

TV Tantrums

The battle for the box - who's winning in your house?

By local teacher Kate Weidmann

feature

The whinging, the sibling squabbles, the bossy little hands reaching for the remote control – and then the blissful peace as we surrender. Till it's time to

switch off. Then it's sulks, tantrums and tear-stained faces in front of the plug-in drug.

Don't get me wrong. We love our TV. Not for us the discreetly middle-class tiny set tucked away in a cabinet or behind a door. Nope. We have a 42-inch monster lurking in one corner of the room, with a satellite box offering no less than 21 separate channels for kids. The TV is part of our lives, but we are trying to work out just what part we want it to have in family life – especially for our five-year-old, Joe. Do we want to be:

PURIST PARENTS TV is the enemy of childhood: let them build / write / knit their own entertainment! (often have full-time childcare)

IMPROVING PARENTS Programmes-of-educational-worth-lovingly-recorded-on-video-to-be-watched-as-a-treat (what I thought we'd be)

DESPERATE PARENTS We need to make that phone call / cook that meal / have a chance to finish a sentence, so we crack and trawl the TV channels for something that doesn't look too awful (what we often are)

SURRENDERED PARENTS 40% of British kids under five have their own TV in the bedroom. For 11 to 14 year olds, a pretty staggering 77% have a bedroom TV, according to a Mintel consumer report earlier this year.

The average British child (age 4 – 15) watches two hours and 23 minutes a day. (Still one hour and 11 minutes less than adults!) But why do they - and we - love it so much and what good – or harm – is it doing to them?

Some children's television is great. Having watched quite a bit of it, I believe there is some terrific, thoughtful programming being made for children (Art Attack and Blue Peter, for example). Deciding what to watch and talking about why you prefer one programme to another teaches children about choice and how to be critical.

And, of course, the 'did you see?' conversation in the playground is fun, sociable and spins off into games that can be played together.

'TV is here to stay, and if you use it with judgment, there is a lot of valuable language to be had in talking about what you've seen,' says a speech and language therapist from Wandsworth's Early Years Centre, who sees many children identified at school as having language difficulties.

'However, sometimes parents will say 'He's got very good attention – he can watch TV for a long time'. But I think most professionals agree that attention and listening skills are decreasing. And if the TV is constantly on in the background it's not active listening, which is what you need for school. To really improve children's concentration and attention you need to reduce all background noise and to be careful that when children *are* watching, it is something at their level of language and understanding.'

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Joan O'Pray, head of Sheringdale primary school in Wandsworth agrees: 'You can't replace play and you can't make up for it when that time in their childhood is gone,' she says. 'When they arrive in school, you definitely see the difference between the couch-potato children and the ones who lead active lives.'

But just why are children so mesmerised? What they are actually seeing is countless pulsating dots changing 30 times a second to make up the pictures. The brain doesn't quite keep up but continually chases the image, which is what keeps them glued to the screen trying to assimilate it. This causes that slightly hypnotised or gormless 'telly stare' – mind and body are passive (called an alpha state). As with hypnotism generally, the mind is open to suggestion but finds it difficult to break off of its own accord or be discerning – this creates that nice open channel for advertisers.

As Christmas looms, and Joe watches the ads with a running commentary 'That's cool! Not cool. For girls....' it's a good time to remember that in Sweden any advertising targeting children under the age of 12 is banned. Lucky Swedish parents.

But even our early ad-free CBeebies diet sometimes made me wonder. For starters, there are all the merchandising spin-offs from the shows. And then, in my more paranoid moments, I notice that some of the programming looks suspiciously like consumer-training – The Shiny Show is a mini quiz show with puppets competing to answer questions and scoring points. Just getting them into practice for future quiz show watching? When the cast of Tweenies or Brum break into their choreographed dancesteps and sing – aren't they gently breaking in future buyers of manufactured pop groups?

Joan O'Pray has a bracing final word: 'Just use it really, really selectively. You're the parent! Parent your child!'

SUGGESTIONS FROM PARENTS FOR A FAMILY TV POLICY

01. *We didn't teach them how to switch on the TV/video themselves till as late as possible! And we never have it on when we eat – that's our time to talk.*

02. *I tried to have clear rules from the beginning. Once they were established, and they knew I'd stick to it, it cut down a lot on whining.*

03. *We'd look at the paper at the beginning of the week and choose what was going to be watched – it has to be a choice, not random.*

04. *Be interested in what they're watching. I do try to join them and talk about what they are seeing at least once a week. Afterwards, if I'm feeling like a very good parent, I ask them to draw a picture or write about what they saw.*

05. *We talk about what ads are for. What are they trying to make us do? How?*

06. *Especially when they were small, we watched very small chunks. As soon as they wandered away I switched off. Now they have the habit of switching off themselves at the end of a programme.*

07. *I try not to use it as a reward. And if it's causing arguments it gets unplugged for a while.*

What do you think? How much TV is too much? Should it be on before *and* after school? How much is OK at weekends? Have you weaned your children off the TV habit – or is a bedroom set on your Christmas list? Let us know at Flapjack what you think by e-mail: editor@flapjackmag.com or write to Flapjack Magazine, 72 Roseneath Rd, London SW11 6AQ

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