Keeping Kids Healthy in a 24/7 Media World

A Survival Guide for Parents
5 Ways Media Matters to Our Kids’ Health
Physical Health

Sexual Behavior

Violence & Aggression

Addictive Behaviors

Social & Emotional Health
Good health is about more than strong bones and good teeth. It’s about physical, mental, social, and emotional wellness. The media messages and images that our kids consume through TV, movies, video games, the Internet, music, and cell phones shape their values and behavior in ways that can be healthy or unhealthy.

But media runs right through the center of our kids’ lives, so what's a parent to do? It’s up to us to help them use the media they love both wisely and well.

**What kids put in their brains is as important as what goes in their bodies.**
5 Challenges for Parents:

1. **Connect the dots between media and health.** We don’t tend to think that what our kids watch or download affects their overall health. But what they see and hear absolutely matters to their physical, mental, behavioral, and social development. **We need to understand how media influences our kids’ healthy and unhealthy behaviors.**

2. **Media acts as a “super-peer,” influencing and normalizing choices.** Whether it’s a rapper hawking champagne or a favorite TV star’s scrawny physique, when kids see images and behaviors modeled by media stars, they begin to accept that what they see is "normal" or "real" or "okay." **Kids need us to give them perspective on what’s realistic, safe, and age appropriate.**

3. **A healthy media diet means limits and balance.** Who likes to say “no” to their kids? And what kid comes with moderation installed? Because media is such a huge part of children’s lives, we can’t just shut it out. Besides, it’s fun and can be an important learning tool. But kids need limits and guidelines. **Just as we don’t let our kids eat junk food all day long, we need to give them healthy ground rules for choosing and using media.**

4. **Marketers have outgunned us.** Let’s face it: Our kids are in the crosshairs from the moment they first press an ON button. Ads for junk food, clothing, alcohol, and cigarettes saturate their lives. Kids increasingly get their self-esteem and identity from what they own. **We need to help kids understand that ads and entertainment encourage spending money on things that aren’t always good for them.**

5. **Media is everywhere, and it takes time and effort to help kids use it wisely.** Our kids’ media world is increasingly all-encompassing, portable, and constantly changing. It’s converging into a total media immersion. Through media, kids express themselves, meet friends, and discover the world. **It’s up to us to help our kids be media savvy and use media responsibly.**
Physical Health

What Is It?
Media immersion absolutely affects our kids' physical health. It contributes to obesity, eating disorders, attention deficit disorders, addictive behaviors, and declining levels of fitness. There's a direct link between hours of media consumed and calories consumed. Young girls — who see hundreds of thousands of TV and magazine ads about physical appearance — are more likely to practice risky dieting. Anorexic fashion icons and steroid-pumped sports stars can distort a sense of normal body image, which can lead to lower self-esteem and unhealthy decisions.

Why You Should Care:
Because 1 in 3 kids in this country is at risk for becoming obese. Because, due to obesity and inactivity, millions of kids ages 12-19 already have a pre-diabetic condition that puts them at risk for full-blown diabetes and cardiovascular problems as adults. Obesity is overtaking tobacco as the number-one killer in the nation. On the other end of the spectrum, super-skinny models and celebrities set unrealistic and unhealthy beauty standards, adding to the already-overwhelming pressure to be thin or buff. In fact, 1 in 5 American girls will experience an eating disorder. Distorted perceptions of beauty can set the stage for misusing diet or body-building products and developing eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia.
Some Facts You Should Know:

• Kids 8-18 spend an average of 44.5 hours a week with media, versus 8.75 hours exercising.

• A preschooler's risk of obesity jumps 6% for every hour of TV watched per day, 31% if the TV is in their bedroom.

• The average American child sees 40,000 commercials annually on broadcast TV alone.

• 80% of TV commercials are for fast food, candy, cereal, and toys.

• An average of one food commercial is shown every 5 minutes during Saturday morning cartoons.

• The food and beverage industry spends more than $10 billion targeting children and youth though TV ads, coupons, contests, public relations promotions, and packaging.

• The number-one wish for girls 11-17 is to be thinner; boys 11-17 want a physical ideal that can only be achieved through dangerous steroid use.

• Kids see more than 250,000 commercials aimed at their appearance by age 17.
Common Sense Says:

- **Set limits on media time, and stick to them.** Studies show that the moment the TV is turned off, weight drops. Create a balanced schedule of how much media your kids can consume and when. Agree that if they do their homework and chores, they can go online, instant message (IM) their friends, see their favorite show. Sit down and draw up expectations.

