

Strangers in Our Homes:

TV and Our Children's Minds

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As a mother and a pediatrician who completed both a three-year residency in Pediatrics and a three-year subspecialty fellowship in Behavioral and Developmental Pediatrics, I started to wonder: "What are we doing to our children's growth and learning potential by allowing them to watch television and videos as well as spend endless hours playing computer games?"

I practiced seven years as the Physician Consultant at the School Health Center in San Francisco, performing comprehensive assessments on children, ages 4–12, who were having learning and behavioral difficulties in school. I saw hundreds of children who were having difficulties paying attention, focusing on their work, and performing fine and gross motor tasks. Many of these children had a poor self-image and problems relating to adults and peers. As a pediatrician, I had always discouraged television viewing, because of the often violent nature of its content (especially cartoons) and because of all the commercials aimed at children. However, it wasn't until the birth of my own child, six years ago, that I came face to face with the real impact of television. It wasn't just the content, for I had carefully screened the programs my child watched. It was the change in my child's behavior (his mood, his motor movements, his play) before, during and after watching TV that truly frightened me.

*TV rots the senses in the head!
It kills the imagination dead!
It clogs and clutters up the mind!
It makes a child so dull and blind.
He can no longer understand a fantasy,
A fairyland!
His brain becomes as soft as cheese!
His powers of thinking rust and freeze!*

An excerpt from
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
by Roald Dahl, 1964

Before watching TV, he would be outside in nature, content to look at bugs, make things with sticks and rocks, and play in the water and sand. He seemed at peace with himself, his body, and his environment. When watching TV, he was so unresponsive to me and to what was happening around him, that he seemed glued to the television set. When I turned off the TV he became anxious, nervous, and irritable and usually cried (or screamed) for the TV to be turned back on. His play was erratic, his movements impulsive and uncoordinated. His play lacked his own imaginative input. Instead of creating his own play themes, he was simply reenacting what he had just seen on TV in a very repetitive, uncreative, and stilted way.

At age 3 1/2 years, our son went on a plane trip to visit his cousins near Boston, and on the plane was shown the movie *Mission Impossible*. The movie was right above our son's head making it difficult to block out. Earphones had not been purchased, so the impact was only visual, but what an impact it had on our son. He had nightmares and fears about fires, explosions, and bloody hands for the next six months, and his play was profoundly changed. One of my colleagues told me I just had an overly sensitive child, and because I had not taken him to see a movie or let him watch much TV, he was not "used to it" and that was why he was so disturbed by the

pictures he saw. All I could think was—thank heaven he was not “used to it.”

Later that year, I assessed six different children from ages 8–11 years at the School Health Center who all had similar difficulties with reading. They couldn't make a mental picture of letters or words. If I showed them a series of letters and asked them to identify one particular letter, they could do it. If I gave them no visual input and just asked them to write a particular letter by memory, they couldn't do it. All of these children watched a lot of television and videos and played computer games. I wondered what happens to a developing child placed in front of a TV set if they are presented with visual and auditory stimuli at the same time. What is left for the mind to do? At least with reading a story or having a story read to them, the mind can create its own imaginative pictures.

A question arose and I immediately called up my colleague and asked: “Could television itself be causing attention problems and learning difficulties in children?”

My colleague laughed and said just about everyone watches TV—even my child does—and she doesn't have Attention Deficit Disorder or a learning disability. I thought to myself: “Are we spending enough time with our children and looking deeply enough into their development and souls to notice the often subtle changes that occur from spending hours in front of the TV set?” Maybe some children are more vulnerable to the effects of television because of a genetic predisposition or poor nutrition or a more chaotic home environment. I wondered about the loss of potential in all our children, because they are exposed to so much television and so many videos and computers games. What are the capacities we are losing or not even developing because of this TV habit? I then started to read, attend lectures, and ask a lot more questions.

Television has been in existence for the past 80 years, though the broadcasting of entertainment shows didn't begin until the 1940s. In 1950, 10 percent of American households owned a TV set. By 1954, this percentage had increased to 50 percent, and by 1960, 80 percent of American households owned a television. Since 1970, more than 98 percent of American households own a TV and currently 66 percent of households own three or more TVs. Television is on almost 7 hours per day in an average

American home. Children of all ages, from pre-school through adolescence, watch an average of 4 hours of TV per day (excluding time spent watching videos or playing computer games). A child spends more time watching TV than any other activity except sleeping, and by age 18 a child has spent more time in front of a TV than at school.

There have been numerous articles looking at the content of television and how commercials influence children's (and adults') desires for certain foods or material goods (e.g., toys), and how violence seen on television (even in cartoons) leads to more aggressive behavior in children (Fischer et al. 1991, Singer 1989, Zuckerman 1985). Concerns have been raised about who is teaching our children and the developmental appropriateness of what is presented on TV to toddlers, children, and even adolescents. Miles Everett, Ph.D., in his book, *How Television Poisons Children's Minds*, points out that we don't allow our child to talk to strangers, yet through television we allow strangers into the minds and souls of our children

everyday. These “strangers” (advertising agencies), whose motivations are often monetary, are creating the standards for what is “good” or developmentally appropriate for the developing brains of our children.

More importantly, several investigators (Healy 1990, Pearce 1992, Buzzell 1998, Winn 1985) have drawn attention to the actual act of viewing television as even more insidious and potentially damaging to the brain of the developing child than the actual content of what's on TV. So what are we doing to our children's potential by allowing them to watch television?

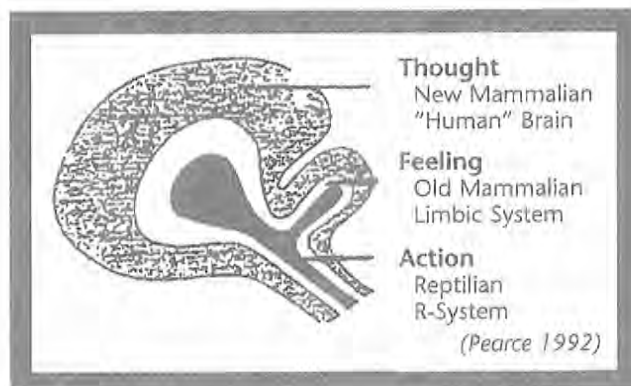
Question: How does a child's brain develop and how does a child learn?

Joseph Chilton Pearce in his book, *Evolution's End*, sees a child's potential as a seed that needs to be nurtured and nourished in order to grow properly. If the environment doesn't provide the necessary nurturing (and protections from overstimulation), then certain potentials and abilities cannot be realized. The infant is born with 10 billion nerve cells or neurons and spends the first three years of life adding billions of glial cells to support and nourish these



neurons (Everett 1992). These neurons are then capable of forming thousands of interconnections with each other via spider-like projections called dendrites and longer projections called axons that extend to other regions of the brain.

It is important to realize that a six-year-old's brain is $\frac{2}{3}$ the size of an adult's though it has 5–7 times more connections between neurons than does the brain of an 18-month-old or an adult (Pearce 1992). The brain of a 6–7 year old child appears to have a tremendous capacity for making thousands and thousands of dendrite connections among neurons. This potential for development ends around age 10–11 when the child loses 80 percent of his neural mass (Pearce 1992, Buzzell 1998). It appears that what we don't develop or use, we lose as a capacity. An enzyme is released within the brain and literally dissolves all poorly myelinated pathways (Pearce 1992, Buzzell 1998).



In the developing child, there is a progression of brain development from the most primitive core (action) brain, to the limbic (feeling) brain, and finally to the most advanced neocortex, or thought brain. There are critical periods for brain development when the stimulus must be present for the capacity to evolve (for example, language). There is also plasticity in brain development so that even adults can make new dendritic connections, but they have to work harder to establish pathways which were more easily made in childhood.

The core (action) brain is dedicated to our physical survival and manages reflexes, controls our motor movements, monitors body functions, and processes information from our senses. Along with the limbic (feeling) brain, it is involved in the "flight or fight" response that our body has to a dangerous or threatening situation. Humans react physically and emotionally before the thought brain has had time to process the information (Buzzell 1998).

