able to imitate some behaviours.
- If you want to use the television to 'entertain' your infant, select good quality preschool programs that contain brightness, colour, high levels of activity, music etc, but do not have any violent content.

Toddlers (1–3 years)

Toddlers are keen to explore the wider world, but at the same time, need the security of a trusted caregiver to keep them safe and help them learn to manage their feelings. Toddlers have an unclear understanding about how the world works, and as a result can sometimes have fears such as the fear of going down the bath plug hole, fear of monsters and witches and fear of people who look different.

Toddlers, the media and a realistic understanding of the world

The best way for toddlers to develop their understanding of the world is by actively interacting with it, and large amounts of television consumption may interfere with this important 'reality checking' process.

A sense that they are safe in the world

The National Television Violence Study (US) conducted in three consecutive years in the late 1990s found that young people view 10,000 acts of violence per year. They concluded that exposure to media violence can affect very young children in three ways:

- Learning of aggressive behaviours and attitudes
- Desensitisation to violence
- Fear of being victimised by violence

(cited in Villani, 2001, p394)

Every Young Media Australia Movie Review reminds readers:

“Research shows that children are at risk of learning that violence is an acceptable means of conflict resolution when violence is glamourised, performed by an attractive hero, successful, has few real life consequences, is set in a comic context and / or is mostly perpetrated by male characters with female victims, or by one race against another.

Repeated exposure to violent content can reinforce the message that violence is an acceptable means of conflict resolution. Repeated exposure also increases the risks that children will become desensitised to the use of violence in real life or develop an exaggerated view about the prevalence and likelihood of violence in their own world.” (YMA, 2005)

Joanne Cantor, respected researcher in the field of children and television and Professor Emerita in the field of communications arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has conducted much research into children’s fear responses to the media. She has found that “what children see on news shows really frightens them . . . Children may not be interested in the news, but they will be affected by it if you watch it when they are around. If you have preschool children, the safest bet is to watch the news when they are in bed or get your news from the papers.” (Cantor, 1998, p. 112, 123).

Expectations of well being

Exposure to too much commercial television gives children a false image of what it means to be happy and successful. Susan Linn (2004) writes that marketing to children . . . “ aims to affect core values such as lifestyle choices: how we define happiness and how we measure our self-worth”. Charles Ashbach (2001), clinical psychologist, argues that excessive television viewing is problematic for children because it can give them an unreal sense of their own power and self-importance, not tempered by a parent’s loving reminders of the importance of relationships and cooperation.

Here are a few media strategies that will help:

- Limit total screen time to one hour per day; more than this could displace other more meaningful activities.
- Watch documentaries with your toddler, pointing out and explaining interesting images.
- Programs such as *Play School* and the *Teletubbies* often contain footage of other cultures and experiences at a level your toddler may be able to appreciate and enjoy.
- Avoid media violence, particularly those where violence is glamourised by attractive heroes performing successful acts of violence against others.
- Avoid the TV News, even if it is on in the background. Your toddler could be exposed to footage that they will find quite disturbing.
- Avoid commercial television; for screen based entertainment choose videos or DVDs that promote values that coincide with your family’s, not contradict it.

Preschoolers (3–5 years)

In the later preschool years, children have refined their understanding of the world to some degree, but still rely on adults and other children to provide them with more information and feedback about their perceptions. By the age of three or four, they will be able to sort people into categories, and will notice if people look different to them and most of the people they know.

Preschoolers, the media and a realistic understanding of the world

There are many excellent programs made for children, which will show the child elements of their world in a safe and non-threatening way. Choosing programs and seeking out videos and DVDs that support and extend your child’s interests will ensure that they develop a more rounded view of the world at a pace that suits them.

Cultural diversity

Research shows that the images of mass marketed media can undermine trust and empathy across racial or ethnic barriers, as minority groups members are often associated with negative values and antisocial behaviour and portrayed as fundamentally different (Berry, G and Asamen, JK 2001).

Many good quality children’s programs exist in which people from different races and ethnic groups are valued and respected. Choose these programs over those which contain gender, racial and ethnic stereotypes.

The world as a mean and scary place

Cantor found that the most troublesome content for very young children is:

- Visual images, that are naturally scary, such as vicious animals; monsters; grotesque, mutilated, or deformed characters
- Physical transformations of characters, especially when a normal character becomes grotesque.
- Stories involving the death of a parent
- Stories involving natural disasters, shown vividly.

Exposing your preschooler to such images, should be avoided; preschoolers can not yet distinguish fantasy from reality and can be traumatised by such images.

More about the TV news

The TV News is generally a depiction of the most graphic and violent events of that day. Given the that the primary function of commercial TV News and current affairs programs is to sell advertising space, the more sensational and unusual the event is, the more likely it is to be deemed newsworthy. Many ‘news’ programs are tabloid in nature containing lurid and gratuitous details of destruction and grief. These are images and concepts that children, in the absence of television, would not have to confront until they were much older, if at all. A child developing their view of reality from what they see on the TV News is at risk of developing an unbalanced view of the world.

