

TV Inhibits Development

By John Rosemond

Since 1979, in my books, talks and columns, I've been saying we judge the book by the cover concerning television's impact on children. The programs a child watches I've said, have less effect on development than the very process of watching. All programs, including "Sesame Street" (which I've called anti-educational), are watched the same passive way. The programs change every 30 to 60 minutes, the process doesn't.

Television watching constitutes a deprivational experience for the child of formative years. A preschool child who watches but 20 hours a week, which is well below the national average, will have spent 4,000 plus hours staring at television by the time he enters first grade. Four thousand hours of not exercising any competency skill has got to have negative impact on the child's learning abilities.

During the first seven years of life, the environment imprints enduring patterns into the central nervous system. If a young child spends significant time staring at a fixed and flickering electronic field, is it not reasonable to assume that this experience is interfering with the establishment of key neural skills, including a long attention span and certain reasoning abilities?

Parents have, for the most part, ignored the alarm I've sounded. For obvious reasons, they prefer a generic "it couldn't be helped" explanation over a developmental one. By and large, the professional community has dismissed my arguments. I've been called an iconoclast and even threatened with charges of unethical conduct. "There's no research to support what you're saying," they've said.

Well, now there is. Psychologist Jane Healy, author of Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think (Simon and Schuster, \$22.95) proposes that television's electronic environment is actually altering the brains of children, both functionally (how the brain works) and structurally (its construction). She sees a connection between the increase in learning disabilities (and lower reading scores in general), hyperactivity, and the time American children spend splotched in front of television sets during the most critical years of brain development.

Healy also emphasizes process over program. Television watching is inhibiting the development of language and listening skills, imagination, and various problem-solving processes essential to learning to read, she says.

I've said children should not be allowed to watch any television until they are completely literate, which translates to no television until age eight or so. Now even Yale University's Jerome Singer, this country's leading researcher into the effects of television, is saying the same thing. Hallelujah!!

So, now that the choice is clear, will parents opt for smart kids or the convenience of an electronic babysitter? And will school administrations put their money where their mouth is and remove television sets from the elementary classrooms? We'll see.

Note: Endangered Minds and Jane Healy's new book Failure to Connect are available in our library for parents to check out. (See school Library Policy)

John Rosemond is a family psychologist in private practice in North Carolina. His column is published every Monday on the Conversation page. Reprinted with permission from John Rosemond's nationally syndicated newspaper column.