- **Get your kids up and moving.** Encourage younger kids to be physical and interactive while engaging in media. Dance, clap hands, anything. As for tweens and teens? Choose games that get them off the couch.

- **Watch media with your kids.** Point out when someone is selling them something that isn’t good for their bodies. Point out how much effort (stylists, trainers, image editing, etc.) goes into celebrities’ looks — it's their job, after all. Point out product tie-ins, advergames, and placements and how they're embedded in media.

- **Model good behavior.** Take a break from the screen — even when you’re really busy. Get everyone up and moving with a walk, a ride, a trip to the store, or even a chore.

- **Explain the basics of diabetes, obesity, and eating disorders.** See if you can find examples of behaviors in media that could lead to any of these diseases.

- **Be careful when discussing weight with your kids.** They can easily feel criticized, since it's natural for them to be hyper-sensitive about their bodies. Keep the emphasis on health rather than appearance.
Keep information age appropriate. With elementary school kids, explain how diet and exercise keep them healthy. Middle schoolers can absorb information about obesity, eating disorders, alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes. Teens should understand that stars look the way they do thanks to Photoshop, makeup artists, strict diet, and tons of exercise.

Limit or avoid exposing young kids to commercials. Kids 2-7 often can’t distinguish between ad messages and reality. Even age-appropriate shows tend to be surrounded by commercials designed to give kids the "gimmies" for foods that are often full of sugar and fat.

Get the TV, computer, and video game console out of your kids’ bedroom. Studies show that kids watch more, you have less control, weight increases, and grades drop. The risk for obesity jumps 31% for each hour of TV watched.

Don’t let young girls immerse themselves in fashion magazines — without giving them some healthy perspective. Studies show that teens who read lots of diet articles are more likely five years later to practice extreme weight-loss measures such as smoking cigarettes, abusing laxatives, and fasting.

Don’t eat with the TV on. Turn it off and enjoy your family.
Sexual Behavior

What Is It?

Music videos, movies, reality shows, beer ads, online porn, prostitutes in video games, sexy doctor shows. Sex is everywhere. And studies show that the more sexual content kids watch and listen to, the earlier they’re likely to have sex themselves. In fact, teens report that their main source of information about sex, dating, and sexual health comes from what they see and hear in the media. Public health experts say that the media can be an effective sex educator when it includes specific information on birth control methods and sexually transmitted diseases. But in 2005, out of 68% of TV shows that showed steamy sexual content, only 15% discussed risk and responsibility. And it’s not just movies and TV: Music, video games, and the Internet are also filled with sexually explicit, often-degrading messages that can shape kids’ attitudes about sex.

Why You Should Care:

Because if you don’t talk to your kids about your own values and expectations about sex, the main input they’ll get is from the media. And that world makes dressing sexy, talking about sex, and casual hook-ups seem like the norm. Teen pregnancy may not be on the rise, but sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) sure are, as is a rise in sexualized violence. And so much of online life is anonymous, which creates false sexual bravado and allows for sexually aggressive action divorced from consequences. Do you really want your boys looking at girls as sex objects and your girls using sexiness as a foundation for their identities?
Some Facts You Should Know:

- 72% of teens think watching TV with a lot of sexual content influences their peers' behavior somewhat or a lot.

- Programs with sexual content average 4.4 scenes per hour.

- On average, music videos contain 93 sexual situations per hour, including 11 hard-core scenes depicting behavior like intercourse and oral sex.

- Between 1998 and 2005, the number of sexual scenes on TV nearly doubled.

- 1 in 5 children will be approached by a sexual predator online.

- 15- to 24-year-olds account for nearly half of all STD diagnoses each year.

- Watching a lot of sexual content on TV and listening to sexually explicit music lyrics increase the chances that a teen will have sex at an earlier age.

- 60% of female video game characters are presented in a sexualized fashion.

- The biggest users of online pornography are 12- to 17-year-old boys.
Talk about your values. You can’t always be around to cover your kids’ eyes or ears, but you can help them develop inner compasses by sharing your feelings about the role of sex in their lives.

Watch and listen with your kids. When a sexy song comes on the radio with lyrics you don’t think are healthy, say why. Ask your kids what they think and whether they know people who act like the singers or actors.

