

PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Helping Children Learn
to Read and Write

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Chapter 15

Television and Literacy

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Parents and teachers share many concerns about children. One of those shared concerns is the effect television viewing has on the academic development of children. Their concerns take the form of questions such as, Does television viewing adversely affect reading achievement? Would children read more if they watched less television? Does television create children who have shorter attention spans or who are more inclined to seek immediate gratification in their learning? In this chapter we approach the topic of television and literacy as a parent, as former elementary school teachers, as educational researchers, and no less important, as individuals who watch a fair amount of television and who are ourselves products of the television age.

One difficulty in addressing this topic is the mixed feelings that many adults have about television. On the one hand we complain about the many examples of television's shallow, seemingly addictive characteristics and on the other we enjoy its ability to entertain, to enlighten, and to motivate learning. Television has produced both the "Beverly Hillbillies" and a widely viewed documentary about the Civil War that subsequently increased the sales of books about that period of history.

Our mixed feelings about television can be translated into mixed messages to our children about television. For example, it may be difficult for children to understand adults' apparent love-hate relationship with television. In our roles as parent and teacher we have discouraged our children from watching television one day and strongly encouraged them to view a particular program the next day, all the while watching a good deal of television ourselves. Parents have been known to rally against television viewing to their children, but then use it as a method for rewarding or punishing certain behaviors. And, what parent has not occasionally used television as an electronic baby-sitter? The teacher whose car displays the bumper sticker "Fight prime time, read a book" may also be the one assigning students to view an educational program to be discussed in class.

As these examples suggest, concerns about television and reading cannot be reduced to the issue of whether or not to watch television. Few would suggest that television viewing should be abolished entirely, although some parents have done so, usually on a temporary basis and often in response to the pleas of educators. Noticeably absent from many discussions about television and reading are findings from research. The discussion of any issue should begin with the relevant facts or at least the best available information. In this chapter we provide a brief overview of the best available information about the relation between television viewing and reading. We believe that the evidence provides useful information to help parents and teachers make informed decisions about television and reading. We also provide some suggestions about using television viewing to enhance children's literacy.

*What We
Know about
Television and
Reading*

One thing is clear: Children in the United States spend a great deal of time watching television. A study by the National Institute of Mental Health found that the typical high school senior has spent more time watching television (approximately 15,000 hours) than attending school (approximately 11,000 hours). This fact led researchers interested in studying the effect of television on reading to ask a logical question: *Are children who watch more television poorer readers than those who watch less televi-*

tion? This question has not been as easy to answer as one might expect and has led to some surprising results. For example, children who watch a great deal of television tend to come from homes that are not very enriching in many other ways. So, it is hard to tell whether television or other factors such as having few reading materials around the house are to blame for poor reading. When such factors are taken into account, researchers found something surprising: Reading achievement tends to *increase* slightly as children watch more television, at least up to the national average of about two to three hours per day. However, as the amount of TV viewing increased above the average, reading achievement dropped sharply. Moderate levels of television viewing may help some children, especially disadvantaged children, become more aware of the world around them, which translates into increased understanding during reading and perhaps increased motivation to read.

A group of researchers led by Richard Anderson at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois looked for a relation between reading achievement and a wide range of out-of-school, free time activities including watching television. Their findings suggest that television viewing was weakly related to poor reading achievement. Interestingly, however, activities such as talking on the phone and listening to music were more strongly related. The researchers wisely cautioned against jumping to conclusions based on these findings. Nonetheless, there seems to be no evidence clearly suggesting that moderate levels of television viewing (an *average* of two to three hours a day) is having a widespread, negative effect on children's reading achievement in this country. On the other hand this finding does not offer clear guidance to parents and teachers who are interested in making specific decisions about children's television viewing. For that sort of guidance it is necessary to dig deeper into the research.