Our limbic (feeling) brain wraps around our core (action) brain and processes emotional information (e.g., our likes/dislikes, love/hate polarities). Our feeling brain gives meaning and value to our memories and what we learn. It influences behavior based on emotional feelings and has an intimate relationship to our immune system and capacity to heal. It is involved in the forming of our intimate relationships and emotional bonds (e.g., between mother and child) and is connected with our dreaming, subtle intuitive experiences and the daydreams and fantasies that originate from the thought brain (Healy 1990). This feeling brain connects the more highly evolved thought brain to the more primitive action brain. Our lower action brain can be made to follow the will of our thought brain or our higher thought brain can be "locked into" the service of the lower action-feeling brain during an emergency that is real or imagined (Pearce 1992). The action and feeling brains can't distinguish real from imaginary sensory input. It is a survival advantage to react first and think later.

Finally our thought brain, the neocortex, represents our highest and newest form of intellect. It receives extensive input from the core (action) brain and limbic (feeling) brain and has the potential of separating itself and being the most objective part of the brain. It connects us to our higher self. However, the neocortex needs more time to process the images from the action and feeling brains. It is also the part of the brain that has the most potential for the future, and it is the place where our perceptions (experiences), recollections, feelings, and thinking skills all combine to shape our ideas and actions (Everett 1997). The thinking brain is "five times larger than the other brains combined and provides intellect, creative thinking, computing and, if developed, sympathy, empathy, compassion and love" (Pearce 1992).

There is a sequential development (a progressive myelination of nerve pathways) of the child's brain from the most primitive (action) brain to the limbic (feeling) brain and finally to the most highly evolved thought brain, or neocortex. Myelination involves covering the nerve axons and dendrites with a protective fatty-protein sheath. The more a pathway is used, the more myelin is added. The thicker the myelin sheath, the faster the nerve impulse or signal travels along the pathway. For these reasons, it is imperative that the growing child receives developmentally appropriate input from his/her environment in order to nourish each part of the brain's development and promote the myelination of new

nerve pathways. For example, young children who are in the process of forming their motor-sensory pathways and sense organs (the action brain) need repetitive and rhythmical experiences in movement.

Children also need experiences that stimulate and integrate their senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Their senses need to be protected from overstimulation, since young children are literally sponges. Children absorb all they see, hear, smell, taste and touch from their environment since they haven't developed the brain capacity to discriminate or filter out unpleasant or noxious sense experiences. The sense of touch is especially crucial since our culture and its hospital birth practices (including the high rate of C-sections) and, until recently, its discouragement of breast-feeding, deprive infants of critical multi-sensory experiences.

The stimulation and development of our sense organs is the precursor to the development of part of our lower brain, called the Reticular Activating System (RAS). The RAS is the gateway through which our sense impressions coordinate with each other and then travel to the higher thought brain. The RAS is the area of the brain that allows us to attend and focus our attention. Impairments in motor-sensory pathways lead to impairments in children's attention span and ability to concentrate (Buzzell 1998). Overstimulation and under-stimulation of our senses and poorly developed fine and gross motor movements may lead to impairments in attention.

By age 4, both the core (action) and limbic (feeling) brains are 80 percent myelinated. After age 6–7, the brain's attention is shifted to the neocortex (thought brain) with myelination beginning first on the right side or hemisphere and later joined by the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere is the more intuitive side of the brain, and it particularly responds to visual images. It grasps wholes, shapes and patterns and focuses on the big picture rather than the details. It directs drawing and painting and monitors melodies and harmonies of music. It is especially responsive to novelty and color and is the dominant hemisphere when watching TV (Healy, 1990, Everett 1997).

The left hemisphere dominates when a child reads, writes and speaks. It specializes in analytical and

sequential thinking and step-by-step logical reasoning. It analyzes the sound and meaning of language (e.g., phonic skills of matching sound to letters of the alphabet). It manages fine muscle skills and is concerned with order, routine and details. The ability to comprehend science, religion, math (especially geometry) and philosophy relies on abstract thinking characteristic of the left hemisphere.

Even though we emphasize which functions of learning are performed by which hemisphere, there is a crucial connection between the two hemispheres called the corpus callosum. It consists of a large bundle of nerve pathways that

form a bridge between the left and right hemispheres. It is one of the brain's latest-maturing parts. The left and right sides of the body learn to coordinate with each other by this pathway. Gross motor activities like jumping rope, climbing, running, and circle games and fine motor activities like form drawing, knitting, pottery, origami, woodworking,

embroidery, and bread-making are crucial to myelinating this pathway and lead to more flexible manipulation of ideas and a creative imagination. This pathway provides the interplay between analytic and intuitive thinking, and several neuropsychologists believe that poor development of this pathway affects the right and left hemispheres' effective communication with each other and may be a cause of attention and learning difficulties (Healy 1990).

We myelinate our pathways by using them. Movements of our bodies combine with experiences of our senses to build strong neural pathways and connections. For example, when a toddler listens to the sound of a ball bouncing on the floor, tastes and smells the ball or pushes, rolls and throws the ball, neurons are making dendritic connections with each other. When a toddler examines balls of varying sizes, shapes, weights and textures, a field of thousands (and possibly millions) of interconnecting neurons can be created around the "word" ball (Pearce 1992). Repetition, movement, and multisensory stimulation are the foundations of the language development and higher level thinking. The toddler's repetitive experiences with an object like a ball, create images or pictures in his/her brain. "The images of the core limbic brain form much of the elemental "food" for the remarkable and progressive abstract-



ing abilities of the associative high cortex [neocortex]" (Buzzell 1998).

Question: *What is so harmful to the mind about watching television?*

Watching television has been characterized as multi-leveled sensory deprivation that may be stunting the growth of our children's brains. Brain size has been shown to decrease 20–30 percent if a child is not touched, played with or talked to (Healy 1990). In addition, when young animals were placed in an enclosed area where they could only watch other animals play, their brain growth decreased in proportion to the time spent inactively watching (Healy 1990). Television really only presents information to two senses: hearing and sight. In addition, the poor quality of reproduced sound presented to our hearing and the flashing, colored, fluorescent over-stimulating images presented to our eyes cause problems in the development and proper function of these two critical sense organs (Poplawski 1998).

To begin with, a child's visual acuity and full binocular (three-dimensional) vision are not fully developed until 4 years of age, and the picture produced on the television screen is an unfocused (made up of dots of light), two-dimensional image that restricts our field of vision to the TV screen itself. Images on TV are produced by a cathode ray gun that shoots electrons at phosphors (fluorescent substances) on the TV screen. The phosphors glow and this artificially produced pulsed light projects directly into our eyes and beyond affecting the secretions of our neuroendocrine system (Mander 1978). The actual image produced by dots of light is fuzzy and unfocused, so that our eyes, and the eyes of our children, have to strain to make the image clear. Television, like any electrical appliance and like power lines, produces invisible waves of electromagnetism. Last June, a panel convened by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences decided there was enough evidence to consider these invisible waves (called electromagnetic fields or EMFs) as possible human carcinogens. In the article it was recommended that children sit at least 4 feet from TV and 18 inches from the computer screen (Gross 1999).

Our visual system, "the ability to search out, scan, focus, and identify whatever comes in the visual field" (Buzzell 1998), is impaired by watching TV. These visual skills are also the ones that need to be developed for effective reading. Children watching TV do not dilate their pupils, show little to no movement of their eyes (i.e., stare at the screen), and lack

the normal saccadic movements of the eyes (a jumping from one line of print to the next) that is critical for reading. The lack of eye movement when watching television is a problem because reading requires the eyes to continually move from left to right across the page. The weakening of eye muscles from lack of use can't help but negatively impact the ability and effort required to read. In addition, our ability to focus and pay attention relies on this visual system. Pupil dilation, tracking and following are all part of the reticular activating system. The RAS is the gateway to the right and left hemispheres. It determines what we pay attention to and is related to the child's ability to concentrate and focus. The RAS is not operating well when a child watches television. A poorly integrated lower brain can't properly access the higher brain.

