
THE
ELEPHANT
LIVING ROOM



Praise for
The Elephant in the Living Room: Make TV Work for Your Kids

“Christakis and Zimmerman . . . have produced a book that balances science and good sense and spiced it with humor and wisdom . . . Finally, a book that can help today’s overwhelmed parents cut through the hype”

~Andrew N. Meltzoff, PhD, Director, Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, and co-author, *The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells Us about the Mind*

“This is the book about television that thoughtful parents have been waiting for. Instead of arguing with your friends and neighbors about how much children should or should not watch television---everyone has an opinion on that subject!---read this book.”

~Michael Thompson, PhD, co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*

*“Reading *The Elephant in the Living Room* is like having two smart, sensitive, reasonable experts in your living room as you think about the role of TV in your kids’ lives.”*

~Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*

“This is a must-read for any parent.”

—Donald Shifrin, MD, chairman of the Committee on Communications, American Academy of Pediatrics

“A must for every parent’s library. In an easy, conversational manner, packed with solid information and good advice, Christakis and Zimmerman help us understand the urgent need to take control of TV’s impact on our children and ourselves—and they provide us with the tools to do it.”

—Susan Linn, EdD, associate director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children’s Center in Boston and instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School

“Television has a huge impact on every child and family in this country. This should be required reading for every parent and teacher who’s concerned about the topic.”

**—James P. Steyer, founder, Common Sense Media
(commonsensemedia.org)**

MAKE TELEVISION WORK
FOR YOUR FAMILY

THE
ELEPHANT
IN THE
LIVING ROOM

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*This instrument can teach, it can illuminate;
yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the
extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.
Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.*

*Edward R. Murrow, keynote speech at the
1958 convention of the Radio-Television News Directors Association*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	ix
Chapter 1: Looking at the Elephant.....	1
Chapter 2: Staying in Focus: Television and Attention.....	17
Chapter 3: Going to School: Television and Education.....	37
Chapter 4: Naughty or Nice? Television's Effects on Aggression and Prosocial Behaviors.....	63
Chapter 5: Asleep at the Switch: Television and Sleep Problems.....	97
Chapter 6: Does the Screen Add or Remove 10 Pounds? Television, Body Image, and Obesity.....	123
Chapter 7: Risky Behavior and Risky Business: Sex, Booze, and MTV.....	149
Chapter 8: The Captive Wallet: Children and the TV Marketing Juggernaut.....	179
Chapter 9: Getting to Mindful Viewing: Rethinking, Restructuring, and Reducing Television.....	207
Epilogue: Making Television Work for All Children.....	227
Appendix 1: Selected Emphasis Areas of Television Programs by Age Group.....	233
Appendix 2: Internet Resources for Parents.....	237
Notes.....	239
Index.....	253

CHAPTER 1

LOOKING AT THE ELEPHANT

When television is good, nothing is better. When it's bad, nothing is worse.

Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission in the 1960s

The many shower gifts that Elizabeth and David received on the happy occasion of the imminent birth of their son included the usual mix of sleepwear, crib toys, and a book about the first year, plus something unexpected—an “educational” baby video. “A real lifesaver,” their friend Kara said as she gave it to them. “My baby just loves it, and it gives me some time during the day to myself.” Elizabeth and David graciously accepted it, looking at the cover image of a brainy-looking—or rather, nerdy-looking—baby with spiked hair and wire-rimmed glasses. It gave them pause. They had discussed many facets of their lives that would affect their child, including their house, the school district, and their religion, but they really hadn't thought about what role television would play in their new baby's life.

Television is the elephant in the American living room. It is a massive presence in childhood, and yet, as for Elizabeth and David, its importance seldom seems to merit discussion. Children watch an average of 3 hours—and sometimes more than 8 hours—of television per day, and typical schoolchildren spend as much time in front of the television as they do in class. Children too young to go to school are old enough to be

schooled by TV, typically starting their TV-viewing careers as early as 6 months old. Children under the age of 3 spend up to 20 to 30 percent of their waking hours watching TV and videos, despite the fact that at this age, their attention span is only a few minutes at a time.

