



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Parents Should Limit Young Children's Exposure to Background TV

Despite the fact that pediatricians recommend no screen media exposure for children under age 2, three-quarters of very young children in America live in homes where the television is on most of the time, according to research. A new study has found that leaving your TV set on disrupts young children while they are playing, even if the channel is tuned to adult shows. This means that simply having the TV on, even in the background, may be detrimental to children's development.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Massachusetts, is published in the July/August 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at 50 children ages 1, 2, and 3. Each child came to a lab with a parent and was invited to play for an hour with a variety of age-appropriate toys. For half the time, a television was on in the room, showing an episode of the adult game show *Jeopardy!*, with commercials; during the other half hour, the TV was turned off.

Researchers observed the children as they played to determine whether background TV—defined as adult-oriented television that is on and may be watched by older members of the family, but which very young children don't understand and to which they pay little attention—affected the children's behavior during play.

Background TV was found to disrupt the toy play of the children at every age, even when they paid little attention to it. When the television was on, the children played for significantly shorter periods of time and the time they spent focused on their play was shorter, compared to when the TV was off.

“Background TV, as an ever-changing audiovisual distractor, disrupts children's efforts to sustain attention to ongoing play behaviors,” according to Marie Evans Schmidt, who is now a research associate at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston and is the lead author of the study. “Background TV is potentially a chronic environmental risk factor affecting *most* American children. Parents should limit their young children's exposure to background television.”

The study was funded by the National Science Foundation.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 4, *The Effects of Background Television on the Toy Play Behavior of Very Young Children* by Schmidt, ME (Children's Hospital Boston), Pempek, TA (Georgetown University), and Kirkorian, HL, Lund, AF, and Anderson, DR (University of Massachusetts). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.