

May 7, 2007 | [Social Science](#) | [Health and Medicine](#)

40 percent of 3-month-old infants are regularly watching TV, DVDs or videos

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A large number of parents are ignoring warnings from the American Academy of Pediatrics and are allowing their very young children to watch television, DVDs or videos so that by 3 months of age 40 percent of infants are regular viewers.

That number jumps to 90 percent of 2-year-olds, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Washington and Seattle Children's Hospital Research Institute. The findings are being published today in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

The study is the first to look at the trajectory of media viewing in the first two years of life and to explore the content of what is being watched. The research also explores parents' reasons for permitting it.

"Exposure to TV takes time away from more developmentally appropriate activities such as a parent or adult caregiver and an infant engaging in free play with dolls, blocks or cars," said Frederick Zimmerman, lead author of the study and a UW associate professor of health services.

"While appropriate television viewing at the right age can be helpful for both children and parents, excessive viewing before age 3 has been shown to be associated with problems of attention control, aggressive behavior and poor cognitive development. Early television viewing has exploded in recent years, and is one of the major public health issues facing American children."

Co-authors of the study are Dr. Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrics researcher at Seattle Children's Hospital Research Institute and a UW associate professor of medicine, and Andrew Meltzoff, co-director of the UW's Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences.

"This study is important because it teaches us about the media diet of infants who are too young to speak for themselves. Most parents seek what's best for their child, and we discovered that many parents believe that they are providing educational and brain development opportunities by exposing their babies to 10 to 20 hours of viewing per week," said Meltzoff, a developmental psychologist who is the Job and Gertrud Tamaki endowed chair in psychology at the UW.

"We need more research on both the positive and negative effects of a steady diet of baby TV and DVD viewing. But parents should feel confident that high-quality social

interaction with babies, including reading and talking with them, provides all the stimulation that the growing brain needs. It's not as though TV or a DVD provides an extra vitamin of some kind in the first two years of life, where we concentrated our research in this study. This area is one in which science, health and public policy all meet. We need to get our facts right so we can productively advise parents who so desperately want to do the right thing."

The researchers conducted random telephone surveys of more than 1,000 families in Minnesota and Washington with a child born in the previous two years, and found the median age at which infants were regularly exposed to media was 9 months. Among those who watched TV, DVDs or videos, the average daily viewing time jumped from one hour per day for those children younger than 12 months to more than 1½ hours a day by 24 months.

The three most important and common reasons cited by parents for allowing their children to watch TV, DVDs or videos were:

- 29 percent believed these media were educational or were good for the child's brain.
- 23 percent said viewing was enjoyable or relaxing for the child.
- 21 percent used these media as an electronic babysitter so they could do other things.

Even though educational content was the top reason given by parents, only about half the infant viewing time was reported to be in what researchers classified as a children's educational category. This included educational TV programs such as "Sesame Street" and "Arthur" and DVDs or videos such as "Blue's Clues." The remaining viewing time was roughly split among children's non-educational programs, baby DVDs or videos and grown-up television.

Although parents believe in the educational value of TV, DVDs and videos, just 32 percent of parents always watched with their children. Parents also had an inflated idea of how much of these media other children were watching and believed that their children viewed less than the average amount. The study indicated that the perceived average viewing for other families is 73 percent higher than the actual average.

"At the end of the day the amount of TV viewing is based on what parents think is normal," said Zimmerman. "Perceptions of norms tend to shape behavior even if those norms are inflated."

So what can parents do to reduce the amount of time their kids spend in front of the tube?

Zimmerman has several suggestions.

"Parents often turn to TV for a break. A better suggestion would be to provide kids with simple activities to do. When parents are cooking, for example, they could have a low

drawer with plastic dishes or wooden spoons available that a child can play with or make noise. This gives the child something to be engaged with while taking pressure off the parent.

"A parent can also enjoy reading a fun or familiar book to a child," he said. "The child benefits from being close while the parent can get a breather. Children thrive on physical closeness."

Zimmerman and Christakis are the authors of the book "The Elephant in the Living Room, Make Television Work for Your Kids" and Meltzoff is co-author of "The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells Us about the Mind."

The study was funded by the Tamaki Foundation with additional support by the National Institute of Mental Health.

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