If you're like most parents, you'll have a strong, visceral reaction to numbers such as these. Either you'll be glad that your children don't or won't watch much TV, or you'll feel guilty about how much they do watch, or you'll feel good that you are highly selective about what they watch, or you'll be convinced that the whole concern with TV is overblown. When our friends found out that we were working on a book on the effects of television on children, reactions varied. Some responded as our friend Caroline did: "I know I've probably ruined my kids already—they watched a lot of *Scooby-Doo* when they were little." Others, like Kim, said things like, "Good. Finally someone can tell us that it is fine for them to watch as much as they want."

While it's true that most parents (and grandparents) have strong feelings about television, it's also true that they seldom share them with other people when they're not sure others agree with their position. Television, like religion and politics, needs to be discussed with great caution. It's understandable that the topic of television and children is fraught with strong emotions, generating more heat than light. After all, parents have had to rely on their own opinions because high-quality, scientifically based information and advice about television haven't been readily available—until now.

As parents, we came to our research on TV with the same kinds of emotional responses to the topic most parents have. As scientists, we've put those emotions on the back burner as we've delved into the rigorous work of painstaking data collection and careful statistical analyses. And we've discovered that our initial reactions were wrong—or partly wrong, for as you'll see in this book, our scientific research and that of many other TV researchers tell us that television can be both worse than we'd feared and better than we'd thought possible. For this reason, we no longer think of TV as inherently good or bad. Instead, we see it as a tool.

Much like a food processor or a power saw, television can be dangerous. But properly used at the appropriate age and with the requisite adult supervision, it can produce wonderful things. As you read this book, we ask you to set aside initial emotional reactions, as we have, and join us in exploring how TV—with all its promise and pitfalls—can work for your child.

WHY THIS BOOK?

Open up your favorite parenting book and look through the index. How many references to television are there? Five? Ten? None? The lack of good-quality information for parents about television is all out of step with the enormous role TV plays in children's lives. There is a strong need for thoughtful and accurate information on what effects it has on children as well as what effects it doesn't have.

This need for information is now being met by important new research, including our own. In this book, we will introduce you to some of the fascinating research we have been engaged in regarding the issue of television and its effects on children. In Chapter 2, we'll explain the rationale and results of our study of television's impact on children's ability to pay attention. In Chapter 3, we'll discuss the implications of our study that looked at how watching TV at an early age affects school readiness—a study that for the first time highlighted the real disadvantages of too much television before children are ready for it. In Chapter 4, we'll outline our work on the effects of television on bullying behavior, a major concern in elementary schools.

All of these studies have garnered worldwide media attention. While the press coverage is gratifying, it hasn't always appropriately conveyed the important messages for parents. It has focused more on the dangers—which are real—than on what parents can do—which is important. Although between us, we had spent more than 20 years conducting

research and had published well over 100 articles related to children's health, it wasn't until we had children of our own that we directed our scientific inquiries at television.

We wrote this book in part because we were eager to learn more about how this pervasive medium might affect our children. This book is the resource we *wanted*; it is the resource that the parents of our patients—and friends—*need*. It does something that is routinely avoided: It dispassionately and carefully discusses the “elephant in the living room.” Its purpose is to inform and empower parents so they can take charge of their children's viewing. Many parents feel incapable of doing so. More than half are worried about the effect of television on their children. Many are concerned about how much time their children spend watching TV but feel they can do nothing to reduce it. Many parents would get rid of their sets altogether if they felt they could tolerate the absence of TV. Even among parents who aren't concerned, the majority have mixed views about TV's place in their children's lives, and a sizable percentage feel guilty about their reliance on it.

Parents should not feel guilty, powerless, or even indifferent about television, however; its effects need not be adverse, and they are most certainly remediable. Television viewing can be beneficial. It can be entertaining, broadening, and educational. It just has to be used properly.

