

## Is the media a health hazard for children?

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*Watching television, playing video games and using the internet are popular pastimes for children and also powerful influences on child health, development and wellbeing. How powerful are these influences and what role do GPs have in optimising children's interactions with the media?*

General practitioners are well aware of the powerful interface between social context and child health, and the range of behavioural, emotional and developmental problems that may result and which have collectively been termed the 'new morbidity'.<sup>1</sup> Yet teaching and research in paediatrics continues to be dominated by organic models of disease. How then do we attempt to understand a complex area such as the media (television, video games and the internet) and its influence on child health, development and wellbeing?

### Is the media a 'health' issue?

We argue here that the answer to this question is 'Yes'.

The media impacts on the health and development of children in both positive and negative ways. In recognition of this fact, the Division of Paediatrics of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians recently revised its policy on children and television.<sup>2</sup> This document provides the full set of references to the assertions below, and can be obtained without cost from the College by calling (02) 9256 5464.

What this means is that, as health practitioners, we need to understand issues such as the media, including how they influence the health and development of children.

### The good: health and developmental benefits

The media can improve the health and development of children. Material actively selected, viewed and discussed at a family level can broaden children's understanding of the world. It provides children with a broad knowledge base and ideas that they can incorporate into their learning, development, play and behaviour.

Prospective research from the United States suggests that

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television used in this way can improve academic performance. Also, health-promoting messages can change understanding and behaviour in a beneficial way if they are actively discussed and incorporated locally (within the family or school).

### The bad: potential for harm

The media can also have an adverse effect on the health, development and wellbeing of children. These many and diverse hazards are summarised in the box on page 137.

### A resiliency and risk model

Children differ in the degree to which they benefit or are vulnerable to harm from their exposure to the media. Resiliency refers to a capacity to withstand adversity, and to benefit from the positives.

### Resiliency

The recurrent message of multiple research studies is that children become resilient, and potentially benefit from the media, when:

- their family has an active process of program and media choices

## Health and developmental risks to children from the media

### Violence

Violence in the media makes children think and act more violently. A recently released joint statement from the American Academies of Pediatrics, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Family Physicians, and the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, reviewing over 1000 research articles, has concluded that exposure to violence in the media increases the likelihood of:

- viewing violence as an effective strategy to solve conflict
- desensitisation to violence in everyday life
- increasing mistrust, anxiety and fear, and a perception that the world is a violent place
- using violence in their own behaviour.

See [www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm](http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm)

### Obesity

The relationship between television viewing and obesity is strong and causal, particularly around early adolescence. The more time spent viewing television, the greater the probability of becoming overweight and developing obesity.

### Advertising

A basic tenet of advertising is that information is presented in a way that allows an informed choice. This presumption is violated in advertising to children. The research suggests that younger children may not clearly identify the transitions to and from advertisements, and not clearly understand their intent. This is particularly true with the recent trend of intermingling products with toy-based programs.

Children are more likely to believe that advertising claims are true, particularly if presented by a known personality. The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated in policy that advertising to children under the age of 8 years is inherently deceptive and exploits children.

### Cigarettes, alcohol and fast food

Despite the apparent ban on cigarette advertising, the rates of adolescent smoking and drinking are high. Although teenagers may understand the health risks, they remain vulnerable to the image messages presented through direct and indirect advertising for these products.

Targeting adolescents is no chance occurrence. For individuals with a predisposition to addiction, the chances of becoming

addicted are greater if they start using alcohol and cigarettes during adolescence.

Media advertisements lead children to incorrectly believe in positive nutritional benefits of processed foods. This is one causal contribution to the fact that children in Australia are becoming more obese. By contrast, the relentless portrayal of slim stereotypes is causal, particularly for girls, in the preoccupations with weight that lead to continual dieting and more problematic food behaviours.

### Sexual behaviour

Sexual encounters, as portrayed on the media, usually fail to portray the potential consequences of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. This influences the choices of adolescents when presented with sexual situations, increasing the chances of these unintended outcomes.

### Social stereotypes

The media has a powerful influence in shaping the beliefs of children about subjects that they have limited experience of in their daily life. Many research studies show that children have restricted belief sets concerning issues such as race, gender and the elderly. The depths of these beliefs correlate with the amount of television watched.

### Victimisation

Although yet largely unstudied, there are many anecdotes of the victimisation of children through the internet. Children often have a technical knowledge of the internet exceeding that of their parents, and are able to access products such as 'chat rooms' without their parents knowing they are doing so. There is the potential for exploitation of children commercially, psychologically and sexually as these technologies bypass usual parental and social protective mechanisms.

### What children are not doing

When children spend a lot of time watching television, playing video games or being involved in other media related pastimes, these activities compete with activities that may be more directly beneficial to health and development. Specifically, opportunities to build developmental skills in physical activity and socialisation may be lost. For most children this may not be a concern, but for children at risk in these areas (for example, those who are clumsy or have poor social skills), their ways of using the media may compound their problems.

- the family actively discusses the issues presented by the media and, where relevant, incorporates these into their family life
- the parents actively co-view material with their children
- the parents feel confident in the understanding and management of their children's use of the media.

## Risk

By contrast, children are at greatest risk of media-related harm when:

- their viewing choices are unsupervised (particularly if the children have a television, computer or video in their bedrooms)
- there is no discussion of media related issues within the family
- there is family disharmony or stress, and the media is used as a form of 'escape' or 'babysitting'
- children are vulnerable (young, emotionally or developmentally disabled) and exposed to inappropriate content.

Virtually all research articles note that these risk factors occur more commonly in families within the lower socioeconomic sectors of our society. This is particularly true of the most prominent risk factor – the lack of a family culture or process to

choose, co-view and discuss viewing content. If, as a GP, you want to address these issues within your practice, you may decide to use different approaches depending on each family's social situation.

## What GPs can do

General practitioners have a great deal to offer in this area of child health because of the very nature of primary health care. The potential contribution can come through two parallel processes:

- The first process is at the level of the individual doctor. In the waiting room there could be brochures on the subject, or messages encouraging parents to discuss their concerns about television, video, or the internet with their doctor. Within the actual consultation, GPs can take a history, draw conclusions about the media risk, make specific recommendations and follow up on these.
- The second process is at the College level. There is the opportunity for the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners to take a formal policy position on the subject of children and the media. This can be done in collaboration with groups such as Young Media Australia (see the box on this page). From this can come educational content for general practitioner training programs, and a formal policy to guide other groups such as community child health nurses, early childhood teachers and schoolteachers.

Common to both these strategies is the recognition that parents are the ultimate 'gatekeepers'. Health and educational professionals are not there to take over the problem. Instead they should be acknowledging the importance of the issue, motivating parents to take the matter seriously, and providing the ideas and strategies necessary for parents to optimise their children's interactions with the media. Continuing support can then ensure that positive change occurs.

## Young Media Australia

Young Media Australia (YMA) is a national non-profit community based organisation that provides information, advocacy and research regarding the impact of media on children and young people.

Resources available through YMA for parents and professionals include brochures such as:

- 'Cybersafety'
- 'Advertising and children'
- 'For kids eyes only'
- 'Television, videos and grandchildren'
- 'Using television sensibly'.

The YMA also publishes kits and videos (including a media reference guide), library information packages for schools, various books and booklets (such as 'Does violence hurt your children?') and conference papers covering issues such as advertising, children's television, new technology, regulations and violence.

Since it is a community-based organisation, YMA is financially vulnerable. In recognition that the media is a health issue, collaboration with individual health practitioners and health professional bodies is welcomed.

Further information is available from the YMA website <http://www.youngmedia.org.au>, or YMA freecall 1800 245 959.

