

# How Media Use Can Affect Kids

Most kids are plugged into devices like TVs, game consoles, tablets, and smartphones well before they can even ride a bike.

Technology is part of life. And parents can make technology a healthy part of childhood by teaching smart media use. Preschoolers can get help learning the alphabet on public television, gradeschoolers can play educational apps and games, and teens can do research online.

But media use can also have some downsides:

## **The Obesity Link**

Kids who spend too much time using media are more likely to be overweight. Health experts have long linked too much screen time to excess weight. When they're staring at screens, kids are inactive and tend to snack. They're also see lots of ads that encourage them to eat unhealthy foods like potato chips and drink empty-calorie soft drinks that often become favorite snack foods.

Studies show that decreasing the amount of TV kids watched led to less weight gain and lower body mass index (BMI). Replacing video game time with outdoor game time is another good way to help kids maintain a healthy weight.

## **Watching Risky Behaviors**

Characters on TV and in video games often show risky behaviors — like drinking alcohol, using drugs, and smoking cigarettes — as cool, fun, and exciting. When these things seem acceptable, kids and teens might be tempted to try them. That might lead to substance abuse problems. Media can also expose kids to high-risk sexual practices, and studies show that teens who watch lots of sexual content are more likely to start sexual activity at a young age.

## **Seeing Violence**

The average American child will see 200,000 violent acts on TV by age 18. Many of these are done by the "good guys," whom kids are taught to admire. In fact, often the hero wins by fighting with or killing the "bad guys." This can confuse kids as they try to understand the difference between right and wrong.

Kids who view violence onscreen are more likely to show aggressive behavior, and to fear that the world is scary and that something bad will happen to them.

Young kids are easily frightened by violent images. Because they don't yet understand what is real and what is make believe, simply telling them that violence isn't real won't help. Behavior problems, nightmares, and trouble sleeping may happen after kids watch violence on screen.

Older kids can be scared by violent images too. Talking with kids this age will help them, so it's important to comfort them and explain what they see to help ease fears. But it's even better to not let your kids view shows or play games that could scare them.

### **Sleep, Mental Health, and Other Problems**

Kids who use media in their bedrooms often don't get enough sleep at night. Media use also can expose kids to cyberbullying, which has been linked to depression and suicide.

And media use can distract kids from important tasks, interfere with homework time, and hurt school performance. It can limit quality family time and make kids feel lonely or isolated.

### **Too Many Commercials**

Young kids don't understand that commercials are for selling a product, and sometimes can't tell the difference between the show and the ad. Even older kids may need to be reminded of the purpose of advertising. Video games are especially full of pop-up ads with pressure to buy.

Explain that ads are designed to make people want things they probably don't need and believe the products will somehow make them happier. Teach kids to be smart consumers. Ask them questions like: "What do you like about that?" or "Do you think it's really as good as it looks in that ad?"

Try to limit kids' exposure to ads. You can:

- Have them watch public TV stations, which rarely show ads featuring products.
- Record shows so you can fast forward through the commercials.
- Mute the TV during ads to ask your child questions about the show.
- Stream their favorite programs, or buy or rent DVDs.

## **What Else Should I Know?**

Parents can and should keep tabs on their kids' media use:

- Set limits to ensure that kids don't spend too much time in front of a screen.
- Monitor how and what kids see on their screens, and encourage positive, meaningful, and educational media use.

These online resources also can help:

- the AAP's family media plan tool lets parents create a media plan for their family
- Common Sense Media has information about age and content appropriateness of video games and other media

**Medically reviewed by:** Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, MD

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<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/tv-affects-child.prt-en.html>