



Study: TV can impair speech development of young children

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By Liz Szabo, USA TODAY

A study released Monday adds to the debate over whether television impairs children's language development. It found that parents and children virtually stop talking to each other when the TV is on, even if they're in the same room.

For every hour in front of the TV, parents spoke 770 fewer words to children, according to a study of 329 children, ages 2 months to 4 years, in the June issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. Adults usually speak about 941 words an hour.

Children vocalized less, too, says author Dimitri Christakis of the Seattle Children's Research Institute. In some cases, parents may have spoken less because they sat a child in front of a TV and left the room, he says. In others, parents simply zoned out themselves while watching TV with a child.

Researchers didn't note the content of the TV shows.

Parents may not realize how little they interact with children when a TV is on, Christakis says. A mother may think she's engaged with a baby because they're both on the floor playing blocks. But if a TV is on in the background, the two of them talk much less, he says.

That may help explain earlier studies finding that babies who watch a lot of TV know fewer words, although they catch up to their peers by 16 months, Christakis says. "Babies learn language from hearing it spoken," he says.

Christakis and his colleagues fitted children with digital devices that recorded everything they heard or said one day a month for an average of six months. A speech-recognition program, which could differentiate TV content from human voices,

compared the number of words exchanged when televisions were on or off.

Victor Strasburger, a professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico, describes the latest report as "an excellent, creative study."

It's the seventh study to suggest that TV hurts children's language development, Strasburger says. A March report from Harvard Medical School found that watching TV neither helped nor harmed children's language skills.

Though Christakis acknowledges that there is still some debate about whether watching television is harmful, he says there's no evidence to show that it's helpful. That's why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV for babies under age 2.

"We need to avoid parking babies in front of screens," Strasburger says. "Parents need to realize they need to be the primary entertainment for their babies. Parents are movie stars when their kids are babies. It doesn't last long."

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