

# Parent Communications— Tune Out the TV

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## Tune Out Your TV for Better Health?

American children, on average, watch 3 hours of television per day. Many watch more than that. Sound like a lot? Think about your average day. In the morning, the kids might manage an hour or more while you shower, make lunches, and dress the baby. After school, it's hard to argue with a child who just wants to flop in front of the TV for an hour to unwind. Besides, the TV keeps them busy while you cook dinner. Before bed, everyone gathers to watch the baseball game or your favorite sitcom. Three hours come and go pretty easily.

How is TV a problem for health? Watching several hours of TV each day can result in less physical activity, more overeating, and greater risk for becoming overweight. Why? Because watching television often means being inactive, snacking during viewing, and being exposed to lots of advertising for high-calorie, low-nutrition foods. In fact, new research shows that food advertising is very effective at influencing what children eat and that exposure to TV advertising is strongly linked to body fatness.

Here are a few quick facts on TV advertising:

- ▶ Each day, children receive about 58 commercial messages from television alone. About half of these are for food.
- ▶ Close to 98% of food commercials on weekend morning network TV are for unhealthy foods high in fat, sodium, cholesterol, or sugar.
- ▶ The amount of marketing aimed at kids has more than doubled during the last 10 years, growing from \$7 billion to \$15 billion U.S. a year.

What's a parent to do? Protect your children by setting limits. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children 2 years and older watch no more than 2 hours of quality programming per day—watching less is better. You can make the biggest effect by keeping television sets out of children's bedrooms and by banning TV during homework and mealtimes. Although you may get complaints at first, these limits can help you spend more time interacting as a family and can free up time to do other things like play games, read, or just be together.

Another thing you can do is help your children make appropriate choices when they do watch television. Whenever possible, watch programs with children to monitor the

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content, including commercials. You are far better able than they are to see the hidden messages and motivations of commercial advertisements. When it comes to food advertising, children are easily misled by commercials that promote diet foods and fast foods as nutritious choices.

And finally, set a good example by keeping your own TV viewing in check. For ideas on how to promote TV turnoff in your community, check out [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org). You can also find helpful ideas for activities to substitute for watching TV by visiting [www.verbnow.com](http://www.verbnow.com) or [www.bam.gov](http://www.bam.gov).

Optional Sidebar:

### Tips for Success

**Use technology.** Screening devices (like TiVo) can remove advertising and allow you to view TV shows in less time.

**Be a good role model.** Keep a check on your own TV viewing. Kids will take their cues from you!

**Endure kids' complaints.** This may be a parent's biggest challenge. But stick with it!

**Help kids deal with boredom.** Be prepared to suggest other activities. Over time, kids will learn to entertain themselves.

Optional e-mail message: Use this sample message to communicate with parents by e-mail (if available).

### Subject Line: Healthy Habits Power Tips— Tune Out the TV

Dear (school name and grade) Parents:

This week for the *Eat Well & Keep Moving* program, children in the (insert school name and grade) will be encouraged to turn off the TV as part of the (Prime Time Smartness Challenge or Freeze My TV promotion). The key messages we'll be promoting are the following:

- ▶ TV, video games, and movies can keep you inactive and expose you to lots of advertising for unhealthy foods.
- ▶ Replace TV time with active time to keep fit and feel good.

Our goal is to raise children's awareness of their own TV habits and to encourage them to trade some TV time for activities that are more positive for their bodies and minds. Setting limits on screen time (TV, computer, video) can benefit your children's health and school performance.

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Try these Healthy Habits Power Tips:

- ▶ Take the TV out of your child's bedroom.
- ▶ Be a good role model. Keep a check on your own TV viewing. Your children take their cues from you!
- ▶ Limit TV and other screen time (video games, etc.) to less than 2 hours per day. To limit screen time, keep television sets out of everyone's bedrooms, limit viewing to specific days or times, watch only favorite shows, and do not allow TV during meals or homework.
- ▶ Consider having screen-free days, and do not feel obligated to allow 2 hours of TV or other screen time each day!
- ▶ Help children deal with boredom by suggesting other activities. For example, plan a family game night or offer incentives to children who trade 30 minutes of TV for 30 minutes of reading.
- ▶ If your budget allows, consider purchasing a screening device such as TiVo to remove advertising and allow you to watch favorite shows in less time.

Want to learn more? Click on [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org) for ways to promote TV-free family time. Visit [www.verbnow.com](http://www.verbnow.com) for ideas on keeping kids busy without TV.

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