

## **Is your child a couch potato?**

Forget pencils, toys, paper and books. These days children are asking their parents as gifts videos, DVDs and computer games. According to a recent survey, 60% of children spend more than 25 hours a week staring at the little screen or playing with computer games.

During the holiday period, with no boring homework or other activities to get in the way, the TV may be on all day.

The question is: does it really matter? Should parents be worried? Doctor Trisha Macnair says that a little bit of TV is fine but hours are no good for anyone and there are many reasons why it could be harmful, including the antisocial nature of TV and computer games which interfere with normal processes of social interaction. Those precious little conversations are replaced by events on the screen. Any continuity of conversation is thwarted by the instant gratification and excitement of the screen.

TV and computer games use up the time which would otherwise be spent for family things, playing and reading all of which are important for normal speech and language development as well as social skills development. In addition, the media provide wrong messages as well.

There's no doubt that what children see on TV shapes their view of the world. Researchers at the University of California warn that viewing the most common televised violence includes the risk of learning to behave violently and becoming less sensitive to the consequences of violence and worse still of being attacked. Violence and horror aren't the only wrong messages. TV also gives strong messages of sexual attitudes, racial and sexual stereotypes and habits such as drinking or smoking.

Doctor Macnair talks about "The couch potato problem" as television is turning children into "tubbies" as they sit in front of it without getting around and about. TV also encourages children to follow junk food diets as they are bombarded with images of high fat, sugary snacks and drinks.

Probably, this essay could seem meaningless without any tangible examples. Let's look more deeply into this. A couple of years ago, about a hundred of children in Japan were admitted to hospital with vomiting, eye irritation and breathing difficulties after being exposed to a Pokemon cartoon it was a brief 5 seconds –scene with red and white strobe lights. Flickering lights and intensive colours can cause epileptic attacks, and lately there have been a huge number of people suffering of epilepsy which generally starts in puberty (peak computer games time) and most never grow out of it.

Dr Macnair provides some tips for beating the TV. For example, parents should get their children out once a day, developing specific interests like painting, tennis or music. Parents should talk to their children encouraging a little conversation every day. Parents should be aware of what children are watching and watch programmes where strong messages occur, so that they are ready to discuss the topic with them if necessary.

Children learn from the TV but they would learn more and better from their parents' model. What's more there's a time for everything and the age before eight isn't the time for TV. My feeling is that children should spend their early years playing creatively and exploring themselves and the world around them and not with the universal babysitter that the TV has become for many parents.