In addition, the rapid-fire change of television images, which occurs every 5 to 6 seconds in many programs and 2 to 3 seconds in commercials (even less on MTV), does not give the higher thought brain a chance to even process the image. It reportedly takes the neocortex anywhere from 5 to 10 seconds to engage after a stimulus (Scheidler 1994). The neocortex is our higher brain, but also needs a greater processing time to become involved.

All the color combinations produced on the television screen result from the activation of only three types of phosphors: red, blue and green. The wavelengths of visible light produced by the activation of these phosphors represents an extremely limited spectrum compared to the wavelengths of light we receive when viewing objects outdoors in the full spectrum of reflected rays from the sun. Another problem with color television is that the color from it is almost exclusively processed by the right hemisphere so that left hemisphere functioning is diminished and the corpus callosum (the pathway of communication between the brain's hemispheres) is poorly utilized (i.e., poorly myelinated).

Reading a book, walking in nature, or having a conversation with another human being, where one takes the time to ponder and think, are far more educational than watching TV. The television—and computer games—are replacing these invaluable experiences of human conversations, storytelling, reading books, playing "pretend" (using internal images created by the child rather than the fixed external images copied from television), and exploring nature. Viewing television represents an endless, purposeless, physically unfulfilling activity for a child. Unlike eating until one is full or sleeping until one is no longer tired, watching television has no built-in

endpoint. It makes a child want more and more without ever being satisfied (Buzzell 1998).

Question: *Well, what about watching "Sesame Street?" Isn't it educational for our children? Doesn't it teach them how to read?*

Jane Healy, Ph.D., in her book, *Endangered Minds* wrote an entire chapter entitled "Sesame Street and the Death of Reading." In addition to the concerns already mentioned about watching television, Sesame Street and the majority of children's programming seem to put the left hemisphere and parts of the right hemisphere into slow waves of inactivity (alpha waves).

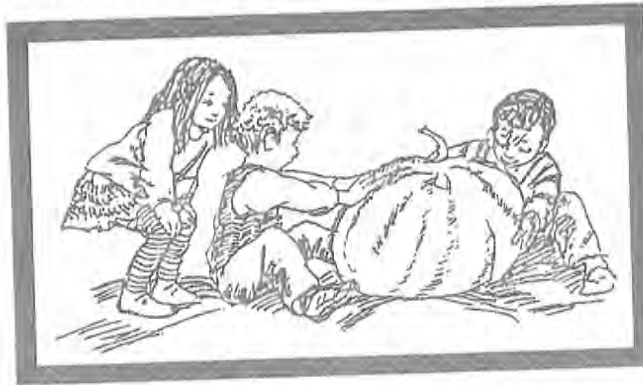
Television anesthetizes our higher brain functions and disrupts the balance and interaction between the left and right hemispheres.

Brain waves can be measured by an EEG, and variations in recorded brain waves correspond to different states of activity in the brain. In general, reading produces active, fast beta waves while television watching leads to an increase in slow alpha waves in the left hemisphere and at times even in the right hemisphere (Buzzell 1998). Once again, the left hemisphere is the critical center for reading, writing and speaking. It is the place where abstract symbols (e.g., the letters of the alphabet) are connected to sounds (phonic skills). The pulsating fluorescent light source of television may have something to do with promoting slow wave activity. Our brain "wakes up" to novelty and falls asleep or habituates to repetitive, "boring" stimuli. Advertising agencies and many children's shows (including Sesame Street) have had to counter children's tendency to habituate to television by increasing the frequency of new images, using flashing colors, closeups, and startling, often loud, sounds. These distracters get our attention momentarily but keep us operating in our lower core and limbic brains.

The lower brain can't discern between images that are real or created on TV, because discernment is the function of the neocortex. Therefore, when the TV presents sudden close-ups, flashing lights, etc., as stimuli, the core-limbic brain immediately goes into a "fight or flight" response with the release of hormones and chemicals throughout the body. Heart rate and blood pressure are increased and blood

flow to limb muscles is increased to prepare for this apparent emergency. Because this all happens in our body without the corresponding movement of our limbs, certain TV programs actually put us in a state of chronic stress or anxiety. Studies have shown atrophy of the left hemisphere in adults who are chronically stressed and only functioning from their core-limbic brain. Even as adults, what we don't use, we lose.

Finally, when our brain is simultaneously presented with visual (images on the screen) and auditory (sound) stimuli, we preferentially attend to the visual. A dramatic example of this phenomenon was illustrated when a group of young children (6-7 years old) were shown a video show where the sound track did not match the visual action, and the children, when questioned, did not appear to notice the discrepancy. Therefore, even in Sesame Street, studies have shown that children are not absorbing the content of the show (Healy 1990).



Maybe the most critical argument against watching television is that it affects the three characteristics that distinguish us as human beings. In the first 3 years of life, a child learns to walk, to talk and to think. Television keeps us sitting, leaves little room for meaningful conversations, and seriously impairs our ability to think.

Question: *What's wrong with using television as just entertainment? I enjoyed watching Disney films like "Snow White."*

Television seems to have a profound effect on our feeling life and therefore, one could argue, on our soul. As human beings, we become detached from the real world by watching television. We sit in a comfortable chair, in a warm room, with plenty to eat and watch a show about people who are homeless, cold and hungry. Our hearts go out to them, but we do nothing. One could argue that reading a book could promote the same sense of unreality without action. The phrases "turn off the TV" or "get your nose out of your book" and "go do something" have meaning. Nevertheless, while reading a book (that doesn't have a lot of pictures) the child's mind creates its own pictures and has time to think

about them. These thoughts could actually lead to ideas that inspire a child or adult to action. TV does not give time for this higher level of thinking that inspires deeds.

Television projects images that go directly into our emotional brain. It is said that the words we hear go into knowledge while the images we see go into our soul. Pictures that elicit emotion are processed by the limbic system and the right hemisphere of the neocortex. If no time is given to think about these emotional pictures, then the left hemisphere is not involved. Once again, watching television often eliminates the part of our brain that can make sense of, analyze and rationalize what we are seeing.

We don't forget what we see. The limbic brain is connected to our memory, and the pictures we see on TV are remembered—either consciously, unconsciously or subconsciously. For example, it is almost impossible to create your own pictures of Snow White from reading a story if you have seen the movie. It is also true that often one is disappointed when one sees a movie after reading the book. Our imagination is so much richer than what can be shown on a screen.

The problem with television is that children get used to not using their imaginative thinking at all, and they don't exercise that part of the brain (the neocortex) that creates the pictures. Children are not reading enough, and we aren't reading or telling them enough stories to help their minds create pictures. Creating pictures is not just entertaining, but the foundation of our dreams and higher thoughts (intuitions, inspirations and imaginations). We dream, think and imagine possibilities of the future in pictures.

Finally, the heart is now seen as an organ of perception that can respond to a stimulus and release a hormone-like substance that influences brain activity. This phenomenon is referred to as our heart intelligence (Pearce 1992). Interacting with human beings is essential for the development of this intelligence. When we stand face to face and look into another person's eyes, we meet soul to soul and we get a sense of who they really are (Soesman). We get a sense of whether they mean what they say—in other words, whether they are enthusiastic and passionate about their subject. We experience their non-verbal language such as how they move, the tone of their voice, and whether their gaze shifts around when they talk. This is how we learn to discern consistency between verbal and non-verbal cues and, therefore, truth.

Television can't give us this intelligence of the heart. It can shock our emotions, and we can cry, laugh or get angry, but these emotions are just reactions. When human beings speak on TV, children are often doing homework, playing games, and talking to friends while watching TV. These activities help save their visual system from the effects of TV, but the underlying message is that you don't need to listen when another person speaks or comfort anyone if you hear crying. If the heart, like the brain and probably the rest of our body, gives off electromagnetic waves (Pearce 1992, Tiller 1999), then there is a form of subtle energy that only can be experienced between human beings by relating to each other in the same physical space. This subtle energy can't be experienced by watching human beings on television. Just as we must use all our senses to construct higher level thoughts or pictures of an object, empathy and love for others does not develop from seeing human beings as objects on TV, but by actively relating, face to face, with each other.