THIS ISN'T YOUR PARENTS' TELEVISION

Consciously or unconsciously, Elizabeth and David, the couple in the story at the beginning of the chapter, will use their recollections of their parents' childrearing strategies as a template for their own. Sometimes they will use them as examples of what not to do, but more often than not they will fall back on them as being the right approach. Remember all the things you swore as a child you would *never* do to your children? You are

probably doing more (or will do more) of them than you care to admit. While our own upbringings usually provide a good starting point for decisions about how to raise our children, television has changed so dramatically in a generation that old models are not necessarily useful guides for parents. One of the reasons Elizabeth and David never discussed television is that they thought it wasn't yet relevant. They were having a *baby*, after all; television surely didn't yet figure into his life.

Like most of us, they probably started watching television at age 3 or 4, when *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was on for just a half hour a day. We watched this and other truly commercial-free programming on PBS for a few years, then transitioned gradually to *Shazam!*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and reruns of *Gilligan's Island* as available on three channels in the family room. The family television—there was only one—was situated where our mothers could see us. The simple truth is that as much as we may have wanted to watch television, there frequently weren't any programs of interest to us. As recently as 20 years ago, VCRs were not widely in use. Holiday programs or favorite movies had to be seen when they aired or were missed altogether.

What a difference 20 years make! A typical child born today will probably watch videos first, starting as early as 4 to 6 months old, often sitting in a car safety seat if she is unable to sit on her own. She will quickly graduate to a bewildering array of shows laden with stressful cartoon violence and commercialism, which she may start watching as early as 9 months old. Yes, we enjoyed our share of *Tom and Jerry* cartoons when we were young, but today's children watch more realistically violent programs, which are no longer limited to Saturday mornings. Not only have cartoons become more violent over time, and not only are they more regularly available, but as we will show, the type of violence in cartoons particularly promotes aggressive behavior among children. What's more, the explosion of cable channels, cartoon networks, DVDs, and recording devices now makes such cartoons available 24 hours a day.

Children today are also more targeted by advertisers than they were a

generation ago; television, including public television, has become much more commercialized. Marketing to children has ballooned from a \$600 million industry in 1989 to \$15 billion today—about a 25-fold increase in just 17 years! Reruns of shows from our childhoods are edited down to make room for more commercials, and it's no longer possible to consider making a children's television show—even an educational show to be aired on PBS—without carefully considering and making advance deals for its merchandising opportunities.

New content has also changed the landscape of children's viewing. A generation ago, MTV and VH-1 didn't exist or were in their infancy, yet today, music videos are far more sexual and more violent than regular TV programming. Seeing the video of a song has become as important as hearing it on the radio once was. Many parents are appalled when they become aware of the lyrics of the songs their children listen to. Usually, this entails reading them on liner notes, as most don't listen to lyrics, and when they do, they often can't discern the words. But those words come to life on the screen, and the rise of music videos has been a major reason for the maturing of content as viewers have become younger.

Reality television is also new, in all its bewildering variety, including game-docs like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, celebrity shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *Dancing with the Stars*, teenage gross-outs like *Fear Factor* and *Jackass*, competitions like *American Idol*, makeovers of home (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*) and body (*The Biggest Loser*), and many others. What these programs have in common is that they are inexpensive to make; depend on psychodrama rather than plot, dialogue, and acting to attract audiences; and are hugely popular. Many of these shows are old-fashioned entertainment in a new wrapper, but a few of them, as we'll show in this book, pose genuine threats to children by offering models of behavior that are made more dangerous by their veracity—sometimes fatally so.

To be sure, the news is not all bad. Children now also have a much wider variety of educational programming to choose from than we did.

Even more important, parents can use new technologies such as TiVo and DVDs to maximize the benefits of educational shows. It may surprise parents to learn this, but children are happy to watch reruns of educational shows, often up to five times in row with no decrease in their attention to a program! As you'll see, this repetition actually helps them to better master the concepts involved.

