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Non-Fiction Essay
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So Turn Off the TV Already!

Everyone's heard the news; too much television is bad for children. Why then are so few doing anything about it? Why is it that our children are more violent, less ready to read, and more obese than ever before? What makes it so very difficult for parents and children to just turn off the television? It's such a very simple motion; just a push of a button and it's done. But people don't do it and they won't do it, even when faced with the overwhelming evidence that it is harming our most precious resource, our children.

Television viewing has reached unprecedented highs in the United States. The average American watches 3.7 hours of TV a day, with 99% of households containing one or more TV's. That's up from a mere 10% in 1950. It's no wonder that Americans are addicted to TV. Addicted you say? Addiction only applies to drugs or alcohol, right? Wrong. According to a February 2002 article in *Scientific American*, Americans are very much addicted to TV. Authors Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi state,

“The term "TV addiction" is imprecise and laden with value judgments, but it captures the essence of a very real phenomenon. Psychologists and psychiatrists formally define substance dependence as a disorder characterized by criteria that include spending a great deal of time using the substance; using it more often than one intends; thinking about reducing use or making repeated unsuccessful efforts to reduce use; giving up important social, family or occupational activities to use it; and reporting withdrawal symptoms when one stops using it.”

How many times have you rushed home to so you don't miss American Idol or called home to have your favorite show taped? Just for fun, ask a room full of people whether they watch more than the recommended one hour a day of television and watch them dodge the question. As is typical of addictions people will come up with excuses. They feel guilty and anxious even talking about how much they watch. Even television shows poke fun at the nature of television addiction. Just last week a friend was watching a primetime sitcom and the male lead was sitting in front of the blank TV with the remote lamenting about his great loss.

So what will it take to get people to turn off the tube?

Today the television is the center of attention in most households. In the vast majority of living rooms, the furniture is situated so that no matter where people sit they can see the TV. Thousands of dollars are spent decorating the room to match the size and shape of the TV. It used to be that living and family rooms were arranged to allow conversations to flow. Chairs and couches were placed facing each other in a loose circle so that eye contact could be made from any seat in the room. A coffee table would sit in the middle of the room ready to accept coffee cups or tea service sets. A whole genre of books were published, coffee table books. Their only purpose was to encourage conversation and look good. Now the dual matching recliners are arranged to face the television with television trays close at hand. This allows two adults to see the TV, eat dinner, and never have to look away from the TV. Is it any wonder that family communication has dropped 80% since the 1950's?

People use it as a way to socialize. We have Super Bowl parties and Final Four parties and Survivor Finale parties. We get together to watch American Idol, sporting events, or specials. We gather the family around the Friday night movie and we rely on Saturday morning cartoons as a way for sleepy parents to steal a few more minutes of sleep. Are all of these bad? Absolutely not, individually. If these are not bad, then why am I advocating for Americans to turn off the TV?

Because television is stealing the next generations childhood. The songs, stories, and games of childhood are being stolen from them. Most American children do not know who Humpty Dumpty or Little Miss Muffet are. They don't know who Mother Goose is, they've never sat at the round table with King Arthur, sailed down the river with Huck Finn, eaten porridge with Goldilocks, or tasted a gingerbread house. The stories that still bring smiles to our lives are completely missing to most American children. Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, Twister, jump rope, tether ball, jacks, marbles, Go Fish, none of these things mean a thing to the elementary school children I work with.

What do they have instead? They have the Simpsons, SpongeBob, Beavis and Butthead, South Park, and other uplifting shows. They have shows that teach them all kinds of important things. For instance, all arguments should be settled by screaming at each other. Having a gun makes you a man. Everyone drinks alcohol in high school. There's no need to wait to get married to have sex. Good guys are immortal, people get shot and walk away. These lessons are reinforced every half hour, every day and night of

the week. The American Academy of Pediatrics, a governing body of pediatricians, continually releases statements opposed to television. In a recent article they stated:

“Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may:

- become "immune" to the horror of violence
- gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems
- imitate the violence they observe on television; and
- identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers”

I've seen this time after time in the classroom. Children that reenact their favorite TV shows by grabbing other students and throwing them to the ground. Derogatory language and disrespectful attitudes are much more prevalent now than when I started working in education 10 years ago. Students are quicker to become angry and to use violence to solve their problems.

Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Sometimes, watching a single violent program can increase aggressiveness. Children who view shows in which violence is very realistic, frequently repeated or unpunished, are more likely to imitate what they see. Children with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence. The impact of TV violence may be immediately evident in the child's behavior or may surface years later, and young people can even be affected when the family atmosphere shows no tendency toward violence. Some people claim the family situation is what makes the difference, but there it is in black and white from people that know what they're talking

about. Even if the family atmosphere shows no tendency towards violence, children are still affected. The only answer, turn off the TV.