## Questions to ask

- Are parents concerned about their children's use of TV, video games and/or internet?
- How many TVs and computers are there in the house? Where are they located?
- How much time do the children spend at the TV, video and/or computer?
- How are programs chosen? Who monitors this? Who monitors internet use?
- How often do parents watch with their children? Do they discuss the programs? Do they discuss advertisements and issues such as violence?
- Do the children watch TV during meal times? Is there discord in the house (to which people adapt by escaping to the media)?

- Do the parents understand the classification systems for television programs and video games? Do they know how to use these in making choices regarding media for their children?

### Diagnostic issues to consider

- Are the media habits of the family such that children are potentially exposed to inappropriate material in an unsupervised way?
- Are there risk factors in the children (they are young, or have intellectual, learning or emotional problems)?
- Is the media being used inappropriately as a babysitter, or is its use a reflection of family problems?

### Possible recommendations

- Use the media as a reward rather than an entitlement. Children can watch TV or play video games after their other responsibilities are completed (getting ready in the morning, doing homework and other jobs in the afternoon).
- Choose programs as a family on a weekly basis – mark (with a highlighter) in the TV guide those programs that are to be watched.
- Parents and children to watch programs together, and discuss the content, including specific issues such as advertisements (why did they show that?, what are they trying to make you think and buy?), and violence (why did this occur?, is it a successful solution to the problem?). Discussion can also address the attitudes towards social subgroups, sexual encounters, alcohol and fast food.
- Turn the TV off during family meals.
- Move TVs (and computers with internet access) out of children's bedrooms.
- Use the VCR more to record programs which parents can view with their children.
- Encourage parents to learn about internet cybersafety.
- Inform parents where they can go with complaints or concerns about the media (see the box on this page).
- Parents to encourage their children to discuss fears that may arise from content they have viewed on TV.

A guide to increasing family media literacy and education (that is, the questioning, analysing and evaluating of media messages) is available at [www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm).

### Discussion

The nature of childhood has changed irreversibly with the increasing diversity of family structures, loss of traditional safe neighbourhoods and the greater availability of media. Against the potential uncertainties of outside play, the media comes direct to children within their own homes, and consequently parents perceive it as 'safe'. Australian children, on average,

## Where to go with complaints or concerns

### For television or radio

- Direct program complaints initially to the relevant channel or station in writing.
- Send a copy to Young Media Australia.
- If this fails to get a satisfactory response within six weeks, take the matter to the Australian Broadcasting Authority (see below).

### For internet, television or radio

- Contact the Australian Broadcasting Authority either by telephone (02 9334 7700 or 1800 22 6667) or their website (<http://www.aba.gov.au>).

### For cinema, films, videos and video games

- Direct concerns about classifications given to these items to the Office of Film and Literature Classification, telephone (02) 9289 7100.

### For all types of media

- For further help, contact Young Media Australia, freecall 1800 245 959.

watch two to three hours of television a day. Over their childhood this time exceeds the time spent in the classroom.

The media directly bypasses traditional structures provided by society to support and protect children during their development. There are few educational standards (as there are for school-teachers), no socially scrutinised curricula (as there are at school), and little intergenerational wisdom (which has supported parenting through human history). The media comes directly to homes and directly to children. Children are vulnerable, and may not have the resources to withstand this force, which is arguably as powerful on the developing child as school education, and perhaps now as powerful as the family itself.

As doctors we swim in a relentless current of biological and pharmacological healthcare information. Yet the media, and many other powerful determinants of child health, are environmental and sociological in nature. They are causal precursors to the adult health behaviour of the future. What is the role of GPs in healthcare issues of this nature?

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### References

1. Haggerty R., Roughmann K, Pless I. Child health and the community. New York: John Wiley, 1975.
2. McDowell M, Weddell C, Baur L. Getting in the picture: a parent and carer's guide for the better use of television for children. Sydney: Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 1999.