

Television – Exercise Killer?

Preschool and Primary School Children and Television Consumption

Dear Parents

Every fifth child in Switzerland is overweight by the time he or she enters Kindergarten! Physical Education teachers and pediatricians have observed that the activity of many children is insufficient and that many young people have bad posture that could lead to back problems.

Our lifestyle and our environment have changed dramatically over the last century. An increase in traffic and housing developments have made it increasingly difficult for children to find play areas that are not specifically designed for this purpose.

Children's active sphere and their opportunity to explore and "conquer" their environment are reduced while their natural need for exercise is limited.

The possibility for media consumption has reinforced the replacement of outdoor with indoor play.

The wide range of media available in children's daily life is taken for granted. The possibilities include everything from television, electronic games, radio, CD-player, video games, DVD, magazines, cell phones and computer to internet. **Media consumption limits physical activity.** **For this reason children and youth should learn how to actively interact with these media.** Correct use of these media means not only knowing how to use them, but especially, that they learn to use them critically and with moderation.

At the same time playing, movement, running, tumbling and getting together with friends should still take priority! When children are offered the opportunity to play outside (in the garden, courtyard, street or playground) they forget some "important" television programs. Offer your children the opportunity to meet with friends, or invite other children to play. Children have enough imagination to create games, they do not need to always be entertained.

Children who watch too much television usually lack other opportunities to entertain themselves. They watch television or play video games out of boredom. **The danger is great that these children will be overweight because they move too little and, unfortunately, often eat sweets and chips while watching television.** In addition, there is the danger that unsupervised children will watch whatever is playing. Certain talk shows, often aired in the morning, but not at all appropriate for children, or violent scenes from films, could cause fear or aggression.

Even children's programs include violence. It is important that parents know what their children are watching and talk about it with them.

How should one think about television programs?

- ┌ Children can only process a certain amount of information. The flood of images on the screen overwhelm and over-stimulate younger children in particular. Children react with nervousness.
- ┌ Young children cannot distinguish between reality and fiction. Television violence shocks and frightens them. Until the age of nine children are unable to distinguish film from reality and cannot understand the complicated plots.
- ┌ Unfortunately, private television stations in particular are exclusively financed through advertising. Even children's programs are interrupted by commercials. Children and teenagers are already a strong market that presents an especially receptive target group for advertising. At the present we rarely have the possibility to block out advertising. Parents must talk with their children about the meaning and use of these messages and, when possible, control the quantity.

Handling television must be learned. Here are some tips:

- ┌ Television should not replace a child's need for sports and movement. Sports and active play are necessary for healthy development.
- ┌ Children (and parents) should not eat in front of the television.
- ┌ The television does not belong in the children's bedroom.
- ┌ One should allow children to watch one program each day but children should consciously choose the program. Afterwards, the television should be turned off. No "channel hopping."
- ┌ Children should not be allowed to watch television until they have completed their other responsibilities, such as homework and household chores.
- ┌ Small children should not be left alone in front of the television. Even television shows intended for children can sometimes be frightening. In this case, it is very important that a child has the opportunity to speak with its parents.
- ┌ **The television should not be a babysitter!**
There are very good educational programs, without advertising, for younger children. The programs "Sendung mit der Maus," "Sesamstrasse" or "der Käpt'n Blaubär Club" are appropriate for children as of five years old. The programs "Löwenzahn" or "Kinderweltspiegel" are recommended for children as of seven years old.