Not surprisingly, many studies, including the one just described, have found that children who read for pleasure outside of school tend to read better than their classmates who do not. This finding leads to another question about television and reading: *If children watched less television, would they read more books?* Underlying this question is an assumption that has not been clearly supported. Put simply, the assumption is that if you turn off the television, children will pick up a book to read. Theorists such as Susan Neuman of Temple University suggest that leisure activities like watching television fulfill certain needs. Television viewing and reading do not always fulfill the same needs. For example, there is often a social dimension to watching television. Children may sometimes see television viewing as a way to socialize with their friends just as adults may use a televised sporting event as a reason for a party. Turning off the television in such instances may lead children to seek out other social activities as opposed to read a book.

Although television viewing is clearly a popular leisure activity, it is only one among many activities that compete with reading. The bad news is that among all the things that children do outside of school, they spend relatively little time reading. Various studies estimate that on average the majority of school-age children read between four and 16 minutes a day outside of school (disturbingly, recent studies have found that children also read less in school than might be expected). The good news in these findings is that we wouldn't have to find too many extra minutes in the day

to double the time that many children spend reading at home. To increase a child's reading from ten to 20 minutes a day does not necessarily imply significant changes in their television viewing habits. In fact, as we will highlight in the second section of this chapter, television can become the stimulus for more leisure reading if parents and teachers look for opportunities to help bring this about.

An important finding for parents and teachers to consider is that environment has a major effect on both leisure reading and television viewing. For example, children's reading for pleasure and television viewing seem to follow the pattern set by their parents. Parents who read little and watch television a great deal tend to have children who do likewise. As in many aspects of parenting, it is difficult to underestimate the power of our example. To decrease children's television viewing while increasing their reading, parents may need to think about changing their own reading and viewing habits. Teachers can play a role too. Research clearly supports the benefits of having a wide variety of reading materials available in classrooms and establishing a time when everyone reads, including the teacher.

Thus, there is no clear evidence that simply turning off the television will by itself significantly increase long-term leisure reading. Instead, the research suggests that efforts to increase the disturbingly little time that many children engage in reading outside of school should focus on creating an environment that encourages reading, not necessarily on finding ways to reduce the amount of television viewed. A good environment for stimulating reading will include adults who model the value of reading (perhaps at least occasionally in place of television viewing), a variety of interesting reading material, opportunities to discuss what family members have read or might read, and so forth. Given that many children spend so little time reading for pleasure, even small increases in the number of minutes they read each day are significant.

Another popular assumption about the effects of television on reading is found in the following question: *Are children who watch television less likely to read because television viewing leads to shorter attention spans?* Some researchers have tried to determine if the nature of television viewing may lead children to become more passive or impulsive, which may in turn lead them to read less. The research in this area is sketchy at best and the findings are mixed. In one relevant study, Gavriel Salomon at the University of Arizona found that children do seem to devote less mental effort while watching television but they also seem to adjust their mental effort to the demands of reading. Some studies suggest that children who watch television tend to be more impulsive in their approach to solving problems, while others suggest that watching some programs may increase their persistence. The connection between these findings and reading, however, is unknown. Again, there seems to be little cause for concern that television is having a widespread negative effect on children's approaches to learning or school, although this possibility has not been ruled out entirely.

In summary, there is no clear evidence that a moderate amount of television viewing has a strong harmful effect on literacy in general. Variables such as the type of program watched, a child's age, viewing habits (e.g., some people try to read and

watch television at the same time), home environment and the like make generalizations difficult. Several researchers in this area have suggested that the lack of any clear findings condemning television viewing is due to the fact that some positive effects lessen the impact of the negative effects. Such a viewpoint leads us to a final question: *What are the potential benefits to reading that can be gained from watching television and how can parents and teachers use television to enhance children's development as readers?*

Because most research is focused on determining the potentially harmful effects of watching television, there are relatively few studies that directly address the potential benefits of television. In fact, several years ago David Reinking heard a presentation at a professional meeting in which a pair of researchers reported their findings that the vocabulary used in several popular children's cartoon programs was greater and more diverse than in several popular children's books. They were so surprised and distressed by this finding that they decided to suspend further research. Actually, this finding does not imply that children should watch more cartoons and read fewer books, but it does suggest the potential of using television viewing to enhance vocabulary development.

