

# **TV EXPOSURE AND SLEEP DISTURBANCES IN CHILDREN**

*(Reproduced from SDA News - Volume 11 - Number 3 - June 2007)*

A recent study, conducted in Finland, looked at the effects of TV exposure on the quality of sleep in five to six-year-old children. The study involved 297 typical urban families and revealed that certain TV viewing practices, such as watching TV alone, watching TV at bedtime and actively viewing adult-targeted TV programs were related to sleeping difficulties in the children.

Children spend a lot of time watching TV in Western countries and the impact of TV viewing on children's wellbeing and health is widely recognized and considered a serious problem. TV viewing has been related to various sleeping difficulties in children, including bedtime resistance, sleep-onset delay, sleep anxiety, night waking, and decreased sleep length. Bedtime viewing and the use of television as a sleeping aid have been found to cause the greatest sleep disturbances. Excessive TV viewing by children has been associated with many psychiatric symptoms, such as aggressive behavior, social problems, family interaction problems, attentional problems and hyperactivity. However, despite the knowledge that sleep and psychiatric symptoms are closely intertwined, few studies have assessed the effects of TV viewing on children's sleep quality.

Interestingly, the results of a study conducted 20 years ago reported that TV viewing had no effect on children's sleep, a discrepancy that suggests changes have occurred in children's TV viewing practices over the last 20 years.

The average amount of time the children in the Finnish study actively viewed TV was about 10 hours a week, or 1.4 hours a day, with a range of 2.5 hours to 29 hours a week, and exposure to passive TV (when the TV was on in the background but not being actively watched by the child) was about 10 hours a week with a range of 0 to 38.5 hours a week. Exposure to TV programs with adult content generated the greatest risk of sleeping problems in the children. And the amount of time the TV was switched on in the family home and the quantity of passive TV exposure also generated significant sleeping difficulties in the children, especially problems getting to sleep and disorders in the transition from sleeping to waking. These findings remained significant when socio-economic status, family income, family conflicts, the father's work schedule, and the child's psychiatric symptoms were taken into account.

Because sleep is essential to children's development and health, the researchers suggest that the negative effects of TV viewing may be a significant concern, particularly for younger children because their abstract reasoning skills have not yet developed and they cannot discriminate between fantasy and reality.

The researchers also discuss several factors that may be related to the harmful effects of passive TV exposure. For example, they suggest that passive TV exposure increases the risk of children being exposed to adult-targeted programs because parents are less likely to monitor program content when the child is not actively watching the TV.

Another factor the researchers discuss is the possibility that in families where the TV is on for long periods of time, the time parents actively spend with their children is diminished. Such parental unavailability and a lack of setting limits may reduce the capacity of the parent to respond emotionally to the child's needs. This may interfere with the development of relationships between the child and parents and result in sleep disturbances. They also suggest that passive TV exposure could interfere with other important activities the child conducts, such as playing or reading, which may indirectly increase sleeping difficulties.

The researchers conclude that parents and health-care professionals should be aware of the association between TV viewing and sleep disturbances in children, and that the amount of TV viewed by children should be reduced, particularly watching TV at bedtime and exposure to adult-targeted programs. This might help to reduce children's sleeping problems and increase sleep duration, which could lead to beneficial changes in children's daytime behaviour. TV viewing habits are learned at a very young age, and children with heavy TV exposure at early ages tend to spend more and more time with TV as they grow older. Therefore the earlier the interventions are started the better.

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*This article is a summary of research published by the European Sleep Research Society in the Journal of Sleep Research, 15, 154-161 (2006).*