We believe that there is a right amount of television for every child, and it is different for each one. The right amount depends on the child and what the show is. Parents know their children better than anyone else, which is why we're not fond of age-based television ratings. But if parents have part of the puzzle, they're missing part of it, too. We recently conducted a survey of parents of young children about educational programming on TV. Ninety-two percent of them knew that *Sesame Street* is educational, and 97 percent knew that *The Lion King* is not. But parents were more confused about many shows, with about 20 percent rating both *Big Comfy Couch* and *Teletubbies* as educational (*Big Comfy Couch* is, *Teletubbies* isn't). Yet our jaws dropped when we found that only 35 percent of parents recognized *Blue's Clues* as educational. As you'll see, *Blue's Clues* is not only educational, it also represents a uniquely successful approach to educational television that keeps it both highly educational and consistently entertaining.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IS TELEVISED

What has led to these changes? In most cases, the answer lies in technological change: cable TV, videos, DVDs, TiVo, tiny video screens in cars and airplanes, giant televisions in home theaters—all new developments since we were children. There are now six networks and at least 15 national television channels with children's programming, with five cable networks completely devoted to it: Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Fox Family

Channel, Nickelodeon, and Toon Disney. As this book went to press, a new satellite channel with 24-hour programming targeted at children under age 2 was just announced. Truly, we are immersed in television as never before. These developments have led to a preponderance of cartoons (instead of live-action shows) for children; they've also led to an increased emphasis on fast pacing, violence, and sex for keeping children's attention rather than high-quality, positive-themed programming, which is much more expensive to produce. There are exceptions, however—some wonderful bright spots—and we will discuss those as well.

HOW CAN TV HELP?

We know parenting is hard—oh, do we know it! Like any parents, we could probably fill a whole book just with our own anecdotes of parenting episodes gone awry. Parents who hear about the ill effects of TV on children often have a rising sense of panic, perhaps mixed with fear, guilt, frustration, and anger.

Relax. We aren't going to tell you to kill your television. On the contrary, we'll show you some of the more positive sides of TV.

Consider Cory, the son of a colleague of ours. When he was an active, likable 9-year-old, Cory was diagnosed with a debilitating illness that kept him in bed for weeks at a time. During this period, he began to watch a lot of TV. One day, he was flipping channels and came upon a cooking show. He was mesmerized. A man was flattening out pizza dough with his hands, and Cory loved the low-key theatricality of it. Something in the pacing and the patter appealed to his reduced energy. He became a regular viewer of *Ciao, America!* and soon added *Good Eats* and *America's Test Kitchen*, a strangely scientific cooking show on PBS. Cory soon carried his interest into the kitchen, and while he didn't become a gourmet chef—not yet, anyway—he quickly mastered deviled eggs and other simple dishes, much to his family's delight. His parents had never imagined he would be

interested in cooking, and even if they had, they probably couldn't have coaxed him into trying it on their own.

At its best, TV can educate and inspire. High-quality documentaries offer insights into history that no book can equal. Nature programs do more than teach us facts about the science of weather or animals' native habitats; they take us to places many of us will never be able to visit. They capture scenes that take literally hundreds of hours of patient camera work and use technologies to take us to venues that it is not humanly possible to visit. Children's educational shows have the proven ability to help children learn to read, to be kind, and to share. In short, when used appropriately, television has the power to expand horizons and help children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.

HOW CAN TV HURT?

Now, the bad news. Too much TV, or the wrong kind, can have lasting, damaging effects that no parent would welcome. In this book, you'll see how television has influenced children to put their own lives and the lives of others at risk—along with their futures, their grades, and their imaginations—by depressing healthy development and encouraging early alcohol use, unsafe sex, and other dangerous activities. Teenagers are often at greatest risk for dramatic consequences, but the effects of television on younger children—even babies—are just as real, if more subtle. We'll show how watching certain kinds of television too early can impair language development or lead to symptoms of hyperactivity and how certain viewing habits can make for fat bodies and thin wallets. Still, we've tried to keep lurid tales of serious consequences in the background in this book. While acts inspired by TV do sometimes land children in the hospital, such dramatic and direct effects tend to be rare. More common are experiences involving poor use of TV, with results that aren't fatal or irreversible but are still unhappy at the time.

