

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Infants and Toddlers Watching TV

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in Infants and Toddlers

Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: Should we let our baby watch TV or DVDs/videos?

1. You are your child's best teacher. Children learn best through relationships, not through television.

Georgene Troseth from Vanderbilt University conducted an experiment with 24 month olds. She had children, one at a time, sit in front of a TV and watch a video of an adult putting together unfamiliar toys. Other children saw the same adult put together unfamiliar toys, but, in this case, this adult was sitting in the room with the child. After seeing how the toy was put together, children in both groups had the chance to imitate—to put together the toys on their own. Children were twice as likely to learn from the person in the room than from the person on the TV, even though it was exactly the same person doing exactly the same thing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two years old not watch television.

2. Limit television and DVDs when your child is an infant or toddler and be selective of the programs you share with older children.

It is clear that television and screen time are a part of our lives, but it is best to limit TV for young children and be selective with older toddlers and preschoolers, who can learn from good television. When choosing TV or video programs for young children, it is best if you:

- choose television programs or videos for your children that have good stories that you and your children find engaging and positive;
- have interactive stories, where the children can participate in the TV or video story—by singing along or answering questions posed by the TV characters;
- watch the programs together with your child as much as you can; and
- ask your child what the characters in the program might be feeling or thinking by raising questions, such as: “What is the person in the show doing? Why do you think he is doing that? What do you think he is feeling? Remember when you felt that way?”

These conversations can help your child to understand how others think and feel, promoting the skill of Perspective Taking. For more information on how to choose age-appropriate media for your child, visit www.common sense media.org

Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst conducted a study on the effect that background TV has on children, using the TV show Jeopardy! He found that having the TV on in the background disrupts preschool children's focused attention, play and learning. Even if young children don't seem to be paying attention to the TV, it can be disruptive.

If the TV in the background is showing bad news—a world event that is scary and affects you negatively—the impact on your child could be even stronger. Children react to what you are feeling.

3. Be aware of the noise and the impact of television on your child. Be sure to turn off the TV if you are not watching it, and if you are watching it, try to have something positive on. Use your own Perspective Taking skills and try to think about what your child might be feeling and hearing. There are many alternatives to watching TV.

- You can play soft music for background noise.
- You can talk and sing songs as you go about your daily activities.
- Try replacing TV with books or quiet time.

Judy DeLoache from the University of Virginia had 12- to 18-month old infants watch a best-selling video aimed at teaching children new words in their own homes, either with a parent or alone. Another group of infants had no exposure to the video, but instead, their parents were told to teach the children the same words as in the video in whatever ways were natural to them. A third group of young children (the control group) didn't see the video or have parents use the words with them. At the end of the month, the children who watched the video knew no more new words than the children who were in the control group. Only the children whose parents were using the new words with their children learned them.

4. Focus on talking with your children of all ages. You can use everyday moments to promote Perspective Taking with children that will help them to learn much more than if they are watching TV.

- You can describe what you are doing and how you are feeling throughout the day. “I am getting ready to make dinner, and I feel hungry since I haven't eaten in a long time.”

Studies have found that children are much more likely to learn words if you talk in a back and forth way, using what Jack Shonkoff and his colleagues at Harvard University call “serve and return.” Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota says:

“Serve and return” forms the platform for early learning. Children learn by reaching out, and then having someone respond. Like a game of ball, the child serves and a responsive adult returns the serve. The baby's brain that organized the serve is rewarded by the response and the connections.

These four strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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