

Study: America's babies are watching too much TV

Researchers say 'educational' videos may harm young children

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP
The Associated Press

SEATTLE — Parents who put their babies in front of the TV to watch videos that are supposed to make them smarter are being duped, say some University of Washington researchers who published a study Monday on TV watching by children 2 and under.

"We're in the midst of a large, national, uncontrolled experiment on the next generation," said Dr. Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle and a researcher at the University of Washington.

It also is the first study to focus on what is being watched.

Unlike the common perception that parents use TV as an electronic baby sitter, the study found instead that the No. 1 reason babies watch TV and videos is because their parents think it is good for them, Christakis said.

He added that using TV as a baby sitter, while moms take a 15-minute break to take shower or "get themselves together," is not that bad.

But the study published Monday in the Archives of

said Frederick Zimmerman, lead author of the study who is an economist who works for the university as a researcher in health sciences.

"The best available evidence suggests that there's harm (in babies watching TV) but it's by no means conclusive," Christakis said.

Other studies have found a connection between early TV viewing and attention deficit disorder, aggressive behavior and poor cognitive development, Zimmerman said.

Focus on early childhood

The telephone survey of 1009 parents of children aged 2 to 24 months in Washington state and Minnesota is unique among studies on TV watching by children because it focuses on the first two years of life and asks parents why they put their kids in front of the TV.

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Points of View

Time kids spend watching TV*

1,023 hours

Time spent in school*

900 hours

*In a year.

200,000

On average, number of violent acts a kid sees on TV by age 18.

A typical U.S. home has a TV on for more than 7A hours each day.

SOURCES: Nielsen Media Research, Kaiser Family Foundation, National Institute on Media and the Family, Annenberg Public Policy Center, Benjamin R. Barber (University of Maryland), American Academy of Pediatrics, U.S. Senate

40,000

Number of TV commercials kids see each year.

4 hours 41 minutes

Average amount of time U.S. kids spend each day in front of a screen (TV/computer/video games).

40%

Americans who say they always or often watch TV while eating dinner.

50%

U.S. homes with three or more TVs.

56%

Kids 8-16 who have a TV in their bedrooms.

THE WASHINGTON POST

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Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine shows babies are watching a lot more TV than necessity demands.

By 3 months of age, 40 percent of infants are regular viewers. That number increases to 90 percent of 2-year-olds, the study found.

Among the young children who watch TV, DVDs or videos at a young age, average daily viewing time jumped from one hour a day for those younger than 12 months to more than

one and a half hours a day by 2 years.

Parents told the researchers they allowed their children to spend this time in front of the TV because they thought it was good for the child's brain (29 percent), because the kids found it enjoyable or relaxing (23 percent) or because they use it as a baby sitter (21 percent).

Although parents said educational content was their No. 1 reason, only about half the infant viewing time was

spent on what the researchers classified as children's educational content — shows like "Sesame Street" and "Blue's Clues."

The rest of the time was split between noneducational programs, baby DVDs or videos and grown-up TV.

Overzealous marketers

Zimmerman said he was especially concerned that parents are being convinced by video marketers who say certain videos are ben-

eficial, when there is no evidence to support those claims.

Christakis said parents are being preyed upon by marketers who make "outrageous claims" that are unsubstantiated.

He said the baby videos overstimulate children and that is what keeps them so engaged.

"I don't blame parents," Zimmerman added. "A little over a quarter of parents believe it's really going to be good for a child's brain."

He said one of the more interesting results of the study was that neither education level nor economic status seemed to influence how much TV a child watches.

"I have two very active young boys myself, so I'm sympathetic to the difficulties of parenting," Zimmerman added.