Be age appropriate. Child development experts say kids 5-7 can handle the concept of boy/girl relationships, but nothing more explicit. For 8- to 10-year-olds, body-part jokes are age appropriate, but not sexual humor. It gets really tough in adolescence, where, for 11- to 12-year-olds, scenes of simple kissing and boy/girl social dynamics are okay, but graphic nudity and simulated sex aren’t great for their developing ideas about what sex is. For younger teens, sex has become commonplace in their media world, but given that most of those kids haven’t had it yet, try to really limit their exposure to anything graphic.
Talk about consequences and bring examples down to earth. Is a guy beating up a girl in that video game? Is the singer talking about how many girls he sleeps with without knowing their names? How would your kids feel if that happened to them? Have you mentioned that, in the real world, unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy and STDs?

No sexual media content is appropriate for kids ages 2-4.

No sex and violence together. Unless the media’s focus is on the consequences of sexually violent behavior, it’s not appropriate for anyone.

No porn sites. Establish clear rules about where your kids can go online. Check your computer history to see where they’ve been going.

No sexual language. Kids call each other “ho” (and they aren’t talking about Santa). Tell your tweens and teens that IMing or texting something that can seem sexual can get them into a heap of trouble. Fast.
Violence & Aggression

What Is It?

Played a T- or M-rated video game lately? Watched a cop show? Followed a gangsta rap feud, seen an action movie, or checked in on one of the many celebrity smackdowns? Violent and aggressive behavior shows up everywhere. And it's not simply passive; as video games take center stage, they allow players to maim, kill, and create all kinds of havoc. In fact, that's how games are won. Studies show that aggressive gaming affects kids — so much so that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) concluded that "playing violent video games leads to adolescent violence like smoking leads to lung cancer."

Why You Should Care:

Because the studies don't lie. Lots of violence affects kids' behavior. Period. When kids marinate in media steeped in acts of aggression, it can increase antisocial activity and bullying and decrease empathy for victims of violence. The more aggressive behavior kids see, the more it becomes an acceptable way to settle conflicts. Movies with scary images, intense peril, loud noises, and, above all, blood and gore, create all sorts of disturbances, including increased anxiety, sleep disruption, and wicked nightmares. And those first-person-shooter video games? The intimacy of the mayhem and murder pack such a huge emotional punch that they alter brain chemistry.
Some Facts You Should Know:

• Nearly 2 out of 3 TV programs contain violence, averaging 6 violent acts per hour.

• The average child who watches 2 hours of cartoons per day may see more than 10,000 violent acts a year.

• There are more than twice as many violent incidents in children's programming than in other types of programming.

• Teens who watch more than 1 hour of TV per day are 4 times more likely than other teens to commit aggressive acts in adulthood.

• In a study of third and fourth graders, reducing TV and video game consumption to less than 1 hour per day decreased verbal aggression by 50% and physical aggression by 40%.

• According to the AAP, violence is a leading cause of death for children, adolescents, and young adults — more prevalent than disease, cancer, or congenital disorders.

• By the time kids enter middle school, they will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 more acts of violence on broadcast TV alone.

• Younger kids are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of media violence — especially those under 7 who can’t easily distinguish between fantasy and reality.

• The younger kids are when they see a violent or scary movie or TV show, the longer-lasting the effects — particularly in nightmares and increased anxiety.
**Common Sense Says:**

***Explain consequences.*** What parent hasn’t heard “but there’s no blood” as the justification for seeing a movie or playing a video game? Explain the true physical consequences of violence. Point out how unrealistic it is for people to get away with the kind of mayhem modeled in media. Explain how games, in particular, actually encourage and reward violent acts (how else can you win?).

***Teach conflict resolution.*** Kids know that clocking someone on the head isn't the way to solve a disagreement, but verbal cruelty is also violent. Teach kids how to disengage, use their words, and stand up for themselves without throwing a punch.

***Be age appropriate:***

- **Kids ages 2-4** often see cartoon violence. But keep them away from anything that shows physical aggression as a means of conflict resolution, because they'll imitate what they see.

- **For 5- to 7-year-olds,** cartoon rough-and-tumble, slapstick, and fantasy violence are okay, but violence that would reasonably result in death or serious injury is too scary.
8- to 10-year-olds can handle action-hero sword fighting or gunplay as long as there's no gore. Violence should have consequences.

For 11- to 12-year-old tweens, historical action is okay, including battles, fantasy clashes, and duels. But close-ups of gore or graphic violence (alone or combined with sexual situations) aren't recommended.

Kids ages 13-17 can and will see shoot 'em ups, blow 'em ups, high-tech violence, accidents with disfigurement, or death, anger, and gang fighting (and with HDTV, they will really see things!). Point out that the violence portrayed is hurtful and causes suffering. And limit time exposure to violence, especially in video games.

