

Healthy Habits for TV, Videogames and the Internet

No doubt about it — TV, interactive video games, and the Internet can be excellent sources of education and entertainment for kids. However, too much screen time can have unhealthy side effects.

That's why it's wise to monitor and limit the time your child spends playing video games, watching TV, and on the computer and the Internet.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that kids under age 2 have no screen time, and that kids older than 2 watch no more than 1 to 2 hours a day of quality programming.

It's also a good idea to make sure kids have a wide variety of free-time activities like reading, playing with friends, and sports, which can all play a vital part in helping them develop a healthy body and mind.

Here are some practical ways to make kids' screen time more productive.

TV Time

Limit the number of TV-watching hours:

- Stock the room in which you have your TV with plenty of other non-screen entertainment (books, kids' magazines, toys, puzzles, board games, etc.) to encourage kids to do something other than watch the tube.
- Keep TVs out of kids' bedrooms.
- Turn off the TV during meals.
- Don't allow your child to watch TV while doing homework.
- Treat TV as a privilege that kids need to earn — not a right that they're entitled to. Tell them that TV viewing is allowed only after chores and homework are completed.

Try a weekday ban. Schoolwork, sports activities, and job responsibilities make it tough to find extra family time during the week. Record weekday shows or save TV time for weekends, and you'll have more family togetherness time to spend on meals, games, physical activity, and reading during the week.

Set a good example. Limit your own TV viewing.

Check the TV listings and program reviews. Look for programs your family can watch together (i.e., developmentally appropriate and nonviolent programs that reinforce your family's values). Choose shows, says the AAP, that foster interest and learning in hobbies and education (reading, science, etc.).

Preview programs. Make sure you think they're appropriate before your kids watch them.

Use the ratings. Age-group rating tools have been developed for some TV programs and usually appear in newspaper TV listings and onscreen during the first 15 seconds of some TV programs.

Come up with a family TV schedule. Come up with something the entire family agrees on. Then post the schedule in a visible household area (i.e., on the refrigerator) so that everyone knows which programs are OK to watch and when. And make sure to turn off the TV when the "scheduled" program is over instead of channel surfing for something else to watch.

Watch TV with your child. If you can't sit through the whole program, at least watch the first few minutes to assess the tone and appropriateness, then check in throughout the show.

Talk to kids about what they see on TV and share your own beliefs and values. If something you don't approve of appears on the screen, turn off the TV and use the opportunity to ask your child thought-provoking questions such as, "Do you think it was OK when those men got in that fight? What else could they have done? What would you have done?" Or, "What do you think about how those teenagers were acting at that party? Do you think what they were doing was wrong?" If certain people or characters are mistreated or discriminated against, talk about why it's important to treat everyone fairly despite their differences. You can use TV to explain confusing situations and express your feelings about

difficult topics (sex, love, drugs, alcohol, smoking, work, behavior, family life). Teach your kids to question and learn from what they see on TV.

Offer fun alternatives to television. If your kids want to watch TV but you want them to turn it off, suggest alternatives like playing a board game, starting a game of hide and seek, playing outside, reading, etc. The possibilities for fun without the tube are endless — so turn off the TV and enjoy quality time with your kids.

Video and Interactive Computer Games

Look at the ratings. Video games do have ratings to indicate when they have violence, strong language, mature sexual themes, and other content that may be inappropriate for kids. The ratings, established for the Entertainment Software Rating Board, range from EC (meaning Early Childhood), which indicates that the game is appropriate for kids ages 3 and older, to AO (for Adults Only), which indicates that violent or graphic sexual content makes it appropriate only for adults.

Preview the games. Even with the ratings, it's still important to preview the games — or even play them — before letting kids play. The game's rating may not match what you feel is appropriate for your child.

Help kids get perspective on the games. Monitor how the games are affecting your kids. If they seem more aggressive after spending time playing a certain game, discuss the game and help them understand how the violence that's portrayed is different from what occurs in the real world. That can help them identify less with the aggressive characters and reduce the negative effects that violent video games can have.

Internet Safety

Keep the computer in a common area. Keep it where you can watch and monitor your kids. Avoid putting a computer in a child's bedroom.

Share an email account with younger children. That way, you can monitor who is sending them messages.

Teach your child about [Internet safety](#). Discuss rules for your kids to follow while they're using the Internet, such as never reveal personal information, including address, phone number, or school name or location.

Bookmark your child's favorite sites. Your child will have easy access and be less likely to make a typo that could lead to inappropriate content.