Another example of using television in a positive vein has been a series of investigations carried out by Patricia Koskinen and her colleagues at the University of Maryland. She has found some encouraging results in using closed-captioned television with young readers and readers experiencing difficulty in learning to read. Closed-captioned television was developed for the deaf to be able to read the dialogue of popular programs on the television screen. Koskinen found that some beginning reading skills were enhanced by using this feature for children without any hearing problems. Previously, the use of closed-captioned television has required the purchase of a special decoder, but some major manufacturers are currently including a built-in decoder as a standard feature.

The major conclusion we draw from looking at the best available research is that a moderate level of television viewing does not seem to be harmful to children's reading. Furthermore, watching a moderate amount of television might have some benefits for reading. These benefits might be enhanced by engaging children in reading and writing activities connected to their television viewing. In the next section we suggest how parents and teachers might look for such activities and we provide some examples.

Experienced teachers and many parents who take an active role in their children's education often recognize what has been called the teachable moment. A teachable moment is usually an unplanned opportunity for learning that occurs naturally during an experience in which a child has some personal involvement. For example, a parent or teacher taking a child to a baseball game might see an opportunity to point out how a player's batting average represents a chance of getting a hit each time at bat, thus introducing the concept of probability in a rich, motivating context. With practice, most teachers and parents can go one step further by extending teachable moments through informal games and activities. A common example would be the

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Television
to Enhance
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informal games parents sometimes invent to keep children occupied during a long trip in the family car. For example, "Let's see who can find a sign with the name of an animal on it."

Similarly, television viewing can be seen as a potential source of such informal learning. In this section we offer a few examples that we hope might help parents and teachers creatively use television to enhance children's literacy. The possibilities are, of course, limitless, but at first they may be difficult to see. Once parents and teachers begin looking for connections between television and reading, they may be surprised by how many opportunities there are to connect rich reading and writing activities to television viewing.

Some opportunities are easy to identify and are a good place for a parent or teacher to start noticing the possibilities. For example, many television quiz shows require the use of language skills as viewers participate along with the contestants. Predicting words in a sentence from only a few letters in each word, as is done on "Wheel of Fortune," for example, is a motivating activity related directly to skills frequently included in the school's reading curriculum. Other game shows, such as "Jeopardy," require contestants to pit their knowledge against each other in specific categories such as sports, history, or movies. A debated answer on the show or among family members might lead to consulting an encyclopedia or other reference source.

A more elaborate extension of game shows might be to encourage children to create their own home version of the show, developing their own categories and questions. In fact, children often enjoy creating their own versions of other types of programs as well. Some will want to write their own scripts and commercials, perhaps using a video camera to tape their "program." This level of involvement may work best on a rainy summer day or other occasions when children have extended free time.

Commercial breaks can be a good time to engage children in brief conversations that reinforce reading. For example, making predictions about possible developments in a story's plot, a valued reading skill, can be reinforced during a commercial by asking children to predict what they think will happen next in a television drama and by informally asking them to give reasons for their predictions. They can learn aspects of how characters are developed in a story by looking for who emerges as the hero or heroine as well as the villain (*hero*, *heroine*, and *villain* are also good words to know and understand). A game-like activity would be to see whose predictions are most accurate from one commercial break to the next (the loser has to pop the popcorn).

Occasionally, there is a direct link between television and books. For example, some television programs are adaptations of acclaimed children's literature. "Reading Rainbow" aired on Public Television is one regularly scheduled program that has had this aim, and the series "Little House on the Prairie," often seen in syndication, is based loosely on books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. As parents and teachers skim television viewing guides, they can be alert for key phrases such as "based on the popular children's book . . ."

Watching such programs on television can lead to a variety of activities that may encourage reading and writing. The book upon which the program is based can often be found at a public library, which is a good excuse to visit the library. Many of the book club orders that are sent home from school may highlight books related to television programs. Connecting television and books may be especially effective in opening up the world of reading to reluctant readers. After viewing a television program, reluctant readers may be more open to reading a book related to the program. For younger children or readers having difficulty reading by themselves, parents or older siblings might also read the book aloud. Or parents might wish to use a VCR to record the television version and play it in parts as portions of the book are read aloud over several days. Comparing the versions of the story in the book and in the television program can also give children the opportunity to see the unique characteristics of each version. Such activities can illustrate the power in reading and listening to written stories that cannot be fully duplicated in a video presentation.