No M-rated games for kids younger than 16 or 17. Sure, the kid down the street has the latest cop-killer game. But these games are ultra-violent and often sexually violent. That’s not good for developing brains and social development.

Don’t let kids immerse themselves in violent content. Keep an eye on the clock. The more time spent with violent content, the greater its impact and influence.
What Is It?
Smoking, drinking, drugs, gaming. There's no gray area here: A direct and proven correlation exists between the onset of smoking and drinking and media exposure. Marketers consciously advertise directly or by embedding products in entertainment to foster brand awareness with young kids so that when they grow up, they'll gravitate to the branded products. It's not accidental that animated characters often sell products. (Remember Joe Camel?) Scenes of drinking, smoking, and drug use in kids' media both model and normalize these behaviors, increasing the odds that kids will try them for themselves. But addiction risks also extend beyond substance use: Some kids — especially boys 11-19 — can get hooked on their computers, as well as multiplayer Internet games that are purposely designed to be highly addictive.

Why You Should Care:
Because alcohol advertising affects underage drinking behavior. Because kids are using drugs at younger and younger ages. Because kids, especially teens, are bombarded with thousands of images of smoking in movies alone. And because computer and Internet gaming addictions can harm kids’ social interaction abilities. Staying immersed in electronic fantasies can cause them to miss meals and sleep and negatively impact homework and school attendance.
Some Facts You Should Know:

• Half of all kids who start smoking do so because they saw it in movies.

• 1 in 3 kids will ultimately die from a smoking-related disease.

• Movie smoking is even more effective than cigarette ads with teens.

• The earlier kids start drinking and drugging, the higher the incidence of alcoholism.

• 47% of kids under 14 who start drinking become alcoholics within 10 years.

• Research shows that 9- to 11-year-olds can identify the Budweiser frogs better than Tony the Tiger, the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, or Smokey the Bear.

• The more alcohol ads kids see, the more they drink.

• Researchers have determined that playing video games triggers and doubles the amount of dopamine in the brain, roughly equivalent to a dose of speed.

• Middle school students who play video games during the week do worse in school.
Common Sense Says:

- **Watch TV and movies with your kids, and point out drinking and smoking.** Where is it shown as glamorous? Cool? Remind your kids that tobacco and alcohol companies have probably paid to have their products featured.

- **Defuse funny alcohol ads, because there's nothing funny about drunk driving.** No one likes being the wet blanket, but you might remind your kids that those amusing beer ads are there for one reason: to sell alcohol. And car crashes remain the leading cause of death for kids 15-20.

- **Share the facts about smoking with your kids.** They're hard to argue with.

- **Create a gaming game plan.** Set game time limits before turning on the box. It cuts out arguments and makes the time spent more enjoyable.

- **Look at your whole family's gaming and online behavior.** Younger kids could be patterning themselves after older siblings, and everyone could be following your own example.

- **Don't ban gaming.** Internet and console games have become entertainment facts of life for kids. They're also learning tools. But do be careful about what kind of games they play and how long they play them.
Keep a watchful eye for signs of Internet and game addiction. They include loss of sleep, crankiness when away from games or Internet communications, social isolation, and lying about both the amount of time spent online and contacts made through online communication.

Don't let 2- to 8-year-olds see TV shows or movies with addictive behaviors. But if they do see smoking, drinking, and drug use, make sure you point out the negative consequences.

Don't buy in. Don’t let your kids buy souvenirs or branded products that display drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes; studies show it impacts use.

Don't kid yourself. You may think your kids aren't intrigued by celebrities who drink and use drugs, but they are. Talk to them about the real-life consequences, and connect the facts to their behaviors. Just think back to when you were a teenager. Need we say more?
Social & Emotional Health

What Is It?
You want your kids to have a healthy social life and do well in school. You want them to behave morally and have good values. For that, they need hefty doses of self-esteem and a strong sense of right and wrong. That's what leads to respectful, responsible, and appropriate relationships. But the media often model and encourage just the opposite. Reality TV shows — which routinely rank in the top 10 for preteen viewing — glamorize people who lie and ruthlessly stab each other in the back to win competitions. Email, IMs, and cell phone text messaging have become new ways to cheat and bully. Rampant consumerism helps kids define who they are by what they own. And gender and racial stereotypes abound in video games, movies, TV shows, and music, sending kids unhealthy messages about social norms.