Question: *What can we do to help our children's brains develop?*

1. *Keep the television turned off as much as possible.*

One author recommended avoiding television as much as possible for the first 12 years of your child's life and then encouraging your child to always read the book first before seeing the movie. It helps to cover the TV with a cloth or store it away in a closed cabinet or closet. Out of sight really helps the child keep the TV out of mind (Large 1997). Remember that what we do serves as a role model for our children. We can't really ask our children to stop watching TV if we keep doing it—that will eventually lead to power struggles.

When the television is on, then try to neutralize its damage. Select the programs carefully and watch TV with your child so you can talk about what you see. Keep a light on when the TV is going since that will minimize the effects of the reduced field of vision and provide a different light source for the eyes. Try to sit at least 4 feet from the television and 18 inches from the computer screen. Plan to go outside (to the park, woods, or beach) after viewing television.

2. *Read a lot of books to your children (especially ones without lots of pictures) and tell your children lots of stories.* Children love to hear stories about our lives when we were little or you can make them up. Bedtime and riding in the car

provide good opportunities for telling stories. Telling our children stories helps to stimulate their internal picture making capabilities.

3. *Nature! Nature! Nature!* Nature is the greatest teacher of patience, delayed gratification, reverence, awe and observation. The colors are spectacular and all the senses are stimulated. Many children today think being out in nature is boring, because they are so used to the fast-paced, action-packed images from TV (Poplawski 1998). We only truly learn when all our senses are involved, and when the information is presented to us in such a way that our higher brain can absorb it. Nature is reality while television is a pseudo-reality.
4. *Pay close attention to your senses and those of your child.* Our environment is noisy and overstimulating to the sense organs. What a child sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches is extremely important to his or her development. We need to surround our children with what is beautiful, what is good, and what is true. How a child experiences the world has a tremendous influence on how the child perceives the world as a teenager and adult.
5. *Have children use their hands, feet and whole body performing purposeful activities.* All the outdoor activities of running, jumping, climbing, and playing jump rope help develop our children's gross motor skills and myelinate pathways in the higher brain.

Performing household chores, cooking, baking bread, knitting, woodworking, origami, string games, finger games, circle games, painting, drawing, and coloring help develop fine motor skills and also myelinate pathways in the higher brain.

Finally, the future of our children and our society is in the protection and development of our children's minds, hearts and limbs. What we are aiming for in the thoughts of our children is best summarized in this fine verse from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

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TELEVISION AND THE CHILD UNDER SIX *

Dorothy H. Cohen

The plasticity of the human species has been its outstanding characteristic, giving humankind its capacity both to adapt to an existing environment and to create environments to suit developing needs. With the intense, dramatic and seemingly endless creations of new, man-made environments since the end of World War II, thinkers like Rene DuBois and Jerome Bruner, among others, have raised the question of whether the species is indeed endlessly adaptable (or whether it is the environment that is now altering human beings).

The question has special relevance to the development of the young, who are particularly vulnerable in any species. Although biological patterns follow certain directions according to genetic endowment both for the species and for individuals, such endowment takes form and shape only in interaction with environmental elements, and when used. Thus there is no "unfolding" without environmental support; similarly, the absence of environmental support (or its inadequacy), leads to no growth, or poor growth at best.

Thus the question whether dramatic changes in the environment can affect development is not an unreasonable question when applied to young children. Nor is the direction of that question toward the effect of television as a major environmental element in the lives of children an argument against other factors of equal importance, so much as a focus on one important aspect of environmental change and influence.

Long before the advent of any organized study of children, apparent agreement emerged across the centuries from literature, philosophy and sermons admonishing parents as to the nature of young children's behavior. Whether this behavior was subject to positive or negative appraisal, young children were always observed to be endlessly active, endlessly curious, and endlessly absorbed in non-adult kinds of interest. In the last century, carefully delineated long and short range studies of infants, toddlers, and young children have confirmed the activity and curiosity that spring forth without teaching. This more sophisticated knowledge blueprints such activity as a force for growth and life that impels the young organism to participate in activities that support its development. For example, at the basic survival level there is the cry of hunger,

*in: Television Awareness Training
The Viewer's Guide
for Family and Community
edited by Ben Logan and Kate Moody
A Media Action Research Center Publication, New York, N.Y. 1979.

Editor's Note: Dorothy Cohen died as this book was in press. Her article, commissioned in the late winter, is one of her last pieces of completed writing.

The late Dr. Dorothy H. Cohen was a member of the senior faculty, Graduate Programs, Bank Street College of Education. She wrote The Learning Child, Kindergarten and Early Schooling as well as other books and articles.

the demand for relief from pain and the appeals for loving. At a later level, motor patterns are learned simultaneously with discoveries about soft and hard, wet and dry, hot and cold, under and over, two hands or one, push or pull, shapes, smells, tastes.

SENSORY LEARNING

All during early childhood there is sensory outreach for feedback which results in a construction of reality which grows out of an individual's action and experience. The insatiable search for feedback around which to construct an image of the world (which must in time share some agreement with others) has, until our era, encountered clearly human and clearly non-human environments which young children had to disentangle. Never before was that task confused by long hours of contact with a nonhuman environment that simulates humanness as it does in our time. And herein lies the problem of television and the young child.

Piaget¹ has uncovered for us much we may have forgotten about our own early experiences, but which takes on a *deja vu* quality when we read his work. He describes how the young child endows all things with life - "animism" - and interprets all things as made by people and for the express purpose of serving people - "artificialism." From the psychoanalytic backlog of experience we learn of the difficulty young children have separating fantasy from reality, a not too dissimilar finding on the emotional level from Piaget's on the cognitive.

The inevitability of early childhood activity, curiosity, animism, artificialism, confusion between fantasy and reality and the need for interaction are all part of a stage of development. Resolution of the confusions and conflicts incurred in the processes indicated are tied in with language development as well as with physical, social and intellectual growth.

Basic to the young child's functioning is the egocentrism that sees the world and its events as revolving around the child himself. "It's raining outside," says the three-year-old, "because I am thirsty." Egocentric views of the world do not disappear lightly or easily. But in early childhood, largely through children's contact with each other, and especially through their play with each other, they learn gradually that there is another view than their subjective one. It is this experience with people, for which there is no verbal or vicarious substitute that works, that stretches a child's mind toward larger horizons. Piaget insists that it is interaction with others in early childhood that leads to the more objective thinking associated with cognitive maturity.

The egocentric child learns a great deal more, however, than a base for objective thinking. From the social-emotional perspective, Erikson² speaks of autonomy and initiative as emerging characteristics of personality in early childhood. By autonomy, Erikson means the internal sense of "I am the captain of my ship", a feeling the toddler may somewhat arrogantly misinterpret as "I am the captain of the whole world", but which for the preschool period and ever afterwards is the basis for independent, self-propelled behavior. As the child comes closer to four, five and six, the urge to undertake projects of independent character becomes part of his/her functioning. Children develop initiative, a type of functioning which demands sufficient independence from parental or other adult direction to let imagination and originality play their part in the child's actions and consequence learning. To many an adult this is a period of mischief, but to the children themselves their activity springs from innocence tied to an experimental urge that will not be denied.

PLAY

Other important developments also take place during early childhood. One of these, which seems to emerge quite spontaneously across cultures, is the children's capacity to involve themselves in activity which is symbolic in nature, i.e. play. Apparently, unless tied to work too early, all young children play; a portion of their play includes symbolic activity.

