

THE INFLUENCE OF TELEVISION ON CHILDREN

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Children often internalize gender role stereotypes from books, songs, television, and the movies. Television, however, is perhaps the most influential form of media. Research on television viewing and children's socialization indicates that television has a great impact on children's lives.

Studies show preschoolers spend an average of nearly 30 hours a week watching television; some spend more time watching television than doing anything else except sleeping. Nielsen Media Research has found that by the time children are 16 years old, they have spent more time watching television than going to school. As a result, children are exposed to about 20,000 advertisements a year. By the time a child graduates from high school, he will have witnessed 13,000 violent deaths on television. Television influences both children's prosocial and antisocial behaviors, as well as their attitudes about race and gender.

Development of children as children grow and develop, they take in information and acquire knowledge at a rapid pace. As they develop their cognitive abilities, they assimilate new information and accommodate it to what they already know. Children's ideas about how the world works come from their experiences and from the attitudes and behaviors they see around them. The young child who believes that only women are nurses and only men are doctors may have developed this understanding because the first doctor he or she saw was a man, who was assisted by a female nurse.

This "man as doctor, woman as nurse" idea may have been reinforced further by parents, books, conversations with friends, and television. If the child frequently meets such gender biases and gender stereotypes, this knowledge will be incorporated into future perceptions. Keeping in mind that young children with developing minds watch many hours of television, and recalling how television reinforces gender stereotypes, it is not surprising when children develop stereotyped beliefs.

Of the various factors that help shape gender-typed behaviors, role models and imitation are extremely influential. Research suggests that children who view violent programming on television will behave more aggressively with peers. It is also true that children who view prosocial behaviors on television are more likely to exhibit those types of behaviors themselves. Young children will imitate and repeat behaviors they see on television. Consequently, children may exhibit these gender-biased behaviors and develop the gender-biased attitudes that they see modeled on television.

Developing autonomy, initiative, and a sense of industriousness are critical to young children's positive development. Children who witness female characters on television programs who are passive, indecisive, and subordinate to men, and who see this reinforced by their environment, will likely believe that this is the appropriate way for females to behave. Female children are less likely to develop autonomy, initiative, and industriousness if they rarely see those traits modeled. Similarly, because male characters on television programs are more likely to be shown in leadership roles and exhibiting assertive, decisive behavior, children learn this is the appropriate way for males to behave.