Here are a few media strategies that will help:

- Choose programs that show people from culturally and linguistically diverse background interacting in a normal social way, without stereotyped behaviours.
- Avoid programs where the villains have accents or different coloured skin.
- Continue to avoid the TV News, particularly on commercial stations.
- If you have older children whom you wish to expose to world events, tape the ABC's BTN (Behind the News) and watch it with them. If your preschooler is in the room while this program is on, they are less likely to see disturbing footage; however they will still be too young to pick up much by way of detail.
- Check the content of movies before you take your preschooler. Use the YMA Movie Review Service to "Know before you go" (www.youngmedia.org.au).
- Watch programs such as *Totally Wild*, *Magic School Bus*, *Creature Features* and other programs that explore the animal worlds with your preschooler.
- Go to UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Fund) website *MAGIC: Media Activities and Good Ideas by, with and for Children* for ideas about media activities with your child.

Teach about the 'fib' factor

Help your children see through the tricks of advertising:

- As soon as children start watching TV, start saying things like: "Not everything you see on TV is true. Sometimes they fib, to make you get your parents to buy you something, even if it isn't good for you."
- Be aware that advertisers will try to create ads that will encourage your children to nag you. Media critic Jean Kilbourne eliminated that problem in her family with a blanket rule, that they don't buy anything advertised on TV (except milk!).
- Watch commercials with your children. Every now and then say things like: "This commercial makes me think that if you eat at McDonald's, you'll be happy. Do you think that's true?"
- When ads include celebrity endorsements, comment: "Did you know that Brittany was paid to say she likes Pepsi?" Get them to think about what they would do if someone offered them money to pretend they liked something that they didn't.
- Teach young children to mute the ads. This can help them feel in control.
- Point out the tricks of marketing, including that advertisers can use lots of visual effects to make things look a lot better than they do in real life. Compare products that are packaged with favourite TV characters with similar products packaged in plain labels. Compare tastes and prices.
- If a toy is disappointing, explain how the TV can make things look more exciting by using different lighting, camera angles and other tricks. Point out that toy ads often show the owner of the toy surrounded by lots of children having fun, but that in real life toys don't make us any more popular or happy.

Information in the section has been adapted from Meltz,(2004)

Summary about the media and the development of a realistic view of the world

There are many excellent children's television programs that can enhance and extend your child's understanding of the world, particularly if you watch with them responding to their interests and answering questions. Violent media should be completely avoided as the child is at risk of developing the view that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict. Research clearly shows that some children who have been exposed to violence on TV develop the view that the world is a 'mean and scary place'. Exposure to television advertising should also be avoided as it can create distorted expectations about what constitutes happiness and what is needed to be 'successful'.

To conclude Young Media Australia's Mind Over Media Fact Sheet series

This is the final in Young Media Australia's *Mind Over Media* Fact Sheet series. The information presented in the Fact Sheets has been drawn from a range of researchers and practitioners, not only those who focus on the implications of early brain research, but the very solid body of research that exists in the more general field of media impact on early child development.

As a summary, it may be helpful to summarise the debate as to the degree to which early brain research can inform early childhood policy and practice. The titles of two articles in the June 2001 issue of the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* epitomise the debate: "Neuroscience and early childhood: A necessary partnership" and "Neuroscience and early childhood: A dangerous liaison."

Firstly, it should be highlighted that there is no dispute about the fact that children's experiences in the early years have an impact on their healthy development.

Other elements are:

- Critical periods and plasticity. Some research indicates that mature brains retain plasticity and are not restricted by critical periods. Other writers suggest that claims of critical periods start too late and end too early, that is, life in utero must be factored in to any discussion, and it must be acknowledged that they can go much later than is sometimes suggested
- Enriched environments. Although it is agreed that environments of abuse and neglect can be damaging to brain development, it is not necessarily the case that an enriched development is necessary to enhance the brain's natural process of healthy development
- Many findings are based on animal research. Sceptics about the importance of early brain research remind us that animal research does not translate exactly into human behaviour and physiology.

What does early brain research tell us about the impact of the media?

Early brain research does confirm certain points about media impact on children:

- violent media can hard wire a fight or flight response to threatening situations, and reduce the capacity to employ higher reasoning
- too much media can increase the likelihood of developing aggressive behaviours and attention disorders.
- some good quality media designed for children can enhance children's literacy and problem solving skills.

Conclusion

Early brain research aside, there is a wealth and depth of childhood development theory and practice available to provide parents and caregivers with clear guidelines about healthy media use for their children. They tell us that monitoring the quality and quantity of children's media consumption, choosing age appropriate programs, avoiding both media violence and advertising and teaching our children to be critical media consumers are the most effective ways to ensure that they reap the benefits of their media environment and avoid the pitfalls.

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1800 700 357

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