A look at the biological underpinnings for the importance of play in childhood reveals a growing consensus among biologists that play among young primates which include monkeys, apes, and humans, is preparation for adult life. It is Harlow's³ contention, for example, that play provides the behavioral mechanisms by which activities for adult functioning can be imitated and perfected. In fact, Harlow's well-known studies of monkeys led him to conclude that "no play makes for a socially very disturbed monkey."

The behavioral mechanisms that Harlow refers to include, among human children, the capacity for symbolization. This capacity, given the opportunity, develops in an orderly course. A recent study of play by Virginia Stern⁴ of Bank Street College, measured this trend among children aged three to five. As though in pursuit of an instinctual impetus to fulfill a biological inheritance, the increase from solitary to group play went from 47% to 71% during ages three, four and five.

It is, therefore, probably not happenstance that the capacity for symbolization, which is unique in its complex form among human beings - and without which we could not learn to read and handle numbers - is both a first requisite capacity for play, and increases as an important characteristic and ability during play. It is worth repeating here a long-ago comment by Susan Isaacs that the more complex the animal along the evolutionary scale, the longer is the childhood and the longer its period of play. To this observation, as we go on to consider the phenomenon of television, we might add a well-known comment by Piaget:

It appears that many educators, believing themselves to be applying my psychological principles, limit themselves to showing the objects without having the children manipulate them, or, worse still, simply present audio-visual representations of objects (pictures, films, and so on) in the erroneous belief that the mere fact of perceiving the objects and their transformations will be equivalent to direct action of the learner in the experience. The latter is a grave error, since action is only instructive when it involves the spontaneous participation of the child himself, with all the tentative gropings and apparent waste of time that such involvement implies. It is absolutely necessary that learners have at their disposal concrete material experiences (and not merely pictures) and that they form their own hypotheses and verify them (or not verify them) themselves through their own active manipulations. The observed activities of others, including those of the teachers, are not formative of new organizations in the child.⁵

Language is an early symbolic activity, learned in babyhood as a child listens to and interacts with the adults around. Children understand language before they can speak - they absorb syntax long before they can explain it. Yet this apparently inherent trait among humans will not develop without interaction with other humans. Listening only, without response, does not cause fully developed speech to follow. Being listened to, as one uses speech, is an equally important part of the process of learning to use language. Using it in interaction with others is thus highly significant.

PERCEPTION

A last major learning that occurs in early childhood is the development of perception - the ability to draw meaning out of the environment. This calls for the ability to see differences and similarities, to make comparisons, to recognize what will not change and what is subject to change. What is more, a child also learns to recognize stability within change, so that, for example, a parent remains a parent whether in pajamas or evening dress, whether at work or at home.

The sum total of the many concrete and direct sensory experiences normally encountered by a healthy young child over the years from infancy to five or six, leads to a sense of rootedness in the world of the human and non-human. The child gains strength out of awareness of this reality and this, together with the sense of inner rootedness, gives him/her impetus to go on to further learning. More of what is learned will in time be less dependent on the sensory, will be abstract as well as concrete, as the children grow older.

In what ways may the present heavy involvement of young children with the television set interfere with the growth and development indicated? A look at a fairly typical course of experience with television sets the stage for such analysis.

Children's encounters with television may start in infancy when the set is on as a steady accompaniment to the adult's activities around the house. At six months, a child may be sitting next to a parent or housekeeper who is taking a well-earned rest watching a program. The child's eyes will be drawn to the light and remain fixed on it, a practice that Dr. Ed Gording, psychometrist, believes will cause the baby to cease to use its eyes for properly searching out stimuli in a variety of directions. By 18 months, children go to the knob in imitation of their parents, and by 2½ large numbers are "hooked" into programs. By age four, television content is a major source of social discussion at nursery school, and nursery and kindergarten teachers at conferences and meetings speak with concern of the negative effect of television on children's play.

It must be granted that before the advent of television, there were many children whose lives were not optimal and whose development reflected inadequate environmental support. Unfortunately, the effect of television on normal development is likely to be felt by many more children, since hardly a home is without a set and television takes up most young children's time to an average of 23-25 hours per week. This reflects a marked increase since a study in 1959 showed that young children who had sets watched for three-fourths hour a day. The amount of time spent viewing is obviously an important variable in how effective television actually can be on development. Variables too are the more difficult-to-access vulnerability of some children and the protective ability of others to turn away. But because the amount of time for most children is a given, and because many experienced teachers of young children as well as pediatricians, hospital nurses, and psychologists are agreed that some new kinds of behavior are emerging in children, it is possible to look at what television demands of children, or imposes upon them, and perhaps accounts for such behavior.

The active child learns to be unnaturally passive. The talking child learns to listen and expects not to have someone to whom to respond. (Even programs that call for response cannot have interaction.)

The child struggling to assess the relative meanings of animate and inanimate, of man-made and natural, of fantasy and reality, is not only not aided in the struggle, but further confused or convinced that imagery is reality. What happens

to the still existent "old" reality in the child's mind? What is the basis for "the construction of reality" of which Piaget speaks, if imagery replaces concrete reality?

As children take on the formulas of programs for their source of play, what happens to their own autonomy and initiative; to imagination and originality?

As they are inundated with too much of some sensory modes (sound and sight) and lose totally on the screen the other sensory modes of touch, smell and taste, what happens to the clarification of the world by a sensory-guided child?

As the limited, yet exaggerated world of the television screen with its speed of images and strength of sound becomes an indigenous part of a young child's world, the capacity for perceptual development through feedback of the senses becomes questionable, at the least.

Investment of self in exploration and experimentation so that one can arrive at conclusions, and one can learn to reason as a result of comparison and awareness of evidence, are not usually considered properties of early childhood growth. Yet they are, and are known to be such to any careful observer. Television interferes with the child's search for reality through his/her own efforts, and offers instead a hodge-podge of noise and fast, incomprehensible but seductive images that may well be creating the new type of child seen by many teachers - the child at nursery school who is frenetic, runs around playing out a script with peers who also know the script, which is limited to jumping off heights, shooting, running, playing dead, and jumping up to climb heights again. It is play which gets nowhere. Many of these children will not get interested in nursery school materials, and unless running around aimlessly, have "nothing to do."

Too many children in first grade will not exert effort to learn; expect to be entertained but not to be a participant and exert effort: have real difficulties of perception; are bored easily because they have few inner resources on which to draw; have sophisticated "knowledge" they do not understand; and ignorance of the simplest realities of the natural world.

Television has become a way of life, no longer a source of entertainment. As a way of life, it permeates every phase of our lives. Do young children need protection from this new environment? The contradictions between their normal needs and the way television functions, would certainly seem to suggest that it is wisest to come to the screen and its images quite a bit later than children now do.

Basic growth into thinking, feeling and active people can only occur out of interaction with the human and non-human environment, not by passive observation of even the most instructive imagery. To deny this right to children is to court the danger that, like so many already seen, they will neither think, feel, nor act on the basis of both. The outer limits of plasticity of human adaptation may be stretched too far by the loss to young children of the kind of experience that start them off well able to adapt even to television and its imagery when they are older.

