

The TV Vacuum

The most destructive aspect of television may be that it displaces more worthwhile activities.

By Marie Winn

Unlike most discussions of television's negative impact, this one does not deal with the usual suspects — violence or sex or relentless commercials. Instead, it focuses on television watching, regardless of program content.

Obviously, kids learn from what they see on the screen. Some of what they learn is useful, some washes over them, and some of it has a negative impact. But given the amount of time most children spend watching television, the question of quality pales in importance compared to questions about the experience itself and the time devoted to it.

"Like the sorcerer of old, the television set casts its magic spell, freezing speech and action, turning the living into silent statues for as long as the enchantment lasts. The primary danger of the television screen lies ... in the behaviour it prevents: the talks, the games, the family festivities, and the arguments through which much of the child's learning takes place and through which his character is formed."

Urie Bronfenbrenner

One of the clearest demonstrations of the 'displacement factor,' as it has been called, is a unique study titled, "The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in three Communities." It documents the effects of television's arrival on a small Canadian town, Notel, that had been without television reception due to geographic factors for a decade into the television era.

University researchers, in advance of television's arrival, studied the television-free children and families, comparing them with the populations of two demographically-similar towns — one that had had only one TV channel available during the previous decade and another that had had many channels.

The findings were revealing. Before television, the Notel children tested significantly higher than the kids in the other towns on skills like creativity and reading comprehension. When retested a year after television's introduction, the Notel children's scores had gone down to the level of the kids in the other towns.

The researchers, however, did not attribute the declines to the act of watching television. Rather, they explained that watching television displaced other more valuable experiences. Perhaps pursuing hobbies, going camping, or joining clubs broadens children's base of experience in a way that makes them more creative.

Similarly, in explaining the decline in reading comprehension, the researchers wrote, "We suspect that a displacement process is involved The absence of reading practice is, in our view, more important than television per se."

Similarly, a large-scale study conducted in the Netherlands concluded that television viewing had a negative impact on reading comprehension, largely as a result of television's displacement of reading as a leisure-time activity. A large number of other studies also show a negative relationship between television viewing and academic achievement.

Not so long ago, children were regularly faced with periods of time that they were required to deal with on their own. Today, not only are children's lives packed with meetings, lessons, and other activities, but even all the possible chunks of empty time between these activities are filled in with the mortar of television.

There is evidence that families with rules about TV viewing are better off than families without rules. In a recent study of children's media use, the researchers assessed the personal contentedness and social adjustment of a large group of children, then related the results to their media use.

It turned out that children from families with rules about TV viewing scored higher (that is, were happier and better adjusted) than children in families without such rules. The study also noted that children in families with rules were more likely to spend more time reading. Here are a few ways that parents can limit television.

No TV on School Days

This rule effectively eliminates television as a competitor for other, more fulfilling activities (lively family meals, conversations, games, reading aloud, and of course studying and doing homework) during a good chunk of the week.

No TV at Dinnertime or Bedtime

This is the rule that virtually every expert agrees on. Whatever cohesiveness and family spirit is to exist, the evening meal is where it is consolidated. As for bedtime, there is nothing that can replace the bedtime story as a uniquely valuable experience in every child's life.

A One-Hour-a-Day Time Limit

This may work to 'detelevisionize' family life considerably, but the competition between television and other activities often continues.

Few or no 'Regular' Programs

A rule limiting or eliminating the watching of regular weekly series programs will usually reduce the quantity of TV watching considerably. It also helps discourage families from planning their lives around the TV schedule.

A preview of life without TV can be arranged by participating in the TV Turnoff held during the last week of April every year. To learn more about the TV-Turnoff Network, visit www.tvturnoff.org.

(By permission of Marie Winn. Adapted from the new 25th anniversary edition of The Plug-in Drug: Television, Computers and Family Life, Penguin Books, 2002)