Energy Express: Fit Parenting 101 - How to protect your kid from overdosing on media

by Marilynn_Preston

Does your sweet child have a TV in the bedroom? Get it out. Recycle responsibly. Studies show that kids who have TVs in their bedroom score lower on tests, watch nine hours more of TV a week and are more likely to have sleep problems.

And don't stop there. In a big healthy lifestyle story that got small notice last December, researchers for the National Institutes of Health working with a nonprofit advocacy group called Common Sense Media proved something that none of us really want to believe: Media consumption is making our kids sick, some more than others. The more they watch, message, download, upload, search and play, the less healthy they get.

I was a TV critic for 18 years. It's not that media exposure is bad or good. It's the accumulated time suck of it all. And the unhealthy ad messages. Many children, left to their own devices, will simply overdose on those devices unless they are motivated to get out of the house, ride a bike, play sports, study music, run a dog or, my personal Pollyanna favorite, do yoga.

"Exposure to media has a variety of negative health impacts on kids and teens," the researchers concluded after reviewing not 10, not 50, but 173 different studies on the effects of media consumption on children and teens. "(Just) five hours a day can change brain development, make them fat and lead to risky behaviors, including sex."

Oh, dear. Five hours a day is nothing when it comes to the gross amount of time kids (and adults) spend in front of a video screen: watching TV, reading and writing mobile messages, downloading music, staying in touch with friends, with family, with business contacts, with local, national and world news, not to mention games and porn.

In 2005, kids were spending 45 hours a week with media. Can you imagine what that number is now? 145? These guys at NIH and Common Sense Media (check out www.commonsensemedia.org) have sounded the alarm loud and clear: There is a strong correlation between greater exposure to media and adverse health outcomes.

So what can you do? Take action. Be the parent. Exercise your best Fit Parenting skills and consider what a healthy strategy looks like:

1. NO JUDGMENT. Begin where you are. Enlist your kids help in getting a handle on how much time he/she/it spends watching, clicking and messaging. Ask them to keep track in a journal you give them. Don't appear to judge. Be curious, not critical. If you begin with an angry, negative approach, yelling at them about wasted time or unhealthy habits, you'll turn a simple research project into an adversarial nightmare. Reward them for keeping track. When you get the final count, don't fall down or cry. Stay cool. Retreat to a neutral corner, turn off the TV, and plot your next step.

2. REDUCE MEDIA TIME. It's up to you to set limits. That's what a responsible parent does, in collaboration with your kid, of course. Don't be anti-media so much as pro-balance, freeing up time for your child to play, to read, to explore, to learn to cook and serve their favorite dish. And hear this, from all the child development experts who ever lived: The plan to reduce media exposure must come from your kid, not from you. If you tell them how to do it, you're fried. If you inspire and allow them to come up with their own plan â€” kids with TVs in their room watch nine more hours a week â€” you're halfway home to creating a real change in behavior. Not easy, but possible, and certainly worth trying. Start by removing the bedroom TV ...

3. BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE. How can you convince your little one to wean off of media if you run the computer 24/7 and walk around glued to your mobile phone? "Turn off the TV" isn't just for kids. It's for all of us who suffer the demands of too much technology in our lives. The computer and all of its small screen cousins may be the greatest communication and research tool in history, but it's also Public Enemy No. 1 when it comes to physical activity and an active, healthy lifestyle. Deal with it.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! HELP IS NOT ON THE WAY

"The era of a perfect Internet computer for $99 is coming this year." â€” Jen-Hsan Huang

Marilynn Preston â€” fitness expert, personal trainer and speaker on healthy lifestyle issues â€” is the creator of Energy Express, the longest-running syndicated fitness column in the country. She welcomes reader questions, which can be sent to MyEnergyExpress@aol.com

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