

Encouraging Safe and Healthy Media Use: Suggestions for Parents

1. Reduce media exposure

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no more than 1-2 hours of quality programming per day for children over the age of two years. Time should be spent on activities that promote an intellectually stimulating and physically active lifestyle: reading, playing with friends, engaging in sports, doing homework, and getting enough sleep. Let your child help you choose which shows to watch within their viewing “budget.” In this way, they learn to make active, informed media choices instead of just “seeing whatever is on.”

The AAP also recommends no screen media for kids under 2 years old. Interactive bonding time with parents and siblings including singing, reading, talking, and playing, manipulation of their physical environment, such as playing with blocks or in a sandbox, and creative, problem-solving play, like coloring, will optimize infants’ and toddlers’ brain development.

2. Choose media content carefully

Media content is at least as important as total time spent with media in regards to potential negative effects on children’s health. The best way of determining whether content is safe and healthy for your child is to prescreen media material, but you may not always have the time.

Many newspapers or parenting magazines have mini-reviews of movies or television and you can use content descriptors for television shows and video games, movie ratings for films, and warning labels on music as a rough guide. However, be aware that media ratings are assigned by the industries that create and will profit on sales of the products. They are neither scientific nor objective. Research shows that many media ratings and content descriptors ignore or significantly downplay the amount and kinds of content found in the product. A CMCH study showed that in a random sample of 81 video games, 48 percent included violence, sexual themes, profanity, substance use, or gambling without noting these activities on the packaging.

Another way to learn about media content is to use the Internet. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires radio stations to edit content for airplay, but CDs often contain very different original versions. Parents can use the Internet to research original lyrics of popular music before purchasing CDs or to download and play free trial versions of video games before purchasing them. All children are different in terms of what level of content they can handle; only you know what you would consider appropriate for your individual child’s developmental stage.

3. Covieving

Consume media along with your children – this could include watching TV, listening to music, playing video games, or visiting websites with them. This allows for conversation around controversial or unknown topics, and provides a chance for you to help them understand and synthesize what they have seen in the context of your perspective on the content as a parent.

Discussions could center around whether or not media portrayals are realistic, who might have made these portrayals and what their intent might be, how viewers of other ages, genders, races, or economic status might respond to the material, and whether you and your child agree or disagree with the portrayals and their appropriateness for your family. In this way, you can use media content as a springboard for further discussion of sometimes difficult topics.



4. Remove media from kids' bedrooms

Research has shown that kids who have television, video games, or computers in their rooms get less sleep, read less, and are more overweight than those who do not have media in their bedrooms. Keeping these kinds of media in a public area accessible by the whole family allows parents to better monitor their children's media use and content.

5. Use technology already available to help you control content

The V-Chip (required to be in all new 13 inch or larger televisions after 2000) is an electronic chip that allows parents to block program content based on the television rating. The manual for your television will contain instructions on how to use it. If you no longer have the manual, the website of your television manufacturer (Sony, Panasonic, Magnavox etc.) will have instructions.

Use a VCR, TiVo, or DV-R technology to build a library of shows appropriate for your children. Involve them in the process of programming the technology, telling them that you want to decide as a family which shows are the healthiest and safest.

6. Seek out media that encourage physical activity

Some media actually require physical activity. For example, the popular video game "Dance Dance Revolution" has the player dance on an electronic pad, stepping on arrows corresponding to prompts from the screen. Video games like this capitalize on kids' natural interest in media and get them up and moving.

7. Recognize that your own media use influences your children

Kids learn media use patterns from their parents so it's best to limit and focus your media use. Children are also affected by background TV; they are drawn to sound and moving images, which may split their attention from other pursuits (homework, reading, imaginative play, etc). Remember, you are your children's most potent role model – use the type and amount of media that you want them to use.

8. Teach critical viewing skills and media literacy

Media literacy, the ability to understand how media work, allows children to use media critically and thoughtfully, which research has shown to be protective. Help your kids learn to ask and answer these 5 questions:

- Who created this message?
- What techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently from me?
- What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
- Why was this message sent?

9. Encourage media production

Just as literacy includes writing as well as reading, media literacy includes media production as well as consumption. Encourage your kids to use their imagination to invent plays, make collages from advertising or magazine images, take photographs, or make videos to create the kinds of messages they would broadcast if they were in charge of the media.

