

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

By Barbara J. Moore, PhD

Tip #10 calls upon parents and caregivers to model the very behaviors that they want their children to adopt. When it comes to recreational screen time this tip asks parents to:

- Limit the time spent viewing TV and other screen media to quality programs
- Watch no more than 2 hours per day (this limit applies to all recreational screen viewing combined)
- Turn off the TV when no one is actually watching

Some parents¹ recognize that changing the behavior of their children may require reducing their own heavy viewing habits or even removing the television from their own bedroom. ² U.S. Surgeon General Regina M. Benjamin points out that “children and teenagers look to their mothers and fathers and other caregivers to model healthy lifestyle habits, and adults need to teach by example.”³ As a medical doctor who spent years in family practice she knows what she is talking about when she says that parents “need to be role models by limiting their own television time and spending more time with their children.”⁴

An investigation of the science that explores the role of parents in shaping the viewing habits of children turned up surprisingly few studies. One study of TV viewing of girls aged 9 and 11 years old⁵ found that the girls were more likely to watch more than the recommended maximum of 2 hours per day if UUtheir parents :

- Were heavy viewers (i.e. watched more than 2 hours/day) themselves
- Relied on TV as a recreational activity
- Failed to limit their daughter’s access to TV

A study of 1926 Australian children ages 4 – 12 years old⁶ included a survey of parents to assess factors in the home environment that influenced television viewing. Parent reports identified the following factors that were associated with low levels of TV viewing:

- Tight rules governing TV viewing
- No TV watching during dinner
- None or only one TV in the household
- No TV in the bedroom

Using data based on measured weight and height, this study also found that overweight or obese children had higher levels of TV viewing.

An interesting study of 2670 3rd and 9th graders in Denmark, Portugal, Estonia and Norway⁷ found that after-school TV viewing AND computer game playing were increased in families where TV viewing was

part of the home culture and where children had “more autonomy” over their own behavior. This is one of the few studies of the role of parents that included use of the computer.

A study of the television viewing habits of both boys (n=520) and girls (n=525) ages 10 – 18 years old⁸ found that parents can significantly influence the number of hours the children watched each week. Parental TV viewing increased the volume of TV watching by their children and parental enforcement of rules limiting their child’s TV viewing decreased it.

Another Australian study of young adolescents (n=343) that included both mothers (n=338) and fathers (n=293)⁹ found heavy viewing habits (TV, videos and DVDs) in the children were associated with:

- More than one child present in the family
- Access to pay television
- Eating of snacks while watching TV
- Mothers who watched 2 or more hours per day

These workers concluded that interventions targeting parents, in particular, are more likely to be effective than interventions targeting only the children. Turkish researchers reached a similar conclusion and suggested that pediatricians should take a “TV history” when they examine children in order to help parents better understand the need to limit screen time by their children.¹⁰

Studies of the role of parents in very young children are particularly scant. Qualitative research conducted in the UK¹¹ suggests that parents of preschoolers are not concerned about the screen viewing habits of their children nor do they associate screen viewing in children so young with the establishment of lifelong screen viewing habits or the risk of obesity. One particularly troubling study of low-income preschoolers (n=295) looked at the influence of maternal obesity and the presence of maternal depressive symptoms on television viewing time.¹² This study showed that heavy TV viewing (3 or more hours per day) by these 3-4 year old children was more common if the mother was either obese or had depressive symptoms¹³ and was particularly common in mothers who were both obese and had symptoms of depression.

Taken together, these studies point to the crucial role that parents play in the screen viewing habits of children and present us with the challenge of finding effective ways to help parents understand how to change their own behavior and set appropriate limits for themselves and their children. This may be particularly difficult for parents of limited means, especially if other problems, such as depression, are present. It is worth keeping in mind that ALL adults serve as role models for children. And parents need support as they change their own behavior and that of their children. So here is Dr. Benjamin with the final word for all of us:

“Every one of us has an important role to play in the prevention and control of obesity. Mothers, fathers, teachers, business executives, child care professionals, clinicians, politicians, and government and community leaders – we must all commit to changes that promote the health and wellness of our families and communities.” -- Regina M. Benjamin, MD, MBA, VADM, USPHS, U.S. Surgeon General¹⁴

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- ¹ The word "parent" is used to represent the entire range of adult caregivers who raise children
- ² Jordan AB, Hersey JC, McDivitt JA, Heitzler CD. *Pediatrics* 2006; 118:e1303-e1310
[<http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/118/5/e1303>]
- ³ Regina M. Benjamin, US Surgeon General, *The Surgeon General's Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Surgeon General, January 2010
[<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov>], page 5
- ⁴ Reference 1, page 7
- ⁵ Davison KK, Francis LA, Birch LL. Links between parents' and girls' television viewing behaviors: a longitudinal examination. *J Pediatr* 2005; 147(4): 436-442.
- ⁶ van Zutphen M, Bell AC, Kremer PJ, Swinburn BA. Association between the family environment and television viewing in Australian children. *J Paediatr Child Health*. 2007 Jun;43(6):458-63.
- ⁷ Jago R, Page A, Froberg K, Sardinha LB, Klasson-Heggebø L, Andersen LB. Screen-viewing and the home TV environment: the European Youth Heart Study. *Prev Med*. 2008 Nov;47(5):525-529. Epub 2008 Aug 3.
- ⁸ Barradas DT, Fulton JE, Blanck HM, Huhman M. Parental influences on youth television viewing. *J Pediatr*. 2007 Oct;151(4):369-73, 373.e1-4. Epub 2007 Aug 24.
- ⁹ Hardy LL, Baur LA, Garnett SP, Crawford D, Campbell KJ, Shrewsbury VA, Cowell CT, Salmon J. Family and home correlates of television viewing in 12-13 year old adolescents: the Nepean Study. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act*. 2006 Sep 10;3:24.
- ¹⁰ Songül Yalçın S, Tugrul B, Naçar N, Tuncer M, Yurdakök K. Factors that affect television viewing time in preschool and primary schoolchildren. *Pediatr Int*. 2002 Dec;44(6):622-627.
- ¹¹ He M, Irwin JD, Sangster Bouck LM, Tucker P, Pollett GL. Screen-viewing behaviors among preschoolers parents' perceptions. *Am J Prev Med*. 2005 Aug;29(2):120-125.
- ¹² Burdette HL, Whitaker RC, Kahn RS, Harvey-Berino J. Association of maternal obesity and depressive symptoms with television-viewing time in low-income preschool children. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2003 Sep;157(9):894-9.
- ¹³ Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) scores of 16 or higher
- ¹⁴ Regina M. Benjamin, US Surgeon General, *The Surgeon General's Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Surgeon General, January 2010
[<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov>]