

TV Or No TV For Under Twos

By Elena Marouchos

It's late and you're already behind schedule after a rather long and frustrating day. All you want to do is make dinner, bath your toddler and lift your feet up for a while BUT she/he demands your attention. You engage for a few moments but when you leave a tantrum par excellence erupts because she /he 'demands' the TV be switched on... does this sound familiar? The reality is that many of us have succumbed to these moments and have seen TV and or DVDs as the saving grace for a precious weekend lie-in or to catch up with a few chores.

When confronted with this question from parents I had to examine my own beliefs and practices and think about how these fitted in with the RIE principles which are at the heart of my pedagogy. After much discussion, debate and reflection I have come to realise that it can be quite an emotive issue, especially since most of us watch a little TV on a daily basis. It's almost like a guilty pleasure at times. The reality is however, that if we are to make a sound decision for our toddlers, we need to get the facts; even though we may not be ready for or may not want to hear what the research tells us.

The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recommends no TV for children under two (2007, 2010). It seems that the heart of the research centres around the notions that:

- Our under two's may view TV as a confusing array of colors, images, and noises. The average TV scene lasts between five to eight seconds and therefore infants and toddlers don't have enough time to digest what's happening let alone understand the content.
- Television can be addictive and it seems that the more children watch the more they will want to and hence the daily battle ensues.
- Children who watch TV excessively often become passive and lose their natural creativity. They may therefore find it more difficult to occupy themselves and develop a preference to be engaged with rather than enjoy independent play which we have come to know is the primary way that infants and toddlers learn.

I know that the decision to TV or no TV is a hard one and that it takes a strong will and dedication to avoid the easy route provided by this 'free', undemanding but sometimes addictive babysitter.

Research also reminds that there may be consequences if not monitored such as:

- Children experience unparalleled physical, mental, and emotional growth in their early years. Time spent watching television is time taken away from activities that nurture growth and development and foster a healthy body and mind e.g. physical activities like climbing, exploring indoors and outdoors even if it is just simple things like the kitchen pot cupboard which gives them a great fine motor work out but could turn into a 'music' session or puzzle play when they try and fit and stack items together.
- Children who watch a lot of television during their early years are at risk for childhood obesity, poor social development, and aggressive behavior. They often have trouble adjusting to preschool or kindergarten. According to a study by Yale Family Television Research, teachers characterized children who watched excessive television

"I strongly recommend removing the television from the play area. Television not only robs children of initiative, but also affects their health. Childhood obesity is on the rise as video games and countless TV programs are molding a passive generation. Children, like adults, get accustomed to being entertained."

Magda Gerber

Your Self-Confident Baby pg 144



as less cooperative, less imaginative, less enthusiastic about learning, and less happy than those who watched little or no TV.

Yes, perhaps I have emphasized the negative aspects and unwittingly left out the positives, if any, but first and foremost I write this for the parents of children under two. However, I am also realistic and therefore acknowledge that we aren't going to hide our televisions away until our toddlers become young children.

My advice instead would be to hold off introducing television or even DVDs to your infants/toddlers as long as possible. Television is not a substitute for real-life interaction and independent play that we know is so important for their development. If as a family you decide to include TV and other multimedia options remember to choose programs that are developmentally appropriate for your child. For you, this means shows that are slow, boring, and probably somewhat goofy. But choose programs from your child's perspective, not your own.

- Invest in a collection of educational videos for your child so that you are not restricted by what is on at the time.
- At times watch along so that you can monitor their reactions to what they are seeing. Invite questions and discuss what you are watching so that you can gauge their un-

derstanding. Introduce overlooked or new concepts to broaden their perspective.

- Avoid keeping the TV on when no one is actively watching. What you consider as background noise will expose your toddler to inappropriate programs.
- At times why not try audio storybooks from your local library instead? Our toddlers really enjoy reading and this option will allow them to follow along, listen or simply just read the book at their own pace?

Ultimately it's about making a conscious decision about how you will use television in your family rather than by accident or default. Think about the alternatives and whether your home has a space that is safe and inviting for your child to encourage independent play instead of watching TV or as an attempt to reduce the amount of TV they are exposed to.

Magda Gerber reminds us that every child needs “an absolutely safe environment” in which he/she can move freely around. This environment not only allows the child to spend uninterrupted time exploring and learning but also gives you time to pursue other things. What does this safe environment look like? Well, Magda tells us to imagine if you were accidentally locked out of the house until the end of the day would your child survive? Yes they might be upset, tired, hungry, crying but most importantly still be safe. Now imagine that it is Saturday morning and you're in the mood for a sleep in – does such a space in your home exist? Safe boundaries such as a gated room gives infants and toddlers freedom to move and explore in safe and familiar surroundings. Yes, if the gate has been part of the environment since infancy then your child will naturally accept it. On the other hand if it is erected much later of course it will be viewed as a restraint. You may balk at this idea at first, I certainly did but upon reflection I realised just how many things we are content to strap our children such as high chairs, swings, infant seats, cots etc. in order to get a few moments to take care of other needs. Surely a safe space with a gate has to be better by any of these other devices or even another adult wandering behind your toddler saying “No, don't, stop”?

A safe space is a wonderful alternative to television especially if your toddler is encouraged to discover, achieve and enjoy independently and in their own time. Children who have learned to rely on being stimulated and entertained (by television and adults) may lose their capacity to be absorbed in independent, exploratory activities. Time apart is just as important as time together otherwise both parents and child end up feeling frustrated. In this way the time you spend together with your toddler will be so much more enriching as you will be more inclined to pay attention, observe and indulge in the direction of your toddlers play.

Ultimately the choice to TV or NO TV is yours, I hope that if anything this article makes you rethink about your home and safe spaces and rather than feel guilty about time apart you enjoy the moments you are together.



“The most important thing to understand about your young toddler is that all his behavior is part of his learning process. Endearing and complicated, toddlers are discovering their identities. We can help them by being patient and understanding.”

Magda Gerber