For the last 10 years I have worked in elementary schools teaching children to read. Every day I watch wonderful children struggle to make meaning out of the words on a page. I've seen 1st graders that don't know their alphabet and 5th graders that can't read "The Cat in the Hat". I've seen children of all ages break down in tears because the words on the page simply mean nothing to them. Author Laurie Parker, MFT talks about reading scores in her article, "The Hidden Effects of TV on Children". She states, "National reading test scores have declined dramatically over the last twenty years and continue to decline. The causes of this are complex and include socio-economic, familial, and geographic factors. Numerous studies indicate an inverse relationship between television viewing and reading/language achievement. Children who plug into their regular evening programs spend less time reading or being read to, less time in family conversations, and less time involved in challenging mental activities such as puzzles, board games, etc." If reduced reading scores and increased violence don't mean anything to the American public, maybe some facts that hit them in the pocket book will.

Advertisers spend millions of dollars a year to sell products to children. They freely admit that they target children because kids are susceptible to want anything they see on the screen. *RXWellness* reported the following in a 2004 article *Advertising, Children and Diabetes*.

"It has been estimated that the average American child may view as many as 40,000 commercials on a yearly basis." 40,000 commercials in one year? At 30 seconds a shot that's 333 hours of companies presenting their claims to your children. 333 hours of time

that can not be written off as “educational” or “entertaining”. Those hours are spent doing nothing but trying to sell your child things they most likely don’t need and you probably can’t afford anyways. The article continues, “ These commercials have an effect on children and adults. Networks paid \$7.3 billion this year for advertising time. Critics say that programs exist for the sake of commercials, and not the other way around. In the 1960’s, advertisers began to target children specifically with advertisements, which resulted in significant financial return. By 1998, the advertising industry was spending \$2 billion on advertisements targeting children, which was a 20-fold increase from 1990. Children and teenagers not only influence their parents’ spending habits, but they also have their own money to spend. Teen Research Unlimited estimates that teenagers spend \$140 billion a year. Children under the age of 12 spend another \$25 billion a year but may influence another \$200 billion a year in spending. One survey of 400 parents in 1999 found that 87% reported that advertisement and marketing were making their children too materialistic, and 63% said their children were defining their self-worth by what they possessed.”

You would think that would get someone’s attention. 200 BILLION dollars a year are spent by children or by parents because children wanted something they saw on television. What parent wouldn’t want to put an end to the constant whining? Who wouldn’t want to end the “But I just HAVE to have it” nagging. Who wouldn’t want to not have to spend a hundred dollars or more on a pair of tennis shoes. The sheer number of dollars parents could put back in their pocket if they just turned off the TV set should convince them. But it doesn’t. Still parents choose to let their children sit in front of the TV for hours on end.

As a child, I was raised in a household of televisions. There was one in the living room and one in my parent's room. We never have one in our bedrooms, but we didn't need one, we spent hours tied to the screen. I saw nothing wrong with watching show after show after show. Family Ties, Different Strokes, The Brady Bunch, M.A.S.H, Facts of Life, Doogie Hower, Perry Mason, Pettycoat Junction, Beverly Hillbillies, we watched them all. I knew to the minute what time each and every show was on and on what channel. Now TV is a minor role in my life and I find that I'm living life instead of watching it go by on the screen.

For the tired parent TV is a way to gain a few minutes of peace and quiet. A good friend of mine is a single parent. She and I often debate our policies on television in the home. She uses the TV as a way to have a few minutes to herself. She finds that when the TV is on, she knows the kids will stay in one place and not get into anything. This gives her a chance to take a shower, put on make up, or make important phone calls. After school, she can put on a show and get dinner fixed without anyone asking a million questions. It is a way for her to get things done quickly and efficiently. Her kids are allowed to watch as much TV as she feels necessary but she tries to limit the types of television they watch to things she's comfortable with. In my house, TV is a treat for weekends. My children are allowed to choose one video to watch per day on Saturday and Sunday. There are days that I wish I could just turn on the tube and have some peace and quiet. There are days when my two have asked me for the millionth time what this is or how do you spell that, when a little mindless time would be welcome, but my husband and I have a policy and we stick to it. My children are not allowed to watch TV on a school night. Instead they read books, color, do puzzles, ride their bikes, play board

games, dig holes, plant sunflowers, ride their scooters, climb trees, play together, play alone, draw maps, make signs, and talk. They talk non-stop. They tell me about their day, they tell me about their friends, they tell me what they want to be when they grow up. I know who hurt their feelings, what they're studying in school, and how high you can climb in our plum tree before it gets kind of scary. My friend at times accuses me of isolating my children. She tells me that by not letting them watch TV I'm putting a barrier between them and their friends. She tells me the kids will have nothing to talk about if they didn't see the same shows the other kids did. Fortunately I work in the same school my daughter attends. This gives me the unique opportunity to observe her at play with her friends. Never once have I seen them struggle for a topic of conversation. During one recess period last week I heard them talk about secret spy missions, "just like Harriet the Spy". I heard them talk about traveling to Ancient Greece to play in the Olympics, "just like The Magic Tree House". I heard them talking about climbing the play structure higher than they'd climbed it before. I saw them not talk at all. I saw them sit on the swings and swing until they could touch the sky. I saw them run through the field just to be running. I saw them being children. The way I remember being a child.

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