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Television and Adolescent Depression

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The news that watching television increases teenagers' risk of depression isn't reason enough to chuck the TV. Nor is the fact that video games *don't* raise the risk a reason to spend the weekend playing Halo. Parents who don't want their children to turn into morose screen addicts may be wise to take a look at *how* their children use media, not just how much.



Scientists have long been puzzled over whether video gaming, watching TV, and Web surfing are healthy or harmful. The question gained urgency after a 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation study found that children average 6.5 to 8.5 hours of media exposure a day. It's as if kids are putting in a full workweek in front of the screen. The problem is, no one knows the risks or benefits of that full-time job.

There's good evidence that [kids get fatter as they watch more TV](#) and that lots of [gaming can increase a teen's aggression and anxiety](#). But it's been harder to tell if watching TV and gaming play a role in depression, which usually first surfaces in adolescence or young adulthood and is the leading cause of disability worldwide. The evidence already out there suggests that people who watch lots of TV tend to be more depressed, but that could just be because unhappy people like to watch TV.

So, Brian Primack, a pediatrician at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine who studies how teenagers' use of media affects their health, analyzed survey data that followed 4,142 teenagers from 1995 to 2002. Teenagers who watched TV were more likely to report symptoms of depression, with the rate increasing 8 percent with every hour of TV watched. That's a pretty impressive increase, particularly considering that most teenagers watch three to four hours of TV daily. The researchers excluded teenagers who reported symptoms of depression at the start. Videos (this was the pre-DVD era) and video games didn't show the same depressive effect. This startling news was published in this month's *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

Whoa—*American Idol* is making the youth of America depressed? I do find Paula Abdul to be a

bummer. But her shortcomings don't mean that TV is necessarily bad for our brains.

It could be that one reason the depression risk goes up with TV dosage is that it keeps kids away from activities known to reduce the risk of depression, such as time with friends and family, sports, and exercise. But that's just a theory. If it's true, an hour of video gaming should have the same depressive effect. (Some researchers have speculated that TV might make people depressed because it's passive. If true, that would support the notion that gaming is better because players are interacting with the game and other players.) Another hypothesis involves the high advertising content in TV (an hour of programming typically contains 12 to 15 minutes of ads). The ads show perfect people being incredibly happy, which sets a standard that no one can meet in real life, the theory says. Primack says: "Many [ads] are designed to make you feel as if your life is imperfect if you do not have this soap or this car or this computer or whatever else is being advertised."

Either way, the answer isn't to ban the tube, Primack says. One reason is that we just don't know enough about why TV may be depressing. The study started in 1995, before teens were attached to their iPods and the Internet, which arguably have at least as much influence on them these days as TV and video games. Another reason is more basic: Media use itself isn't bad. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and texting, for example, connect us in ways that no one imagined 14 years ago.

"Instead of simply trying to protect young people by taking these away, we can teach them how these messages are made, how they don't reflect reality," Primack says. He's got a special interest in that, because he studies whether teaching children and teenagers how advertisements are made and how they convey powerful messages about what is supposedly beautiful and sexy and good can counteract the advertisers' push for smoking, drinking, and other unhealthy behaviors. His study also didn't look at what content the kids were watching, which should have huge effects. Nor did it look at whether the content was age-appropriate. The original study didn't ask those questions. Primack is starting a study that adds content into the equation.

Not long ago, I talked with Diane Levin, coauthor of *So Sexy So Soon*, a deeply troubling book about how our children are being sold a seriously warped image of what girls and boys should be. Her advice echoes Primack's. Don't ban TV. Rather, direct kids toward age-appropriate programs, and see what they can handle. (My 5-year-old was overwhelmed by the first three minutes of *Kung Fu Panda*, so we walked out of the theater and went to lunch instead.) With older children, watch what your child watches, grit your teeth, and explain calmly why you find certain scenes or images disturbing or inappropriate. Then turn off the tube, and go for a bike ride together. That's not scientist-recommended, but bike riding has never been linked to mental-

health ills. And with exercise a proven antidepressant, why not balance that TV time with a bit of nondigital fun?

More on the media: Some kids are [overdosing on video gaming](#). Games are not bad in and of themselves, but you should watch for signs that video gaming is becoming an unhealthy addiction. Research also has linked increased screen time to obesity—but parents can work to keep their own kids from [getting too fat](#). Get rid of the TV in the bedroom, for one thing. Kids with [TVs in the bedroom](#) gain more weight than kids who watch with the family.

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