Television can also be used to motivate writing. For example, many television programs provide addresses that allow viewers an opportunity to respond in some way to the program: writing for further information about the content of the program, joining a fan club, and so forth. Children might also be encouraged to write a letter in support of a favorite program to prevent it from being canceled. Many of these letters are answered, which is itself motivating. Parents might ask their children to submit a written justification for staying up past an established bedtime to watch a particular program. Or parents who choose to limit the number of hours a child watches television each week might consider written explanations for extending the allotted hours one week. Children might also create a written summary comparing and contrasting the way different brands of the same product are advertised on television.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, television is a potential source for enriching children's vocabulary. In fact, when children hear new words on television, they often have the benefit of a rich visual context to help them determine the word's meaning. These opportunities build children's vocabulary and increase their interest in language. A simple approach is to draw attention to interesting words while watching television with children. A comment such as "that's a new word to me, do you know what it means?" or "that's an interesting word (or way) to describe . . ." may help children learn new words and expressions. Perhaps more importantly, such observations help children develop a lifelong awareness of the subtleties of language and verbal communication. They might also be encouraged to keep a log of their favorite or most interesting words heard during television programs.

A more elaborate, structured activity entails helping children conduct a scavenger hunt for words they hear while watching television. Children might be given a short list of words to listen for while watching television. To verify that a word has been found, a child would record the program, the date, and the context of each word heard. Bonus points could be awarded for hearing words having similar meanings (huge, enormous), opposite meanings (talkative, reserved), or that sound the same

(blew, blue); or, bonus points could be awarded by predicting that a word on the list would be used in a particular program. Children could also generate lists of words describing favorite characters from television programs, their clothing, their personalities, and so forth. A children's thesaurus and dictionary could be used along with these activities.

However, the ground rules for competitive activities such as a scavenger hunt need to be established in advance to head off potential problems. For example, some children may get carried away with the activity and respond by significantly increasing their television viewing. Also, adults supervising this game should be willing to give as much information about the words' meanings as possible. It is not advisable to send children to the dictionary as the sole source of information about a word that is totally unfamiliar. Instead, give examples of how the word would be used appropriately in several different contexts, then ask a child to guess the word's meaning, and then look in a reference source to see if the guess is correct.

The previous examples are only a sample of informal activities that illustrate how television viewing can be used to enhance literacy. For such activities to be successful it is usually necessary that children perceive them to be enjoyable, nonthreatening, and not too distracting from their involvement in watching a program. Parents need to be especially cautious in proposing activities like the ones presented here. Children may be wary of "school-like" activities proposed by parents, especially when associated with valued free time activities such as television viewing. We do not advise parents to require their children to participate in activities like our examples. Doing so runs the risk of developing negative attitudes towards literacy. Instead, parents should make suggestions, provide support where necessary, and offer encouragement and reinforcement. They should also feel comfortable with the fact that not all of their suggestions will be greeted with enthusiasm.

A Concluding Word

Television is a powerful force in American culture and it is appropriate for teachers and parents to consider its role in shaping children's development. There is no shortage of worrisome issues when we consider television's potential to influence our children. We worry about television's influence on shaping children's values concerning issues related to violence, family life, and the importance of material things. We worry about whether unrestricted television viewing may turn our children into couch potatoes.

In this chapter we addressed the common worry that television has an adverse effect on children's acquisition and appreciation of literacy. Several conclusions seem warranted. First, there is little evidence to support the worry that moderate levels of television viewing will greatly harm children's development of literacy. A second conclusion proceeds from the first: to enhance children's literacy, parents and teachers should devote more of their energies to finding ways to engage children meaningfully in enjoyable reading and writing activities as opposed simply to restricting the time spent viewing television. A third conclusion is that with a little imagination parents and teachers can use television viewing constructively as a source for enhancing children's literacy.

We believe that these conclusions provide one base from which parents and teachers can make informed decisions about children's television viewing. Ultimately, however, the questions parents and teachers have about how television will affect literacy must be answered individually for each child.

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*References
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