

Better Family Time
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Real family communication is disappearing these days as individual family members become lost in their own electronic media world. Sitting in front of a screen has replaced evening communication around a dinner table. Meaningful personal conversation between family members is taking a back seat to television, twittering and texting.

The fact is:

- Children six and under spend an average of two hours a day with screen media.
- Two out of three zero to six year olds live in homes where the TV is usually left on at least half the time even when no one is watching.
- A third of these children have a portable DVD player and a third have a TV in their bedroom. About one in eight are put to bed with the TV on at least half the time.
- By the time a child has reached the age of 18 he will have watched 18,000 hours of television compared to partaking in 13,000 hours of schooling.

It is no wonder that by the age of 7 and 8 our children have become addicted to TV viewing. Well intentioned parents have used this medium as a method of distraction and as a substitute babysitter to occupy children while they get things done. It has been a way for parents to get some 'me' time while knowing that their children are safe inside the house while not causing a lot of trouble. While this is not always a negative practice, it does have its downside.

Children are not engaging in the activities they need to help them develop their bodies and brains when they watch television. Young children need responsive, engaging and stimulating interaction with people. They need to explore, move, and manipulate as they learn. They need exposure to rich language and sounds. Studies have shown that watching television does not increase attention, promote social skills or foster creative play. Healthy development in older children depends on their playing, reading, doing homework and talking with other children and adults. The development of language skills are best developed through interaction with others in conversation and play. Children who watch too much television do not get as much physical activity and do not try new activities. Eating too much junk food combined with endless TV viewing is the major cause of childhood obesity (University of Maine).

American children and adolescents spend 22 to 28 hours per week viewing television, more than any other activity except sleeping. By the age of 70 they will have spent 7 to 10 years of their lives watching TV.

The Kaiser Family Foundation

Relying solely on electronic media for entertainment is having a major impact on children's ability to use and develop their own creative imaginations, and to develop daily functional problem solving skills. The speed and pace of some of the media content is contributing to a generation of attention deficit children who seem to have no patience, and no ability to entertain themselves without their electronic gadgets. Sitting quietly with a good book is usually not a choice they make very often. They have come to expect to be entertained by

external means and have very little knowledge of how to create their own fun. 'I'm bored' seems to be the current mantra.

The Impact on the Family

Parents on average spend less than 40 minutes each week in meaningful conversations with their children. If all the electronic media disappeared for a week would families really know how to have a decent conversation with each other? Personal face to face listening and responding has been reduced to a few seconds here and there on the fly. Everyone rushes about running here and there trying to keep up with their school, work, and extra curricular schedules. A relaxed family conversation seems to be a rare event. And when there is some down time you might find individual family members in their own rooms watching their own personal TV's, surfing the net or texting their friends or even e mailing each other from one bedroom to another! Have we let technology become our master? Have we sacrificed family community, conversation and personal contact for isolated digital relationships? How well do we really know each other?

Protecting the Family

Media can be a good resource for families, but parents need to manage their children's time and their own time with its use. Children's health and well being is compromised when family members spend less time with each other.

- **Keep the television and computer out of children's rooms.** Unsupervised viewing and surfing can leave one open to negative outside influences. Many children fall asleep in school from late night viewing.
- **Teach media literacy.** Children need to know how advertising entices us, when a TV show is just pure fantasy, and how the internet can con them. They have young impressionable minds that need guidance.
- **Watch with them.** Use inspirational movies as a basis for family discussions. Get the whole family engaged in dialogue and analysis of a topic.
- **Pick your favorite few.** Let each member of the family select one or two programs each week; record them and watch them together.
- **Schedule at least four family meal times a week.** (without the TV on) This is a time for sharing of personal stories, problem solving, and emotional connecting. It creates a sense of personal belonging and is a form of group identity. Research has shown that these times are important for healthy child development. An average family meal time represents only 7% of the time children are engaged in some form of electronic media.
- **Get active together.** Family outings and physical activities provide further opportunities for strengthening relationships and for communicating.
- **Start a family book club.** Expect everyone in the home to read a book every month or so. Have a sharing session. Even school novels could be highlighted.

- **Bring out the board games.** Children learn patience and cooperation. They also gain a sense of belonging to a group.
- **Discuss current events.** Newspaper or newscasts offer great opportunities for a family discussion of social issues and values.
- **Encourage hands-on hobbies.** Working with one's hands develops creativity and problem solving skills. Co-operative projects with family members build team work.
- **Post a short daily research question on the fridge.** Let the children bring back their info to one of the meal times for an interesting discussion.
- **Start a family night.** Schedule one night a week to be together as a family to build family unity. Let the children take turns planning an activity.
- **Volunteer as a family.** Find service opportunities in your area.
- **Visit the Library.** Many young people have never seen any other library than their local school. Take an evening as a family to explore all that a large public library has to offer.

TV's, computers, video games and other electronic media are a powerful force in today's family life. Families need to make sure that they are in charge of their use. Setting time limits for usage, and having guidelines for appropriate viewing need to be in place. We need to balance the use of electronic media with physical activity and human interaction. Nothing can ever replace the warmth of personal face to face conversation and family community. Interaction with family fulfills needs that cannot be replaced by the use of electronic media. We must make every effort to keep our precious family time in tact.

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Zero to Six ELECTRONIC MEDIA IN THE LIVES OF INFANTS, TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

Fall 2003 the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

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