

MANAGING TELEVISION AND STREAMING VIDEO IN THE HOME

Watching TV or streaming video should be a fun and relaxing activity for kids and adults alike—but too often it's a source of family conflict.

If you're concerned about television, banning it isn't a practical solution. Instead, you need to learn to co-exist with television by managing how much your kids watch, and what. With more and more ways of viewing TV available we now have access to lots of both good quality and inappropriate TV content. In this crowded television environment, the key is to provide young children with a guided viewing experience and to model and teach them the critical thinking skills they need to be active, engaged viewers.

Television offers lots of benefits to kids:

- Because of its ability to create powerful touchstones, TV enables young people to share cultural experiences with others.
- TV can act as a catalyst to get kids reading—following up on TV programs by getting books on the same subjects or reading authors whose work was adapted for the programs.
- Television can teach kids important values and life lessons.
- Educational programming can develop young children's socialization and learning skills.
- News, current events and historical programming can help make young people more aware of other cultures and people.
- Documentaries can help develop critical thinking about society and the world.

- TV can help introduce youth to classic Hollywood films and foreign movies that they might not otherwise see.
- Cultural programming can open up the world of music and art for young people.

How to choose good TV

How can we select viewing that is good for children? One approach is to ask the following questions:

- Does the program encourage children to ask questions, to use their imaginations, or to be active or creative? Television watching doesn't have to be passive. It can prompt questions, kindle curiosity, or teach activities to pursue when the set is off.
- How commercialized is this program? Some children's programs are designed to act as extended commercials for related merchandise.
- How does this program represent gender and diversity? Young children believe that television reflects the real world. To not see people like themselves—in race, ethnicity, or physical ability, for example—may diminish their self-worth, and not seeing people different from themselves may lead to a distorted view of the world as well. Beyond the simple presence or absence of diversity, it's important to look at how different people are portrayed.

- What are the common themes and topics in this program? Watch a few episodes of the program to see the common themes and storylines. What characteristics are shown in a positive or negative light? Which behaviours and activities are rewarded, and which are punished? What does the show suggest is important, valued or desirable?
- What emotional effect will this program have on children? Consider that children will often have different emotional reactions than adults. Things which we consider to be normal elements of drama, such as conflict between characters or putting characters in jeopardy, can be distressing for very small children. Also, all children are different: don't assume that a child will be able to handle content because you watched it at their age or because siblings or classmates have watched it without incident.

Managing TV and Streaming Video

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR FAMILY'S VIEWING HABITS BY USING SOME OF THESE STRATEGIES:

- Start young. It's wise to work on developing good TV viewing habits well before your children start school. As they grow older, it will become more difficult for you to enforce restrictions or influence their tastes.
- Limit the amount of time your kids spend watching television, especially on school nights. Make sure they're involved in other activities such as sports, hobbies and playing outside. It's easier than ever to watch dozens of episodes of their favourite shows in one sitting. Turn off Autoplay on any streaming services you use, such as YouTube or Netflix, so that something new won't start playing as soon as what they're watching now ends. See our tip sheet [Four Tips for Managing Your Kids' Screen Time](#) for more advice on this.
- Kids model their behaviour on that of their parents—so take a hard look at your own viewing habits, and if necessary, change them.
- Encourage your children to watch a variety of programs: sports, nature and science shows, the arts, music and history shows. There's a lot of great TV programming out there that makes learning about the world interesting and fun.
- Consider the best place for your television set. When your children are small, use the old adage "out of sight, out of mind"—and keep the TV in a room away from where your family spends most of its time. When your kids get older, you might want it to be in a more visible place for easier monitoring. Never put a television set in a child's bedroom! When kids start watching TV or videos on portable devices, make sure to keep them out of bedrooms.
- Don't leave your TV or other screen devices on when you're not watching it. Turn it on for a specific show, and turn it off again when the show is over. This makes television a special experience that your children can look forward to.
- When your children's friends come to visit, insist on some "no-screen" time. Don't be afraid to restrict viewing of certain shows, even if your children's friends are allowed to watch them.

You have the right to protect your children from inappropriate viewing and they will accept your concern as a sign of caring.

- Make sure your kids know that it's their right to say no to programs they find too frightening when visiting friends or relatives.
- Tell the parents of your children's friends about your media rules. It's hard to control what your children see at other houses, but if parents talk about their rules with others, it's easier to protect children from unsuitable programming.
- Make sure your caregiver or sitter knows about, and follows, your rules.

Tips for Managing Children's Television Viewing

Monitor what your children watch, and whenever possible watch with them and discuss the program. See our tip sheet [Coviewing With Your Kids](#) for more tips on how to find teachable moments while watching TV with your children. Here are some specific things to talk about on TV:

HELP THEM UNDERSTAND THAT TV IS ONLY A CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

- Explain how everything they see on TV (even news and documentary programming) is a reality that has been created by producers, directors, cinematographers, actors, editors, advertisers and others—and they bring to it their own points of view, biases and commercial interests.

- Ask your kids what points of view are most often seen on TV (i.e. middle class, male, western society, etc.)? Whose views are not being heard and what cultures and lifestyles are not being shown? Why? Explain how, through these omissions, television can teach that some people and ideas are more important than others.

See the [Diversity and Media Toolbox](#) for more information.

TALK ABOUT WHETHER TV CHARACTERS LOOK AND ACT LIKE REAL PEOPLE

- Do people on TV look like people in real life? What are the differences?
- How do they feel about the lives they see portrayed on television? Do they envy some aspects of the lives of people on TV? Are they content with their own lives?
- Do they want to look like the people they see on TV? Is this realistic?
- Do kids on TV act like kids do in real life? Should they?
- With young children, talk about “make-believe” and the difference between real life and TV.
 - Explain that we can be hurt emotionally, just as we can be hurt physically. Yelling, put-downs, name-calling and threats are what kids are most likely to experience in the schoolyard. Emotionally violent acts can begin a cycle that leads to physical violence.

HELP KIDS UNDERSTAND THAT THE JOB OF BROADCAST AND CABLE TV IS TO SELL VIEWERS TO ADVERTISERS:

- Talk about the television business: producers sell programs to networks, networks sell time to advertisers, and advertisers sell products to viewers.
- Explain that information about which audiences will likely watch which programs is sold to advertisers, who then tailor their ads to appeal to those specific viewers.
- Talk about the kinds of commercials aired during the shows they like to watch. Point out that many of them are for fast food, candy and sweetened cereals.
- Watch for commercials with adult content that air when kids will be watching, as well as ads for teen-rated movies (and tie-in merchandise) during shows aimed at young children. Are marketers deliberately targeting kids with these ads? If so, why?
- Even though they may not have commercials, streaming services like Netflix and Disney Plus still have ads! Explain that when a product appears in a TV show, it's called "product placement" and it is how companies reach kids even if you skip commercials or only use streaming services. Look for examples of product placement in the programs your kids watch.

Find your favourite programs online and bookmark them for later:

For example, did you know that Sesame Street has its own YouTube channel? You can also make playlists of particular videos you want your kids to be able to watch ahead of time. See our tip sheet [Using Parental Controls](#) for other ways of keeping your kids from seeing things they aren't ready for.

Use the mute and pause buttons:

TV advertisements are designed to be extremely engaging to kids. Muting the sound when commercials are playing will lessen their seductive power. And don't be afraid to press pause if there's something happening on screen that you want to talk to your kids about!

Taking Action

If you or your kids see anything on broadcast, cable or streaming TV that you object to, you can do something about it. See our parent guide [Talk Back! How to Take Action on Media Issues](#) for more information on how to make a complaint.