Why You Should Care:
Because the media is one all-encompassing, always-present, giant role model and “super-peer” for kids. Because kids spend more time absorbing the media’s messages as they get older than they do absorbing ours. Because what they see, hear, and play models views and behavior that may conflict with our own sense of healthy values and conduct. Because the commercial nature of today’s media makes kids put enormous emphasis on what they own, leaving them vulnerable to more anxiety and depression. We have to ask what expectations the media is creating for our kids — and what counterbalancing messages we need to give them so they grow up with healthy social skills and attitudes.
Some Facts You Should Know:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics lists the following as media-message “side effects”: poor school performance, hitting or pushing other kids often, aggressively talking back to adults, frequent nightmares.

- One study showed that teens who “text” a lot are sadder and less assured. (Heavy use was defined as more than 90 calls or text messages a day.)

- Cheating is on the rise. According to a Pew research study, 37% of teens say they believe that “too many” of their peers are using the Internet to cheat.

- Race and gender stereotypes and inequalities still exist in media. Of characters on primetime TV, only 3% are Asian, 4% Latino, and 16% African American, versus 74% Caucasian.

- Of characters in top-selling video games, 64% are male, 17% are female, and 19% aren't even human (they're aliens).

- Kids know that they're doing things with media that their parents wouldn’t like. Nearly one-third (29%) of students said their parent or guardian would disapprove if they knew what they were doing on the Internet, and 64% of online teens say that most teens do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about.
Media is full of teachable moments. Point out antisocial behavior and racial stereotyping, and discuss consequences. Point out words and behavior in popular TV shows, Web sites, and music that are both positive and negative examples of what you do and don’t want your kids to model. What you say to your child is up to you, but have the discussion.

Pick age-appropriate media. Kids ages 2-7 should be exposed to media featuring good role models, racial and gender diversity, and no stereotypes.

Embrace what they like. Rejecting your kids' love of popular culture can close off avenues of communication. Embrace their world, but establish clear boundaries about what you find acceptable and appropriate.

Help teens balance their need for rebellion and self-expression with an appreciation of acceptable social action. Kids need to understand how to communicate and use media wisely and ethically. If they engage with media that includes antisocial behavior, make sure they understand the impact and potential consequences.
Let older kids see things you don't agree with. But then discuss exactly what you don't like with them. Since we won't always be around, we need to make sure we instill critical-thinking skills in our kids.

Don't shy away from pointing the finger. If your kids (or their schoolmates) are heavy media users and they demonstrate or are on the receiving end of any antisocial behavior or experience eating disorders, addictions, low school performance, or depression, connect the dots — and disconnect the source.

No screen time for kids under 2. The American Academy of Pediatrics doesn’t recommend TV for kids under 2. Kids grow and thrive best through personal interaction. And those “genius” TV shows, tapes, and computer games? No research backs up their claims.
1. Establish Media Guidelines with Kids

- Set media time limits, and stick to them. Experts recommend no more than 1-2 hours per day of screen time.

- Check content and ratings in advance to choose age-appropriate media.

- Keep media out of kids' bedrooms. Locate media in a central place where children's use can be supervised.

- Make a no-media rule during mealtimes, while doing homework, and before bedtime.

- Consider using parental controls — blocking technology like the V-Chip for the TV, or filtering software for the Internet.

- Get kids into the habit of asking for permission to use media.

- Make sure babysitters and other caregivers know your guidelines for a healthy media diet.

- Hit the OFF button, and get kids to read, exercise, or play outdoors every day for the same amount of time they spend using media.
2. Use Media Together, and Talk About What You See, Hear, and Read

- Whenever you can, watch, play, listen, and surf with your kids and talk about the content. When you can't be there, ask them about the media they've used.

- Become media literate. Help kids question and analyze media messages by sharing your values. Let them know how you feel about solving problems with violence, stereotyping people, selling products using sex or cartoon characters, and advertising to kids in schools or in movie theaters.

- Help kids connect what they learn from the media to events and other activities in which they're involved — like playing sports and creating art — in order to broaden their understanding of the world.

3. Be a Role Model

- When kids are around, set an example by using media the way you want them to use it.

- Record any shows that you like to watch that may be inappropriate for your kids — even the news — and watch them when kids aren't around.
**Common Sense Media** is the nation’s leading nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving the media lives of kids and families. We provide trustworthy ratings and reviews of media and entertainment based on child development criteria created by leading national experts. The next time you need to make a media decision, or need media management tips, come visit us at [www.commonsensemedia.org](http://www.commonsensemedia.org) to help make the best age-appropriate selection for your kids.

Did you find this information helpful? Please let us know. Send your thoughts to: info@commonsensemedia.org