

Television and Child Development **by Marita Huxholl**

Waldorf Schools generally ask that parents keep their children's TV viewing to a minimum, and in the case of young children (Kindergarten and lower primary), to remove the possibility altogether.

Research highlights that the biggest issue regarding television viewing is not so much the content but the medium itself. The Emery Report (Australian National University) established that no matter what the program is, human brain-wave activity enters characteristic patterns. Data is 'received' at a rate faster than the nerve pathways can adequately cope with. This is particularly true in the case of young children. There is a deadening of thought life and the viewer becomes relatively passive or 'spaced out'. Active attention and the critical faculty are suppressed. After constant exposure to this process the capacity of the organic system is dulled.

Children learn to know the world through all of their senses which are at first interdependent. Seeing something new means little until the object is held, weighed, manipulated and touched. This requires the will to move, to experience and to do. The first seven years of life is the time when sensory and motor skills mature, and through play the child works to bring about the interaction of movement and sensory experiences. This is essential as a basis for concentration and thinking. Play is a young child's 'work'. Free, constructive play develops faculties of creativity, imagination and initiative.

Play is an integrating process for the child, both bodily, psychologically and socially. Lack of play experience may cause organic dysfunction (senses underdeveloped, retained reflexes, neurological disorders between left and right hemispheres). TV viewing robs children of time to play.

One of the key aims in our method of education is to help the child toward developing the faculty of free imagination. In the Kindergarten we use many raw materials such as stones, shells, coloured sheep wool, veils and tables and chairs. These then can become, through the child's imagination, buns, plates, animals, cloaks, islands and trains. We usually tell stories without showing printed pictures. Our words provide the raw materials. The child has to clothe the story with its own images.

This 'free imagination' later on develops into creative thinking. Free imagination is a foundation stone of our education - essential in developing individual initiative so central to our 'Education Towards Freedom'.

A child learns to speak through movement. At first, sounds are accompanied by whole body movements. The child's body moves in response to the speech of others. This continues in a less obvious way throughout life. Through television (and tapes) language is heard but the movement and feeling expressed in direct human contact is not communicated. The TV set does not require any verbal response, thus speech is discouraged.

When we watch television our normally active eyes are reduced to focus on a single area. For a young child the necessary practice in moving, coordinating, focusing and strengthening the eyes is considerably reduced. Normal eye movements are rhythmic. To succeed in reading, rhythmic and well-controlled eye movements are essential. Children with learning problems often have impaired visual development.

Images created on the TV screen are composed of 625 lines, with 800 dots appearing 25 times per second. This puts a considerable strain on the brain and the eyes, especially of young children whose eye muscles are still maturing until about 7 years of age. Programs on TV are consciously created with several cuts per minute. Rapid changes of content, new visual perspectives are commercial tricks designed to hold attention, but what do they do for our eyes and attention span?

Television addresses only a limited area of cerebral functioning. Brain waves produced during TV viewing are primarily Alpha waves - those occurring otherwise in sleep. This leads to a trance-like state so that the brain receives information without any conscious analysis or selective association. The sleep like state of Alpha brain waves produces poor concentration.

TV viewing prolongs dependency on the right hemisphere. As the brain develops children shift from a nonverbal 'right' hemisphere, dreaming consciousness, to a verbal, logical 'left' hemisphere. Many skills necessary for reading, e.g. analysis, auditory association, phonics, symbol recognition and handwriting, are associated with the left hemisphere. Children who are slow to read are frequently one-sided in their development and TV viewing can increase this imbalance.

To be able to make meaningful what is seen and heard, sensory input from other areas is necessary; especially important are sensations of touch and movement, which are closely associated with, for example, the visual cortex. Without input to these areas, real seeing does not become meaningful without this wholeness of experience in the young child. An integration of sensory experience is essential to learning. TV stimulates only vision and hearing and therefore promotes a sensory disintegration.

For many children television is a 'look and forget' medium; real learning is an active process. Children need to do, as well as look, in order to retain experiences. Impressions left by TV are often superficial. Children watch passively, without engaging any inner effort of will, which active learning requires, eg. learning to read. TV can produce passive children.

Experienced teachers can see differences in the behaviour and learning patterns between children who do and don't watch television. The child who consumes too much TV is often nervous, easily fatigued, and has a low attention span. There are sometimes problems with fine motor skills, speech, reading skills, etc.

What can parents do to help their children?

- If you are resolute enough and both parents agree, get rid of the TV set altogether. Parents who have made this choice often report that in the end it was the 'simplest solution' and are delighted with the positive impact on family life.
Failing that, put it away and use it only for special occasions.
Failing that, restrict firmly the number of programs watched, especially on school nights.
- Offer alternative activities of a creative sort - crafts, puppetry, dressing up, drawing, painting, gardening etc.
- Encourage reading. Read aloud to little ones or better still, tell them stories, especially of when you were little.
- Aim at positive family interaction - sit together around a table at meal times and make it interesting. Bedtime stories, singing, planned festival activities at Christmas, Easter, birthdays.
- Share your issues and ideas with other school parents. What, for example, can be done when teenage siblings insist on the right to viewing? Bring up the topic at your next Parent/ Teacher night.

Let us help each other - we're all swimming against the stream!

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References and Recommended Reading:

The Plug-in-Drug - Marie Wynn, Viking Press, N.Y.; 1977.
Sesame Street Revisited - New York Russell Sage Foundation; 1975,
Four Arguments for the Elimination of TV - Jerry Mander.
Mt. Barker Waldorf Weekly - February 10 1994.
Television and Child Development - Novalis House, Christchurch, NZ.