

The Inner Tube: How TV may be hurting children more than you realize

Interview with Grace Morrison (1985)

For the Foster Parent Gazette

We all know that violence on TV isn't good for children. All those scenes of murder and mayhem not only provide the raw material for horrible nightmares but also give viewers a distorted sense of potential danger in the world, i.e. people who watch a lot of TV think life "out there" is more menacing than it is. Although the people who regularly watch Miami Vice, Hill Street Blues or even GOBOTS do not in fact get robbed, raped or murdered more than non-viewers, they sure think they will.

But what about Sesame Street? Isn't that a good show, a constructive and even enriching program that benefits children emotionally and teaches them valuable reading skills? Not so, says Grace Morrison, East Bay educator, semanticist and former foster parent whose lively literary portrayal of her foster parenting experiences *To Love and Let Go* was published by Pillar Press in 1984. "Sesame Street seems to turn kids into TV addicts, not into reading addicts, "which is what they're hoping to do." The images that flash by so quickly on Sesame Street actually wind up damaging children's natural nervous system inclinations to respond to stimuli, says Morrison, who has written and followed international research on the subject extensively. Recent evidence from both the Australian National University's Centre for Continuing Education and our own National Institute of Mental Health, she says, points to a definite and positive connection between TV viewing and hyperactivity in children.

"I'm not just talking about being difficult. Mean the medical condition for which they give drugs."

Similarly, according to Dr. Matthew Dumont of Massachusetts, "TV literally programs for a short attention span. The hyperactive child is attempting to recapture the dynamic quality of the TV screen by rapidly changing his perceptual orientation."

Besides promoting hyperactivity in children, shows like Sesame Street may, according to Morrison, teach skills, but they do not educate viewers in more important areas. "Education involves developing the entire human being," she says, "and that involves character, a sense of how to participate in the world, how to make decisions, etc. Television is turning over the training of the children from the parents to the TV programmers. The values presented will become the values of the children" In addition, the very act of sitting passively is non-participatory. True education requires involvement.

Gerry Mander, author of the book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* goes even further. He writes of his childhood memories before the invention of television here there would be times of boredom so extreme that he'd have to invent something creative and interesting to do. That boredom, he says was a wellspring of opportunity, was "the pit out of which creative action springs," the possibility for which is being undermined today by turning on the TV. "TV blots out both the anxiety and the creativity that might follow."

Even worse than that, says Morrison, is the growing phenomenon of what she calls the "Total TV Family"—those people who just keep the TV on virtually all of the time that someone in the household is home. Some people even fall asleep to the drone of the TV. "Researchers estimate that 50% of households in Oakland who own TVs keep them on continually. These people are TV addicts and like alcoholics and drug abusers may stay in the denial stage for a long time. They claim that they don't watch that much, but if you treat the conditions with the behavior modification techniques that are successful for other addictions, you find that when they start keeping track of what they've seen, they surprise themselves with how much TV they've actually watched."

Television has long been called an intellectual and spiritual wasteland, but only recently its influence on human waistlines been revealed. Despite the mostly slender physiques of those who perform on television, and the many messages both commercial and philosophical that promote the ideal that "thin is in," a medical study done at Tufts University indicated that the more television kids watch, the more they are likely to be fat. This could be attributable to the snacks commonly eaten while watching TV, perhaps to the fact that one is typically not exercising while watching TV and also, according to Drs. William Dietz

and Stephen Gortmaker who collected the data at Tufts, that since overweight TV stars are so rare, children are led to believe that eating a lot does not affect weight. Similarly, a task force of the American Academy of Pediatrics, led by Dr. Benjamin Spock himself, recently criticized TV programming, saying that too many of the wrong type of shows can make youngsters not only overweight, but also overly aggressive, can hurt school performance, encourage children to try alcohol, drugs or sex or persuade them that the world is more middle class than it really is.

Many parents use the TV set as a babysitter. They think it keeps the kids quiet while the parents cook dinner, clean or simply try to relax after a hard day at work. The truth is, however, that children become more wild and chaotic after watching TV and that it would be well worthwhile to find alternative activities to better meet everyone's needs.

Playgrounds for example, offer something for everyone. The children can be outdoors, expending energy, engaged with other children and generally (infants excluded) do not need more than minimal supervisory attention from their parents. The parents, thus, are also outdoors, relaxing, often visiting with other parents, possibly engaged in exercise of their own. In daylight savings time, you can even have dinnertime picnics and avoid all the work of setting tables, washing dishes, etc. Games, family dancing or creating your own shows are examples of activities that might substitute for TV.

Few critics of television advocate eliminating it altogether. We all probably find some shows valuable, educational, or just too much fun to give up. Even Bruno Bettelheim who warns that the child "whose conditions of life are extremely destructive" is most vulnerable to TV, says that programs that show "how characters' experiences change them" can even be good for kids and can provide material for needed daydreams. "Up to 10 hours a week in optimum," says Grace Morrison. After that, the danger begins.

For foster children, TV can be especially damaging. According to Morrison, foster kids like shows about families best. "They are trying to fanaticize into a family life they never had and they are just not going to be able to cope the way TV characters do." There just isn't a foster child around without a fair degree of confusion, anger and pain. More than anyone, these kids need to play, work, and talk these feelings out. Sitting in front of the TV will only serve to bury their problems deeper and more extensively within them until they "explode in violence" later. Better to turn off, tune out and get going!

Some books that might be of interest on this subject:

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television by Gerry Mander

The Plug-In Drug by Marie Winn

What to do After you Turn Off the TV? By Frances Moore Lappe

The TV Self Defense Kit by Mike Heller

Breaking the TV Habit by Joan Anderson Wilkins