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Too long in front of TV or computer 'can make children mentally ill'

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By LYNDSEY MOSS

HEALTH CORRESPONDENT

WATCHING too much television and spending hours on the internet can make children mentally ill and depressed, according to two reports yesterday.

Excessive exposure to TV and other electronic media makes a child materialistic, which affects their health and relationships with their parents, according to the "Good Childhood" study for the Children's Society.

A separate report claimed that a child's risk of suffering from depression as a young adult increased with every extra hour of television, internet or computer-game use.

The Children's Society study said youngsters were part of a new form of consumerism, with under-16s spending £3 billion of their own money each year on clothes, snacks, music and other items.

The study claimed that, in its most extreme form, advertising persuaded children that "you are what you own".

The authors also said TV was mentally damaging to children, due to the "constant exposure" to celebrities through soaps, dramas and chat shows.

"Children today know in intimate detail the lives of celebrities who are richer than they will ever be, and mostly better-looking," they said. "This exposure inevitably raises aspirations and reduces self-esteem."

The researchers said the way celebrities were portrayed "automatically encourages the excessive pursuit of wealth and beauty", and that this "media-driven consumerism" was having a negative effect on children's wellbeing.

It said the more a child was exposed to the media, the more materialistic he or she became, the worse they related to parents and the worse their mental health.

The Good Childhood study, endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, found only a quarter of children with mental health problems had received any specialist help. It said 10 per cent of five to 16-year-olds had mental health issues, ranging from anxiety or depression to conduct disorders such as

destructive behaviour.

The authors said an upward trend of violence in the media in general was making children violent and causing tension within families.

"We know from controlled studies that exposure to violence can breed violence," the report said. "So it seems likely that the upward trend in media violence is helping to produce the upward trend in violent behaviour – and also the growth of psychological conflict in family relationships."

The report also said that commercial pressures had led to the "premature sexualisation" of young people.

The second study, by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine in the US, published in Archives of General Psychiatry, also linked TV and computer use to mental health problems.

The study of more than 4,000 adolescents found that the risk of suffering from depressive symptoms in early adulthood increased the more children watched television.

Reasons for this link could include less time spent socialising and carrying out other activities and sleep being disrupted, affecting mental development.

The report said media images might also reinforce aggression or lead to fear and anxiety in young people.

Researcher Dr Brian Primack said: "Psychiatrists, paediatricians and other healthcare providers who work with adolescents may find it useful to ask their patients about television and other media exposure."

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