I quit my job 9 months ago to be a stay-at-home mother with my 3-year-old son, John. At the time, I was 7 months pregnant, and as each day passed, my son seemed to demand more and more attention . . . play with me, hold me, read to me. Before the baby was born, I would give in to his demands, or I would take him places like Story Time or have other children come and play. After the baby was born, I could not run all over the place, so again I tried to keep up with his demands . . . nothing worked. On top of that, my infant would only nap 30 to 45 minutes at a time. So eventually I put John in front of the TV anywhere from 1 to 3 hours per day. Since there was not always much on when we needed it, he watched a lot of cartoons. It gave me a little bit of sanity but only for the time he was actually watching a show. Then, when I would turn it off, things would be worse. I noticed that when I would read a book to him, he lost interest after about 15 minutes. Finally, we cut TV down dramatically. I now think that all of his demanding behavior was caused by jealousy and that putting him in front of the television not only made him dependent on something else to entertain him but actually did shorten his attention span immensely. Only time will tell if we can undo the damage. Until then, our TV will be off.¹

Television used poorly can make children anxious and depressed and can lead to sleep disturbances and aggression. We will review all of these effects and tell you how to protect your child from them.

THE MODERN TELEVISION CHILDHOOD

The stories of Cory and John are compelling because although both children watched a lot of TV, the results were dramatically different. How do you use television to achieve the effects on your child's behavior that you are comfortable with while at the same time avoiding the effects you fear?

Each of the chapters that follow focuses on the three aspects of television viewing that we believe are most salient:

- *How much* is being watched (quantity)
- *What* is being watched (quality and content)
- *How* it is being watched (context)

Because these three dimensions critically inform the effects of TV viewing on children's development, we will focus on them as we examine these effects throughout the book.

Too much television or video watching can affect children's behavior and development—all experts agree on this fundamental fact. But how much is “too much”? It depends on what the children are watching, so our measurement of the *quantity* of television and videos should really be informed by their *quality*. And what does that mean? To some extent, just as for adult programs, the quality of children's television is defined by production values, the cleverness of the dialogue, the believability of the characters, and so on. But much more important for children, quality is determined by the content—the underlying message of the program. Educational programs such as *Sesame Street* and *Blue's Clues* usually have the potential to improve children's reading ability and vocabulary and to promote cooperative, kind, and tolerant behavior. Noneducational programs such as cartoons usually have the potential to promote aggressive and disrespectful behavior in children. Some may even inhibit development of reading ability and vocabulary.

However, this general observation also depends heavily on how the programs are viewed. As we will discuss, watching even high-quality educational programs at the wrong ages can slow a child's academic development. And some children with very busy or distracted parents can benefit from even noneducational television. Co-viewing is one important aspect of how television is watched. We'll discuss how the opportunity to be aware of and discuss a show's content can flip TV's effects on a child's

behavior from negative to positive. When our children watch, we try to watch with them, and we encourage all of our patients' families to do so as well. We'll explain more in later chapters about why this single change can have such a powerful influence on your kids.

In the story above, the mom related that her son John watched 3 hours of TV a day. True, that is more than ideal, but in itself, it's not so excessive as to be damaging. But he watched exactly the kind of programming that would be likely to "ramp him up" and make him more unmanageable rather than any of the several shows that might help him become more understanding and supportive of his little brother. Believe it or not, there are such programs! Most important, though, was *how* he watched. John was set in front of the television so that his mother could focus make dinner. When she pointed to his jealousy as a reason for his behavior, she was spot-on. As is so often the case, the context of the TV viewing profoundly shaped its effects on John's behavior. Leaving him alone with the television as a distraction bought his mother some time with her newborn, but solving one problem exacerbated another.

Cory, on the other hand, was bedridden, bored, and sad. Physically unable to do the things he liked most, such as playing sports, he gained a new creative outlet that required minimal energy to enjoy—watching cooking shows. In large part, this positive outcome was possible only because his parents knew what he was watching, and they encouraged him to step into the kitchen when he was able. In this book, you'll see again and again that all of these elements—the amount of TV children watch, what they watch, and how they watch it—are crucial to determining its effects on them.