The Media-Free Family

*One morning over breakfast,
we decided to drop off at Goodwill
that day all the radios we owned.
And so we did it.*

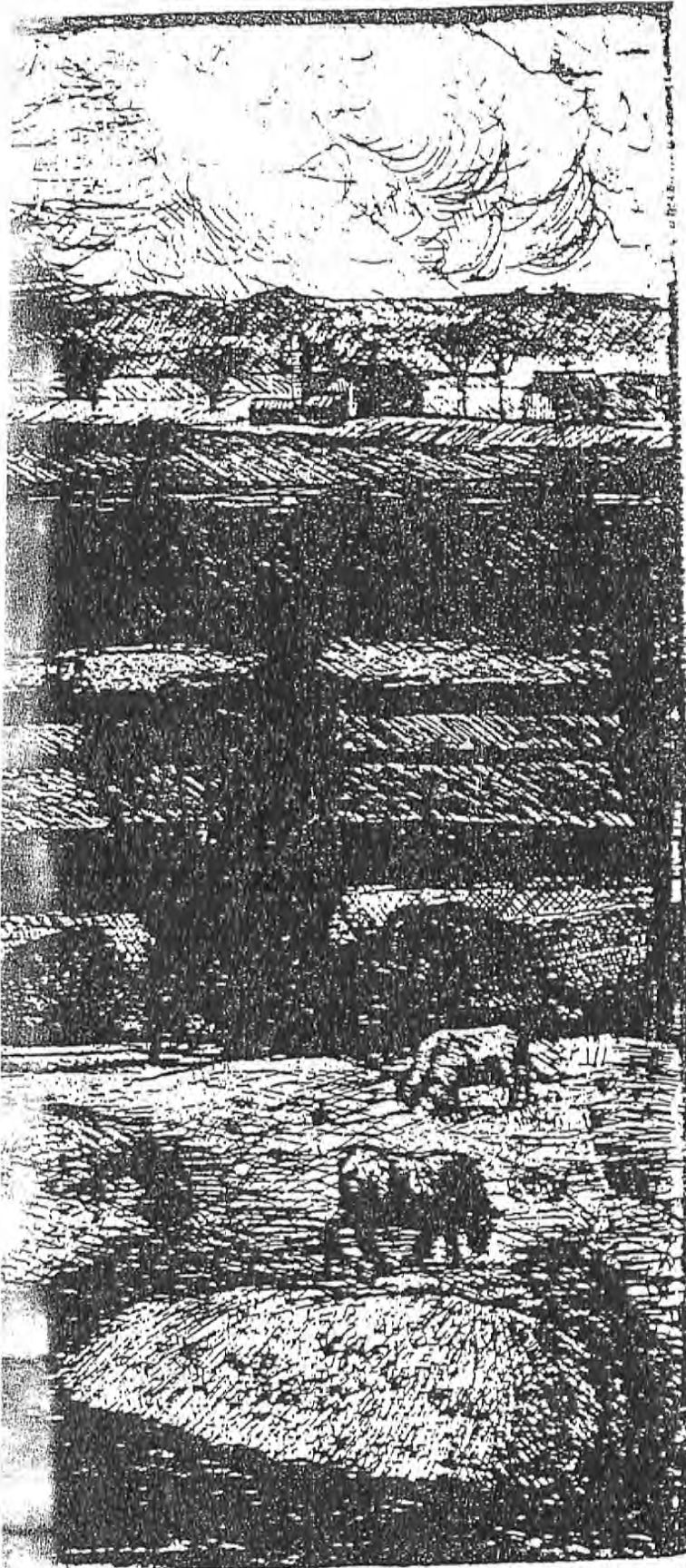
Mary Ann Lieser

My husband and I have lived without television for a long time--the four years of our marriage plus at least five prior years, separately, for each of us. It has been more recently that we've given up radio as well. For over a year now we've lived without voices in our home save those of the real, live people who live here or those of visiting friends.

We talked about it for a long time. I believed ridding our home of radio would be a positive move for us, individually and as a family. And I also resisted the idea. I listened to several hours of public radio news broadcasting morning and evening, and I was reluctant to give that up. "Later," I said. It was autumn of an election year and I wanted to listen to the presidential candidates debate. We put it off time and again. Then one morning over breakfast we decided to drop off at Goodwill that day all the radios we owned. And so we did it.

I felt light and free, as I always do when I give away things I no longer need, clearing out a little more space in my life and my home. I also felt as if I were at sea. How would I know what was going on in the world? How would I keep up with things and stay connected? Those questions--of such importance to me then--seem almost silly now, but it's been a long journey to get from there to here.

A week passed before I stopped reaching for the radio in the kitchen each morning to listen to the news before I even started breakfast. The next thing I noticed was how oppressive silence can be. When our daughter was learning to talk, shortly before we gave our radios away, she would point at the radio that sat on our kitchen counter and say, "guy talking." When she noticed it was gone and pointed to the empty space it used to



"A Natural Resource"
Christopher Mealey
Etching

occupy, I told her, "no more guy talking. It's just us talking now," and I wondered how we would fill up all that space of silence that used to be filled with voices from the airwaves.

With nothing to fill the silence but my own voice, I began singing. I had been singing to my almost two-year-old daughter since her birth, but only a song here or there. I could quickly run through all the songs I knew the words to, and then find myself struggling to remember some more. What were those ones we sang around the campfire in sixth grade? How did the second verse of "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" go? I sought out songbooks at our local library and relearned dozens of songs from my childhood, songs that I'd not sung in years, and it was fun. We've learned many new songs together, too, ones I'd never known before. Hymns and songs of praise, old folk tunes, lullabies, silly songs, sentimental ballads—our heritage in music.

I am not a good singer. My husband still winces sometimes when I switch keys in the middle of a melody, but he would be the first to say that my ability to carry a tune has improved a hundredfold. Best of all, I discovered that I love to sing. I sing unselfconsciously all day long and so does my now three-year-old daughter; "Clementine" as we do the breakfast dishes, "Greensleeves" to the baby as I rock him, "Riding in the Buggy Miss Mary Jane" as we sweep, "Down in the Valley" as we tidy up the livingroom, "Old Dan Tucker" as I hang the wash out on the line, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" as we set off on a walk.

Human voice fills our house, and is richer than any electronically-generated sound could be. My children, now ages one and three, live in a world that is full of music, and they have learned by example that singing is something real people can do for the pure joy of it, not as something we pay entertainers to do for us. And they have learned that it is definitely not something you have to be very good at to feel worthy of doing.

Everyone is worthy of the joy that can come with a spontaneous song, but many people who have electronically-generated voices as a constant presence with which to compare themselves, believe they should possess perfect pitch and a backup orchestra to be worthy of singing. We don't com-

pare ourselves to anything, except maybe the silence, and to us our voices are more beautiful than anything that ever came into our home over the airwaves.

We don't sing or talk all the time, though. The silence that I was always compelled to fill up has become beautiful

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to me as well. I've become accustomed to being quiet with my own thoughts, and now—especially when I do chores such as washing the dishes, I can be centered and meditative in a way I never could be when I either was listening to talk radio or had voices from it still echoing in my head. This calm and centered way of being in my daily life fits better with the slower pace toward which my family is striving.

Radio has become like so many other things we've given up, or made a conscious decision to live without, from television to a clothes dryer. Our lives become much richer, in more ways than we could have imagined when we were living with what we have since given up, whether it be a convenience, a luxury, or a labor-saving device.

Although I don't have the freedom to listen that I had with a radio—freedom to hear over a dozen stations at any hour of the day or night—I have a different and more fulfilling freedom: freedom from having radio voices and noises in my house and in my head. And of course I'm free of the compulsion to turn the radio on to alter my mood or distract myself from my own

thoughts. Often when I had a radio I would feel compelled to listen to the news even when I didn't really want to, just to make sure I wasn't missing anything. Now that the choice is removed, I have much more freedom to choose when I want to learn about the news of the day.

And what about "missing" things? How do I keep up and stay connected? How do I know what's going on in the world? Now that I've lived this way for over a year, I can safely conclude that those questions that were of such concern to me really aren't issues at all. The news—developments in world or local events—is always there, and I often have a better and deeper understanding of such events when I can spend concentrated and focused time once a week reading about them. I can scan reading material and decide how much time I want to spend reading about any given topic. I have the power to decide, rather than letting National Public Radio choose how much of my mental time will be devoted to Bosnia and how much to Somalia.

Not having a radio actually means I'm better informed about world and local events. Not having a radio means I can better focus my attention on my children playing in the room while I make supper; thus I'm better attuned to their needs and moods. Not having a radio means I have more control over what fills my mind, and it means I'm more comfortable with and accepting of silence. Not having a radio means I've learned more about silence, about the many kinds and textures of quietness that can fill a house. Ultimately, not having a radio means for me that I am more fully human, more involved in forming my own mental landscape and in relating to the other people in my life.

And I can't help but believe that my children are growing up with a much richer childhood for not having electronic media in our home. They too are learning about the textures of quietness. And of course they are doing what children are best at: learning to fill up the silence in their own way. Right now my daughter is making up her own verses to "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush" and singing them to her doll, and my son, though he doesn't yet talk, is babbling the tune to "Skip to My Lou" on key.

Mary Ann is co-founder of the Center for Plain Living and managing editor for Plain Magazine

THE CINCINNATI
WALDORF SCHOOL
745 Derby Ave.
Cincinnati, OH 45232

Advice on Television

by Roald Dahl

The most important thing we've learned,
So far as children are concerned,
Is never, NEVER, NEVER, let
Them near your television set—
Or better still, just don't install
The idiotic thing at all.
In almost every house I've been,
We've watched them gaping at the screen.
They loll and slop and lounge about,
And stare until their eyes pop out.
(Last week in someone's place we saw
A dozen eyeballs on the floor.)
They sit and stare and stare and sit
Until they're hypnotized by it,
Until they're absolutely drunk
With all that shocking ghastly junk.
Oh yes, we know it keeps them still,
They don't climb out the window sill,
They never fight or kick or punch,
They leave you free to cook the lunch
And wash the dishes in the sink—
But did you ever stop to think,
To wonder just exactly what
This does to your beloved tot?
IT ROTTS THE SENSES IN THE HEAD!
IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!
IT CLOGS AND CLUTTERS UP THE MIND!
IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND!
HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND
A FANTASY, A FAIRYLAND!

HIS BRAIN BECOMES SOFT AS CHEESE!
HIS POWERS OF THINKING RUST AND FREEZE!
HE CANNOT THINK—HE ONLY SEES!
"Alright!" you'll cry, "Alright!"
you'll say,
"But if we take the set away,
What shall we do to entertain
Our darling children! Please explain!"
We'll answer this by asking you,
"What used these darling ones to do?
How used they keep themselves contented
Before this monster was invented?"
Have you forgotten? Don't you know?
We'll say it very loud and slow:
THEY...USED...TO...READ!
They'd **READ** and **READ**,
AND READ and **READ**, and then proceed
To **READ**, some more. Great Scott! Gadzooks!
One half their lives was reading books!
The nursery shelves held books galore!
Books cluttered up the nursery floor!
And in the bedroom, by the bed
More books were waiting to be read!
Such wondrous, fine fantastic tales
Of dragons, gypsies, queens, and whales
And treasure isles, and distant

shores
Where smugglers rowed with muffled oars,
And pirates wearing purple pants,
And sailing ships and elephants,
And cannibals crouching round the pot,
Stirring away at something hot...
Oh, books, what books they used to know,
Those children living long ago!
So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall.
Then fill the shelves with lots of books,
Ignoring all the dirty looks,
The screams and yells, the bites and kicks,
And children hitting you with sticks—
Fear not, because we promise you
That, in about a week or two
Of having nothing else to do,
They'll now begin to feel the need
Of having something good to read.
And once they start—oh boy, oh boy!
You watch the slowly growing joy
That fills their hearts,
They'll grow so keen
They'll wonder what they'd ever seen
In that ridiculous machine,
That nauseating, foul, unclean,
Repulsive television screen!
And later, each and every kid
Will love you more for what you did.

The Difference Between Auditory and Visual Images

Images a child hears actively engage his own imaginative or picture-making processes. A good storyteller knows that she is weaving a cloak of magic around the listeners as she describes the characters and the unfolding action. Just two days ago I overheard my eleven-year-old say to her friend, "I like to read books without pictures best, because then I can picture them any way I want to." Perhaps this is one of the reasons why movie renditions of books we have read are never quite as satisfying as the originals.

Images we make of things we have read or heard are easy to transform in our imaginations or daydreams because we have already given them life by creating them with our mind's eye. Images we see, however, have a tremendous sticking power and are very difficult to change because they come to us already completed. Who can think of the Seven Dwarves without seeing Happy, Sleepy, Doc and the entire retinue as Disney portrayed them? I was surprised when my two older children talked to each other about cartoons they had seen five years earlier, before we had gotten rid of the television set. But then I realized that I could still call up images from television programs seen when I was a child. Television and movies don't have as strong an effect on adults as they do on children. For me, seeing *E.T.* was sort of like eating cotton candy—it didn't make too deep an impression on me. So I was amazed when a year later my children still remembered Elliot's brother's name! Not only do images from television and the movies make a deep impression on the young child, who is all sense organ, but their power means that these images will be repeated in play as the child tries to digest and assimilate what he has taken in. Even an older child (and many an adult!) will continually talk about a movie right after having seen it as he attempts to digest it.

Because the images from television and the movies are so powerful and change so quickly, children often do not understand the story line, and are left imitating the rapid movements and the elements that make the strongest impressions: chasing, shooting, crashing and so on. Also, because children are kept passive while watching television, they have all the more need to race about when they are finished. Young children's natural state is movement.

Images from television always reminded me of those automatic reflex responses that bypass the brain, like pulling back your finger from a hot stove before realizing what has happened. In a similar way, images from television and the movies seem to bypass the child himself and come out again in frenzied movement, without the child having transformed them into his own unfolding story. As a preschool and kindergarten teacher, I observed a dramatic difference in the quality of the play of children who did not watch television. Their inside play was much more imaginative and more likely to have a story line, compared to the running around and catching one another that was dominant with the other children. When a child arrived at preschool with a Batman T-shirt, the play immediately turned into chasing one another. I then asked the parents not to send their children in clothing with insignias so their imaginative play could find a little space in which to grow and flower.

Sometimes parents are afraid that if they don't let their children watch television they will be seen as social misfits. On the contrary, they are often welcomed (as I enjoyed my Mexican friend's daughter who brought such a creative element into my children's play). After being involved with Waldorf education for a couple of years, a neighbor said to me, "We love to have Faith come over. She's so creative. Last time she came over. . . ." Needless to say, I was pleased.

Children who do not watch television will still play games with their friends involving TV or movie characters, whose nature they can easily pick up from the plastic figures. But when everyone was playing characters from *Star Wars*, for example, the internal process of play was very different in the child who had not seen the film. The imagination was more active and original in the child who was not relating to the fixed visual images from the screen.

From: You Are Your Child's First Teacher by Rahima Baldwin pp. 170-17

THE CINCINNATI
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Some Thoughts On Living Without TV . . . This Week and Beyond . . .

Maryjo Miller, former CWS Kindergarten teacher and mother of two teenage boys, says that her family's "Almost-No-TV" policy works for them for several reasons: They keep their TV in the (windowless) basement, they have a large collection of recorded music and instruments, they go to the library regularly, and most evenings they play games like cards, tangrams, or board games. "This has nurtured the family, and calmed the boys for dreaming, all these years. TV would rob us of all this!"

Valerie Broermann, Nursery teacher, offers these suggestions:

OUTDOORS— Let your child play outside in all types of weather. Have a sandpile, a place to dig dirt, and an occasional mud hole, sticks and/or logs and maybe a cart to lug them back and forth to places you designate, and gardening space just for kids, and a bird-feeding place—let your child feed the birds daily— and look for pill bugs, slugs, etc., under the logs and sticks and such.

INDOORS— Make up "Please Cards" with an activity on each one, coded for the amount of time needed to do them. For example, things that take a moment: give me a horse ride, sing me a song, or tell me about when I was a baby; things that take a little while: let me comb your hair, play a game with me, show me something special of yours; things that take more time: let's use tools together, help me sew something, take me to the zoo. When you want to treat your child, let him/her pick a card-activity to do together.

Keep it simple, simple, simple, then your child won't expect more and more and more!

Let your child be bored, or even whine, or ask you to do something but Stand Firm and know that out of their "boredom" comes more play and learning and true creativity born from their own self! What a feat and what a treat for both you and your child!

