

## HANDOUT 1–9a

**Frequent TV Watching Shortens Kids' Attention Spans**

By Marilyn Elias  
*USA Today*

Psychologists and media experts are concerned, but not surprised, by a landmark study suggesting that frequent TV watching by infants and toddlers may shorten their attention span by age 7.

The research, in today's *Pediatrics*, finds that the more television very young kids watch, the more likely they are to have trouble concentrating and to become impulsive and restless.

Human brains change rapidly in early life, says UCLA neuropsychologist Elizabeth Sowell, and animal research shows that stimulation can "rewire" the brain.

Things happen fast on the TV screen, so kids' brains may come to expect this pace, "making it harder to concentrate if there's less stimulation," says study leader Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle.

Also, TV may replace activities, such as reading, that could help children learn to concentrate, Sowell says.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is genetic, but past studies suggest the environment also plays a key role, Christakis says. How different environments might promote ADHD "has barely been touched by systematic research," writes Vail, Co., educational psychologist Jane Healy in a commentary accompanying the *Pediatrics* report. But TV exposure in young kids is growing, she says.

Although most studies haven't considered TV watching by very young children, a Kaiser Family Foundation survey last year found that about 2 out of 5 children under age 2 watch television every day, and a quarter of them have TVs in their own rooms, says Vicky Rideout of the foundation.

Also, a soaring number of young kids watch DVDs or videos, some thought to be educational, but others as fast-paced as TV, Rideout says. And more TV shows, such as *Teletubbies* and *Boobah*, are geared for children under 3.

Meanwhile, even veteran teachers with superb child-managing skills are reporting "more kids that are off-the-wall. . . . It started about 10 years ago," says Susan Ratterree, a 25-year school psychologist supervisor in suburban New Orleans. Awareness of ADHD is increasing teacher reports of attention problems, "but the kids are changing, too," she says.

Educators may need to change their methods to keep the attention of stimulation-saturated children, says Los Angeles media psychologist Stuart Fischhoff. "Rather than seeing these kids as pathological, maybe we should see them as adaptive, pointing the way to how our society is evolving. Brains may be changing, and we don't know if it's going to be bad or not."

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