

## Television and ADHD

By Rich Maloof for MSN Health & Fitness

Though family genetics may be partly responsible for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, researchers believe environmental factors play a bigger role.

### Reality Check

Television affects a child's ability to pay attention.

Researchers have found that the more television children watch, the more likely they are to later become fidgety, impulsive and have difficulty concentrating—all core symptoms of ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, sometimes abbreviated ADD). A study published in the April 2004 issue of *Pediatrics* concluded that exposure to television in children aged 1- to 3-years-old increased the risk of developing attention-related problems at age 7. In follow-up studies, the researchers found that early TV viewing was also associated with cognitive trouble and problems in school as children aged.

### Reality Check

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television for children 2 and under.

Dr. Dimitri Christakis, an author of the above-mentioned study, explains, “Children’s brains triple in size during the first two years of life. There is an explosion of infant TV viewing now—we’re in the midst of a national, uncontrolled experiment on the next generation of children, and the truth is we just don’t know enough. We’re exposing them to an enormous amount of media at an age when their brains are developing very rapidly.”

Christakis, a professor of pediatrics and co-author of *The Elephant in the Living Room: Make Television Work for Your Kids*, conversely notes that TV is associated with improved school performance when viewed by children between the ages of 3 and 5. By this point the kids have already crossed a crucial threshold in developing cognitive abilities and language skills.

### Reality Check

The editing and pacing of a show can overwhelm the viewer.

That zoned-out, transfixed gaze that comes over your kid’s face is the precise effect intended by many TV producers. When fast edits and scene changes flash across the screen, the brain works hard to comprehend them. Because the cuts are so unlike real life or real time, the viewer is focused but not actually concentrating or comprehending. This phenomenon, known as the orienting reflex, may contribute to a child’s impatience with our slow and impossibly dull real world.

### Reality Check

Parents can play a bigger role than television sets.

Television can still provide benefits to children, especially when the content, pace and quantity is conducive to learning or healthy entertainment. Plus, a few little hides have probably been saved when a parent plops a youngster in front of the TV while he or she regains composure and patience. “But if your motivation is that TV is good for your child’s brain—and our studies repeatedly show that 30 percent of parents believe that—then you should think again,” says Christakis.

Rather, good television is best used in tandem with good parenting. If a child learns about the letter M on Sesame Street, a parent can continue the lesson by talking about muffins or, say, McCarthyism. If her interest is piqued by a show on lions, take a book out of the library. Christakis elaborates, “There are things a parent can do early in life to promote the development of attention. Certain activities like reading to a child or taking a child to the zoo are associated with increased attention later in life.”

Television and ADHD has been reviewed for accuracy by Dr. Dimitri Christakis, pediatrician at the Children’s Hospital in Seattle and professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington.