



Screen cravers

If your child is **tied to TV**, you're not alone. Now we're going digital, there are even **more free** children's channels to provide wall-to-wall viewing for screen-**hungry kids**. **Robert Watts** on when, and why, it's time to worry

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time on a single activity than anything else we do except work and sleep. Based on these figures, by the age of six, a child has already spent a year of his life watching TV.'

Do children watch too much TV?

In America, researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health surveyed 2,700 children aged between 2½ and 5½ and highlighted the negative impact of excessive viewing on their behaviour and social skills, while academics at the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that children under two should avoid television altogether.

Anita Morley, mother of Lauren, seven, and Jack, three, is aware her children may be watching too much TV. 'When they come home from school, it goes straight on and they'll watch for an hour and a half, sometimes two. I hate that they watch so much, but I let them for a bit of peace and quiet.' Anita fears that her children's viewing will become even less appropriate as they get older. 'Some programmes have healthy messages ►



At 4.20pm *Play School*; 4.55pm *Blue Peter*; 5.20pm *Basil Brush*. This was the shape of children's television in the halcyon days of the 1970s. A brief, precious, colourful 90 minutes. When I inform my five-year-old that he watches more TV before he leaves for school each morning than I did in an entire day he looks at me as if I've lost the plot.

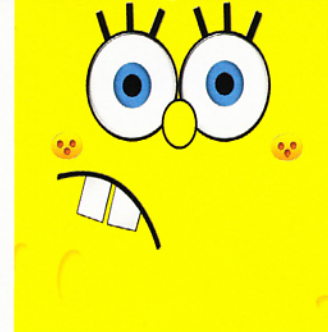
Last year, Whitehaven in Cumbria became the first UK town to switch completely to digital TV broadcasts and now has access to 25 free children's channels offering 113,000 hours of programmes a year. This coincides with growing concern among experts at the prospect of higher levels of television viewing among children. 'On average, American children spend four hours a day in front of the television, and British children are not far behind,' says Dr Richard House of Roehampton University, London. 'This represents more

Square-eyed fatties!

Excessive television watching is a key factor in childhood obesity, according to research. Levels of obesity among two to four-year-olds have doubled in the past 15 years. A study of 9,000 children at universities in Glasgow and Bristol pinpointed the key risk factors as:

- more than eight hours of viewing a week
- less than 10.5 hours of sleep a night
- parental obesity

The research, published in the *British Medical Journal*, suggested that too much television in the early years was closely linked with a lack of exercise and excessive eating. 'There are some genetic factors which play a role,' says Professor Tony Barnett, of Birmingham University, 'but the basic message is that it is the environment which is to blame.'



and some help with number recognition and colours. But my two are moving on from *CBeebies* and what they watch now has no educational content whatsoever.'

Tanya Ying, a teacher at Stanley Infants School in Teddington, is also concerned: 'It's too easy to throw children in front of the box – some are really mesmerised by it. I'd recommend a maximum of an hour a day.'

So what's the problem?

Many parents may reassure themselves that so long as they restrict their offspring to the gentle worlds of *Postman Pat* and *Roary the Racing Car*, a couple of hours a day can do little harm. Yet experts are increasingly concerned that excessive television viewing has a negative impact on key areas of development, including literacy, physical and social development, attitudes to violence and the ability to make decisions.

'Pre-school children spend three times longer in front of a television or computer than they do reading,' says Dr Aric Sigman, author of *Remotely Controlled: How Television Is Damaging Our Lives*. 'Those with a screen in their bedroom are less likely to be able to read by the age of six,' he adds.

Educational psychologist Jane Healey agrees: 'Higher levels of television viewing correlate with lowered academic performance, especially reading scores. The "two-minute mind" quickly becomes impatient with any material requiring depth of processing.'

Dr Richard House is equally concerned about the effects of television viewing on children's physical and social development. 'Hours spent in front of the television are sedentary hours,' he says. 'They arouse the brain to various states but they do not exercise the body. There is no physical experience or social interaction.'

And while programme makers might argue that TV has much to offer in terms of education, Dr House points out that all communication is one-way: children might listen, but they need not formulate a response: 'The television is not interested in what a child thinks or what he or she has to say.'

Dr House also worries that repeated exposure to cartoon violence can affect children's responses to the real world: 'They can separate the fantasy elements of a television programme from reality, but repeated exposure to acts of violence without direct experience of the consequences of those acts may have a desensitizing effect.'

There's even evidence that the brain may actually change following excessive inactive viewing, says Dr House. We literally become drowsier, less capable of paying attention and

making decisions. The implications in classrooms across the country are clear: how can we expect children to progress if they arrive at school feeling lethargic and disinterested?

Damage limitation

The good news is that researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that if children had their TV viewing cut back before the age of five, they were far less likely to suffer long-term consequences. Kamila Mistry, lead author of the study, says: 'Timing of exposure is important, as reducing viewing can reduce the risk of behavioural and social problems. It is vital to emphasise the importance of reducing television viewing in early childhood.'

We might not have appreciated it back in the 1970s, but while we were waiting for those 90 precious minutes of children's television to start, we did seem to find plenty of other things to do with our time. ■



Box clever

- Familiarise yourself with a range of programmes so you know what's out there
- Don't dismiss everything your child watches: there are some real gems that you will enjoy watching together
- Engage your child in dialogue about the content: 'Why do you think she did that?' 'How did he feel when that happened?'
- From the age of five or so, practise reading the on-screen programme schedules together and agree what is to be watched and for how long
- Get an alarm clock and set it for five minutes before dinnertime. (We've found that our five-year-old is much less inclined to argue with the clock than he is with his parents)
- Try to use television as a way of encouraging reading. Many of the more popular programmes have inspired (or been inspired by) books and comics that can be read together
- Don't assume that children should always be allowed to watch the same things. What suits a seven-year-old may not be appropriate viewing for a two-year-old
- Finally, hit the off button and head for the great outdoors. Recent research in the US has identified a sharp decline in the amount of time children spend in natural surroundings as the internet, computer games and video games combine with television to create a wall-to-wall 'screen' culture.