Tickey Harris, CWS parent, makes these "Confessions of a TV Fan":

Let me make it absolutely clear that I, unlike some people, do not favor a "TV Free America". I like watching television. I majored in political communications, and one of my favorite college classes was "Political Messages in Product Advertising". (I couldn't believe that I got credit for watching and discussing TV commercials!) I *like* television. I even own (and play) "Television's Greatest Theme Songs" (Volumes 1 and 2!) Then why do I happily participate in National TV-Turn Off Week? First, because I understand television, second, because it's good for me and finally, because it's great for my family.

Studying television in college and having friends who work "in the industry" help me keep it all in perspective. Like most of you, I watch news and information programs with a critical eye, but I'm also skeptical while watching "entertainment" programming. Not only because their main objective is to keep me in place until the next commercial rolls along, but because the programs themselves sell and perpetuate a world view that encourages passive acceptance of the status quo. Turning off the tube gives me a week free of blatant commercialism and covert political propaganda.

I get a lot more done during that week than usual. Instead of watching TV each night, I try to accomplish some specific task. One or two nights I might catch up on paper work and chores. One or two other nights are reserved for fun tasks like recording music or organizing baseball cards. I make sure to set aside time to practice karate and read. And as an added bonus, I get to bed before midnight!

I'm a better father and a better husband that week too. Even though the TV is usually off until the kids are in bed, keeping it off really improves the time we spend together. Being more productive and well-rested has a ripple effect. I can relax and enjoy playing without work gnawing at the back of my mind. I'm more patient when dealing with Janela and Malcolm; which reduces stress on everyone. With fewer meltdowns and explosions we have a lot more fun. And a less stressful day means a less stressful bedtime. Jodi's in favor of almost anything that improves my time with the kids, but she also benefits. Instead of watching TV, we read (sometimes to each other), we talk, we play games, we listen to music, and once she even taught me to knit. Without the television on it's a lot easier to remember why we fell in love in the first place.

What else can I say to convince you to join us in TV Turn-Off Week? How about: "Try it; you'll like it!" or "Just Do It!" or "It's Grrrrrrreat!" Well, that's all folks!

Surviving Without TV

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The time of day when the "Electronic Babysitter" seems to be busiest is the hour before dinner—parents and children are more tired and less relaxed, and a meal has to be prepared—so it's very tempting for parents to have the television occupy their children while they get dinner made. To help inspire solutions to this problem which are more beneficial to children and families, I surveyed a number of CWS families to see how they manage to prepare dinner, or get some other work done, without plopping their kids in front of TV, and here are some of their strategies:

Fill a sink with water. A child can play with cups and funnels, or boats and people, or "wash" dishes or vegetables, etc.

Play a game, like Simon Says, 20 Questions, or "Grab Bag"—Put something in a bag and your child feels it to guess what it is. Then send him around the house to do the same for you.

Have a low cabinet storing things that can only be played with then (and rotate them often), and sometimes have the children empty the contents into a box or laundry basket, and then they can crawl into the cabinet and play there.

Ask your child to present a puppet play for you in a corner or doorway. Or siblings can do this for each other.

Make dinner earlier in the day. It's easier when there's more time and children are fresher or napping.

Have child draw placemats, a picture to send to Grandma, or make gift-wrap. An older child can write a letter or read to you.

Have a toddler make a concoction: give her a pot with a little water, some food scraps, raisins, salt, etc.

Let children help prepare dinner: tear lettuce for salad, cut vegetables, set table, etc.

Set child up with playdough and kitchen implements. (Here's our favorite recipe in P&T; it has a nice texture, lasts forever, and children are much more interested in playing with it after experiencing the process.—Mix in pot: 2 c. flour, 1/2 c. salt, 4 Tbs cream of tartar. Add to pot: 2 c. water and 2 Tbs. oil. Cook and stir over medium heat 3-5 minutes. It will look like a globby mess, but soon it will form a ball in the center of the pot, and then turn it out and knead a bit.)

Send children outdoors to play.

Talking on the telephone while preparing dinner often invites whiny, demanding behavior from children.

A light snack, like juice popsicles or raw vegetables, can really improve a child's mood without ruining their appetite. A snack under the dining room table can be a spaceship meal, a doll's birthday party, a pretend picnic, etc. Outdoors it can be a picnic with the fairies, at the beach, or camping.

Begin imaginative play with your child. Set up a tea party, or restaurant, or library, or a little farm or zoo or construction site. . . Once the child is started, you can work with minimal need to participate.

Before making dinner, spend some focused time with your children, and they may be more tolerant of your need to focus on dinner afterward.

Pull out old photo albums for your child to look at.

Sing songs together. Tell stories, or take turns telling a story together. Talk with gradeschoolers about how their day at school was. Ask an older child to look at books with a younger one.

Interestingly, a number of people said this wasn't much of an issue in their house because their children rarely watched TV. They were quite in the habit of entertaining themselves when necessary.

101 MEDIA – FREE ACTIVITIES

for children, families, people of all ages

1. Visit the zoo.
2. Make a big indoor tent and sleep in it.
3. Wash the dog.
4. Turn cartwheels.
5. Build a fort.
6. Get out the family photos. Make an album.
7. Make a family tree.
8. Play stickball.
9. Play hopscotch.
10. Go on a scavenger hunt.
11. Play board games.
12. Write a story.
13. Make up a play with friends. Take it to a nursing home.
14. Build a kite. Fly it.
15. Go on a family excursion.
16. Go sledding. Make a snowman.
17. Make a collage out of pictures from old magazines.
18. Set up a lemonade stand on a hot day.
19. Shoot hoops with friends; play H.O.R.S.E.
20. Draw pictures of family members.
21. Get permission to make a backyard campfire.
22. Organize a game of Capture the Flag.
23. Make a miniature boat and float it in the water.
24. Write a letter to your grandparents.
25. Play freeze-tag.
26. Tell ghost stories.
27. Stand on your head.
28. Learn to play the guitar or another instrument.
29. Attend community concerts, listen to a local band.
30. Organize a community clean-up.
31. Visit the library.
32. Go ice skating or roller blading.
33. Daydream.
34. Paint a picture, a mural, a room.
35. Learn to use a compass.
36. Plant a tree or flowers.
37. Write to the President of your Congressman.
38. Learn the metric system.
39. Go swimming. Join a swim team.
40. Read a book. Read to someone else.
41. Plan a picnic or barbeque.
42. Bird watch; set out feeders.
43. Volunteer for a community organization.
44. Walk the dog.
45. Visit the mountains. Visit the city.
46. Write a letter to a friend or relative.
47. Bake cookies or bread. Make jam.
48. Plant a garden.
49. Read magazines, newspapers; swap them with friends.
50. Attend a religious service.
51. Become a tutor.
52. Join a choir.
53. Sift through your closets. Donate surplus items.
54. Start a journal.
55. Go to a museum.
56. Take a nature hike.
57. Play cards.
58. Start an exercise group that walks, runs, or bikes.
59. Sing.
60. Visit a local bookstore.
61. Make crafts to give as gifts.
62. Start writing a novel. Read Proust.
63. Watch the night sky.
64. Walk to work or school.
65. Start a bowling league.
66. Save money—cancel your cable.
67. Go fishing.
68. Run for political office.
69. Learn about a different culture.
70. Go for a bicycle ride.
71. Invite friends to a slide show.
72. Learn yoga.
73. Take photographs.
74. Learn sign-language.
75. Sit by a river.
76. Write a letter to your favorite author.
77. Cook dinner with friends or family.
78. Do yard work.
79. Think.
80. Play Frisbee.
81. Offer to baby-sit for new parents.
82. Make cards for the holidays.
83. Play chess, bridge or checkers.
84. Start a book club.
85. Go camping.
86. Go for a long walk.
87. Meditate.
88. Try out for a play.
89. Recycle.
90. Play charades.
91. Have a tea party.
92. Workout.
93. Take a long bath.
94. Have a conversation.
95. Simplify.
96. Smile.
97. Moonbathe.
98. Go dancing.
99. Climb a tree.
100. Watch the sunset; watch the sunrise.

101. Throw a party to celebrate a media-free life.