Consider how dramatically these three elements have changed. In the early days of primetime programming, television brought families together as they gathered around a single, centrally located TV set to watch general-interest programs such as family-oriented variety shows. When Fred was in grade school, he wouldn't have chosen to watch *Little House on the Prairie* every week, but growing up with two sisters and one

TV, it was his only option on Wednesday nights. Over time, it became a family tradition and something to look forward to.

Now, television often keeps families apart. More than 80 percent of U.S. households have more than one set, and family members frequently watch TV separately. Television sets have become so affordable that typical families find it irresistible to increase the number of TVs they have—TVs now outnumber family members. They even outnumber toilets in the United States! As a result of the proliferating screens, more and more children watch alone or in isolation from their parents, who sheepishly concede that they rely on television and videos as electronic babysitters.

TAMING THE ELEPHANT

Our purpose in writing this book is to help you attune your children's TV viewing to your own needs and goals. Television is a part of our lives, and it is here to stay. We believe that the unexamined TV is not worth watching. As they say on *Nick at Nite*, "You wouldn't suck green ooze from a tube if you didn't know what it was—*would you?*" We espouse what we call *mindful viewing*. Engaging in mindful viewing means that you think about what you're watching and understand the underlying motivations of characters and advertisers. You can promote mindful viewing in your children by actively critiquing programs, both as you watch them and afterward, in other settings. The critique doesn't have to be all negative—positive comments about portrayals you like can contribute wonderfully to mindful viewing. The goal is to get your children to see television not as just a neutral presentation of what the world is like but rather as a medium with a particular point of view to sell, one to which you can be sympathetic or unsympathetic and one that can be realistic or unrealistic with regard to consequences of behavior. Above all, TV is a source of influence that, with mindful viewing, one can tap selectively and actively.

We address questions that all parents have but that have been unfor-

tunately obscured by extreme or unrealistic rhetoric from both pro- and anti-TV camps. We'll cover not only questions about how much TV should kids watch but also others, including the following.

- At what ages should children watch different kinds of TV?
- How can kids get the most educational value out of television?
- What needs and desires motivate children to watch TV, and how are those needs exploited by both educational and noneducational shows?
- Does TV advertising really have an effect?
- Does watching TV lead to obesity?
- How much of the benefit of television depends on the ways in which it is watched and with whom?
- Are children truly passive when they watch TV, or is something else going on in there?
- Does television displace dangerous activities and keep kids out of trouble, or does it displace useful activities and deprive them of important experiences?
- How do the answers to these questions differ at different ages and with different parenting styles?

This book is organized by specific areas that TV has been shown to impact—attention, education, sleep, obesity—and covers the full spectrum of behaviors and outcomes that television is known to affect in these areas, both positively and negatively. Finally, it concludes with a program that will teach you how to improve your children's relationship with television. It includes step-by-step instructions as well as easily incorporated practical tips. You'll learn how to determine how much is enough (and how much is too much), how you can make the best choices for your children, and how you can increase the positive aspects of those choices, generally improving the ways television is used in your home. For our pragmatic approach, we draw heavily on many anecdotes and tips from

parents we've worked with in our research, but we also rely on our own experience as parents. We'll show you how to identify your personal goals for TV viewing: What do you hope your children will get out of it? What are you concerned about? What do you want out of it for yourself? Then we'll help you take these goals and develop a plan to make television work for you and your children.

By providing a scientifically sound conceptual framework about television and child development, this book will help you understand that the subject of television and childhood development is one of the most important topics of discussion for parents. We want this book to open both eyes and minds, to teach you to use the power you have as a parent to make the most of this very important tool. So when someone gives you a baby video for your newborn or invites your 15-year-old to a *Sex and the City* slumber party, by all means, react emotionally—then respond rationally. After reading this book, you'll have the information you need to know when you should listen to your parenting gut and when you can just relax.