



# POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

## Television and Early Childhood Development

Mass media play a significant role in most people's lives, affecting family routines, social interactions, cultural norms, and leisure activities – all of which impact upon contemporary childhood. Television is particularly significant in early childhood; it is the child's first and most enduring contact with the mass media and an integral part of the overall environment in which early childhood development occurs. With more than three televisions in the average household (Edgar & Edgar, 2008), "children in the twenty-first century typically develop in front of a screen" (Calvert & Wilson, 2008). The interconnection between early childhood development and television begins at the start of life (ibid), making exposure to television one of the most enduring and consistent experiences of childhood, and arguably one of the most powerful.

This Policy Brief presents current research findings on the impact of television on early childhood experiences and development. The main focus of the brief is on children in the critical developmental period of 0–2 years.

### Why is this issue important?

The media is an important issue in relation to child health, well-being and development (Royal Australasian College of Physicians [RACP], 2004). Cognitive, social-emotional and physical development is occurring while children experience both background and foreground exposure to television, thereby affecting:

- child development (including brain development), health and well-being
- the ways in which children see and understand the world (including social norms and values) and their place in it.

Collectively, these changes in individuals may alter the nature of our society.

Children are heavy consumers of television. Recent Australian data show that very young children typically spend more time watching television than any other waking activity. Television watching is conservatively estimated at 44 minutes per day for the average four month-old infant and averaging 194 minutes for the 0–4 age group who live in households with subscription television (Australian Communication and Media Authority [ACMA], 2007a).

Contrary to common assumptions:

- Young children increasingly watch television on their own and without the presence of a parent (or older sibling) to regulate or mediate their experiences (RACP, 2004).

An Initiative of:

- Children do not exclusively or even preferentially watch designated children's programs. For example, both 'Bob the Builder' and two variations of 'The Biggest Loser' were among the top 10 rated programs watched by Australian children aged 0–4 in 2006 (ACMA, 2007a).
- Children watch television at any and all times – not just at the presumed and designated 'P' (Pre-school) or 'C' (Child) periods (ACMA, 2007a).
- Around 30% of children live in households that have television on all the time and television is used as a 'baby-sitter', even from earliest infancy (Edgar & Edgar, 30 Sept, 2008).

Face-to-face interactions and responsive, engaged relationships provide the foundation for all child development. Television cannot provide the responsive, engaged relationships and experiences that scaffold early childhood development.

### What does the research tell us?

Much of the research about television and early childhood reveals the detrimental effects of a child's exposure to television. There is, however, some evidence that television programs with pro-social content (for example showing positive interactions between different ethnic groups, or non-aggressive conflict resolution) and educational programs can have social and educational benefits, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, *The Future of Children* (Kirkorian et al., 2008) report suggests that 'there is strong evidence that children older than two years [i.e. three years and older] learn from educational media and there is moderate evidence that exposure to educational television during the preschool years

is positively linked with various measures of academic achievement even ten years later'.

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However, this research relates to specific types of programs and it applies to children aged three and above. The report suggests that for children younger than two years, the reverse may be the case. A growing body of evidence shows that television can impact negatively on the development of infants and young children, with concerns generally relating to:

- The content of television programs, particularly violent content.
- The amount of time spent watching television (the negative effects of television increase as exposure increases).
- The related issue of what children are *not* doing when they are watching television (this links directly to concerns about obesity).

### Violence

Viewing violence is associated with a range of problems including: desensitisation to the emotional effects of violence, a lack of empathy with victims of violence, an increased tendency to aggression, and the perception of the world as scary (RACP, 2004). It may also suggest to children that violence is inevitable, and a normal and acceptable way to resolve conflict.

Television programs provide models and 'scripts' for social behaviour and interactions – including play. Exposure to violent content increases the risk that children will develop a violent mental script that is likely also to be gendered as heroes/perpetrators are typically male, while victims are female. Some children are more vulnerable than others to these effects. Vulnerable children are typically male, younger

than seven or eight, living in violent homes, and, heavy consumers of media (i.e. risk increases with exposure) (Young Media Australia, 2007).

As this profile suggests, exposure to violent television content also needs to be considered in the context of other social variables.

### **Obesity**

An Australian study found that watching 20 hours or more of television per week doubled the risk of being overweight or obese compared with children who watch less television (Wake at al., cited in ACMA, 2007b). Research also now demonstrates a link between adiposity (higher fat mass) in preschoolers and more television viewing (Wosje et al., 2009).

### **Language Development**

Language development is one of the key developmental tasks of early childhood; it is promoted by certain types of experiences including interactions with adults (Christakis et al., 2009). A recent US study of young children aged 2–48 months found that language development is negatively affected when television was on, and parent-child vocal interactions significantly decreased when television was audible. When television is on, adults spoke less to young children who in turn responded with fewer vocalisations. The study concluded, ‘these results may explain the association between infant television exposure and delayed language development’ (Christakis et al., 2009).

A correlation between exposure to background television and delayed language development was also found by Chonchaiya & et al (2008). The study highlighted the relationship between the distracting and interfering effects of background television on the child's attempts at toy play and family interaction, and noted a ‘negative impact on the dynamics and interactive process of developing language milestones’.

### **Sleep**

Television viewing also negatively affects the quality of young children's sleep, with studies reporting effects ranging from sleep-onset delay to sleep anxiety (ACMA, 2007b). While most of the research focuses on older children (4–10 years), an association between television viewing and irregular sleep schedules has been identified in infants and children younger than three years of age (Thompson & Christakis, 2005).

### **Self regulation**

Research into the longer-term effects of television is scarce, but one longitudinal study (Barr, R. in Calvert & Wilson, 2008) found that poor self-regulation and aggression in adulthood are associated with prolonged exposure to television, and the effects of this were intensified when this viewing began in early childhood.

### **General Health**

Researchers have identified 173 quantitative studies on the relationship between media and seven health outcomes – childhood obesity, tobacco use, drug use, alcohol use, low academic achievement, sexual behaviour and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (Nunez-Smith, et al, 2008). 80% of these found greater media exposure associated with negative health outcomes for children and adolescents.

### **Additional concerns**

While violence and obesity dominate the current literature, other content-based concerns (ACMA, 2007b) relate to:

- Distorted and stereotyped representations of gender (including body image issues)
- Ethnic/racial stereotypes
- Sexualisation. Young children are exposed to sexualised images including those created for advertisements

- Consumerism, such as advertisements promoting logos and brands as well as toys, foods and other merchandise ‘tie-ins’ based on characters or story lines from children’s television programs.

### What are the implications of the research?

The research clearly supports the view that television constitutes a significant health and developmental issue in early childhood.

- Babies and children up to the age of two years need to be regarded as a distinct group.
- More research about the impact of television on early childhood is needed – particularly focusing on long term effects.
- The available research has implications for early childhood education and care settings that need to be carefully considered.

### Considerations for policy and programs

- Television needs to be regarded unequivocally as a health and well-being issue for young children.
- Early childhood professionals and services need to be educated about the impact of television in early childhood. Services should provide information and act as advocates for health promotion and prevention messages and strategies as part of their commitment to the healthy development of babies and young children.
- Children aged two years and younger should be treated as a distinct group with special needs and vulnerabilities; specific policies should be developed for this group.
- Parents and caregivers need clear information about the impact of television on early childhood development.
- The government needs to increase their investment in the development and promotion of quality Australian children’s television programs, with clear and measurable criteria to define ‘quality’.
- Specific information about the content, learning objectives and intended use of television programs made for the pre-school age group (‘P’ classification) should be made readily accessible to parents and carers of young children (e.g. through the Raising Children Network: [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)).
- Based on the available evidence, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) recommends ‘no screen’ exposure before age two years. While this recommendation may be aspirational rather than practicable, its seriousness needs to be considered in early childhood policy and programs.

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### References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from:

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