# LINE ON LIFE
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# Taming the Electronic Babysitter *
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With school almost over, parents are worried about providing activities for their children. Unfortunately many of these children will be shuttled to an electronic babysitter, the television. What effect does this have? How can we make more constructive use of our TV?

The average high school graduate has spent about 15,000 hours watching TV, while spending only 11,000 hours in the classroom. During this time, those children have viewed 18,000 murders — not even to mention the robberies, bombings and beatings. Even with the recent positive changes in TV, the frequency of violence is still high.
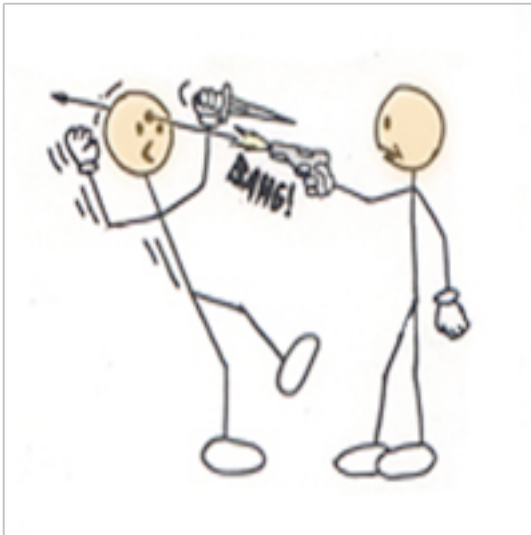


According to hundreds of psychological studies on over 10,000 children, if "*children watch a great deal of television, they will be more prone to behave aggressively*." Although this does not mean that *all* children who watch a lot of television will become more aggressive, many will.

Children naturally learn by copying the behavior of those around them. The **models** can be parents, relatives, friends or actors on television. When children are young, they are not sophisticated TV viewers. They may only notice that the "*good guys*" got their way by aggression against those who bothered them.

On TV, the heroes are as violent as the villains. In addition, they get rewarded and praised for their violence. To the child, this sends the message that violence leads to success and popularity. Some psychologists believe that habitual aggression is learned within the first ten years of childhood. Once learned, this habit — like any habit — is hard to change. If the aggression is **reinforced** — the child gets what s/he wants by violent means — this style of responding will be continued. Although the TV programs don't cause the violence, they make it more likely to occur. Children are more likely to be violent if they identify with TV heroes who use aggression as an acceptable way to solve problems, and if they believe that these portrayals of TV violence are realistic.

In addition, television can cause **desensitization** to acts of violence in children. Real violence is ugly and gut wrenching. In contrast, TV violence is usually sanitized and unrealistic. People don't get up again to play a character in another show. (How about cartoon characters who get blown to bits — only to appear a few seconds later in healthy condition?) However — even if the violence is graphic — it is not as traumatic, when it is viewed in the safety and familiarity of the home.

However, TV does not only promote violence. It can also provide **constructive effects** along with entertainment. For example, television also has positive, educational programs like "*Sesame Street*," "*The Electric Company*" and "*Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*." Over 150 psychological studies have shown the positive impact of these programs. In contrast to the stereotyped violence that TV usually shows, it can promote helping, cooperation and other prosocial behaviors.

If parents want to reduce the negative effects of TV violence on their children, what can they do besides getting rid of the TV or pulling the plug? Children copy their parents' viewing habits, and children are influenced by their parents' reactions to what they watch. With this in mind, something can be done.

1. Restrict total viewing time, so your child sees the world from sources other than TV. You can even set schedules with certain limited times to watch TV.

2. Be aware of what your child is watching. If you object to a program, change the channel or turn off the TV. You can also offer activities and games as alternatives to watching TV. If chosen wisely, these activities can stimulate children's imagination and creativity.

3. Select programs your child will like, especially those that model positive actions and attitudes.

4. Watch television with your child. In this way, you are able to counter the negative qualities of TV. Make your child aware of what is real and what is fantasy in the programs. As they appear in programs, you can counter the distortions and stereotypes.

5. If conflicts and violence are shown, you can make the child aware of other, nonviolent solutions to the problems that are portrayed. Later, you can encourage the child to propose more realistic and positive responses to these situations.

6. Show your disapproval of heroes who use violence. This will reduce the likelihood that the child will identify with them. In turn, they will be less likely to copy the violent behavior of these heroes.

If followed, these guidelines can help your children enjoy TV. At the same time, they can minimize the negative effects of the programs and the advertising.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1989, pages 224-225.