



## PARENT *handout*

# Babies and TV: A Healthy Start on Screen Time

*TVs are everywhere. We see them in doctor's offices and classrooms and, of course, our homes. We even carry electronic screens in our pockets and purses.*

Babies now even have their own TV channels and DVDs. But is TV good for babies? The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under age 2 shouldn't watch any TV. Trying to enforce this can be confusing and challenging.

### TV and tots

The truth is that you need to be careful about how much time your baby spends in front of TV and other electronic screens. Why? Because researchers don't fully understand what screen time does to a baby's growing brain and body. And what they do know is worrisome.

Babies and toddlers who watch more TV tend to have more problems paying attention later on. They are more likely to have weight problems and struggle in school. And they are already learning habits that will stick with them for a long time. This is true even if they are watching programs that seem educational.

### What do children really need?

Your baby needs so much more than TV, videos, and computers can give. He needs people who love him, play with him, talk to him, and respond to him. Even the best TV show doesn't do a very good job with that.

In your baby's first years, his brain is growing very quickly. He needs to use all five senses. The brain is like a muscle. When he interacts with real people and real objects, the connections in his brain get stronger.

Time in front of an electronic screen means less time to explore the world. And it usually means less time in conversation about the world.

So it isn't surprising that babies who watch more TV and videos end up knowing fewer words.

### What can parents do?

Make sure technology doesn't take over. You may feel like TV is a good learning tool. Your baby may seem

to love TV. But babies prefer the real thing. When given the choice between looking at a real toy or a TV image of a toy, babies and toddlers almost always choose the real one. And they learn a lot more from real play.

Here are some specific things you can do:

- 1. Think about your own TV and technology habits.** Is the TV always on? Are you always looking at your cell phone or computer? If the whole family has a healthy relationship with media, so will your baby. Websites like [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org) can help you check out programs ahead of time and plan a family media agreement.
- 2. Watch your program when the baby is sleeping.** When the TV is on, you tend to talk less to each other and to your baby. Many programs, even ones older children may enjoy, are not good for your baby.
- 3. Make some rooms in your home technology-free.** If there are



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TVs and technology everywhere, it will be harder to limit a baby's screen time.

4. **Make it easier to reach for something other than the remote control.** We all grab whatever is easiest. Is that the remote control or baby books? Put baby toys in baskets in the family room or in the kitchen. Keep baby books within reach for when your baby gets fussy or bored.
5. **Create times in the day that are technology-free.** Plan times to turn off the TV, put away the cell phone, and stop working on the computer. Go for a walk or play on the floor with blocks.
6. **If you do decide to have your baby watch TV, make it a very small part of the day.** Choose programs that are meant for babies: short programs that don't move too quickly. And when the program is over, turn the TV off.
7. **Keep TV out of the baby's room. It may seem harmless, but it is not.** Right now, it can keep your baby from interactive play and getting good sleep. And it can create even bigger headaches for you later on. It is much easier to keep the TV out of his bedroom from the start.

### TV is a tool

*TV can be helpful and it can be harmful. It may seem very early to start thinking about your child's screen time. But by 9 months of age, many babies are already regular TV watchers. For babies, less screen time is always better. Books, toys, and people are much healthier growing tools.*



#### REFLECTION

Take time to watch your child.

**When do you feel the need to use the TV to soothe or distract your baby?**

**How do you help your baby understand what he sees on TV?**

**What are your own TV viewing routines?**