



Reading and Television

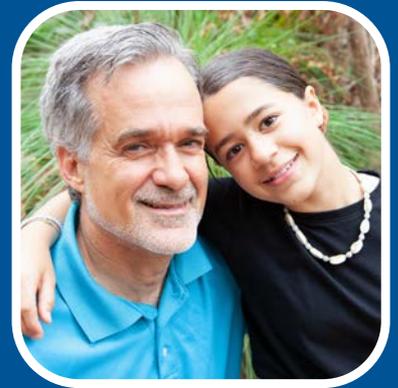
"It is infinitely more useful for a child to hear a story told by a person than by a computer...because the greatest part of the learning experience lies not in the particular words of the story but in the involvement with the individual reading it."

*Frank Smith*¹

Perhaps the question most frequently asked by parents at conference time is 'What can I do at home to help my child?' Our usual advice is that one of the best things parents can do to help their child's education is to read with them. To this suggestion, parents often reply that their child has trouble finding books they like at the library. Some children have a resistance to books, even though both parents may be avid readers themselves. The task of encouraging reading is harder than it might at first appear, mainly because of the effects of television and other screens. The influence of screens go beyond stealing time away from reading and other activities at home; it affects the way children learn and how they relate to their world.

According to a former director of the Writing Program at the State University of New York at Birmingham, "Once out of school, nearly 60% of all Americans never read a single book, and most of the rest read only one book a year."² In this country, the 2021 National Reading Survey by *Australia Reads*³ found that 75% of the general Australia population read or listen to at least one book in any format once a year. Conversely, 25% of the general Australian adult population have not read or listened to a single book in a year. The majority (64%) of Australian readers cited 'watching TV and movies at home' and another big proportion (46%) cited 'social media/internet browsing' as the other leisure activities most likely to compete for their reading time.

Television and books have in common the job of letting us share in experiences we might not otherwise have in our lives, adding to the stock we draw on to understand reality. These two mediums accomplish this task in very different ways. Dissatisfaction with



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television as a learning tool mostly alluded to its content, which spurned the influential lobby group *Action for Children's Television* in 1968. Content is more of a concern to adults, mainly because of differences in the ways adults and children perceive television. An adult has a vast backlog of real-life experiences with which to compare the TV experience; the child does not. As the adult watches television, their own present and past relationships, experiences, dreams and fantasies are drawn on to transform the audiovisual material into something reflecting their own particular inner needs.

With limited life experiences, and only having recently emerged from the stage of pre-verbal thought, children watch television as if it were a primary activity for them. Later real-life activities then stir memories of television experiences, rather than the other way round, which serves to dehumanise and make less real the relationships and events they encounter in life. Marie Winn argues in her now classic study of television, children and the family, *The Plug-In Drug*, that the far more damaging effects of television come not from its content but from the act of watching itself.⁴

How the child learns

The challenges of being an educator are very different now than what they were when Maria Montessori began her work with children. Before television, an hour a day was more time than most children spent in a fantasy world of stories told to them or read to them from a book. Before learning to read, it was difficult for pre-television children to enter the imaginary worlds of others without an adult along to interpret, explain and comfort. Today in most advanced industrialised countries, television or other screens soak up more of the average child's waking hours than any other single activity. A 2015 longitudinal study by the *Australian Institute of Family Studies*⁵ showed that by 12 or 13 years old the average Australian child spends about 20% of the waking time on weekdays watching television, and this rises to 30% on weekends. The study found that TV is children's main form of screen time, accounting for about 60% of total screen time. There is no other experience in a child's life (or in the history of childhood) that permits so much stimulation while demanding so little response from the child in return.

Around the turn of the last century, Montessori described the development of the child as a process in which the child constructs himself by discovering the environment, motivated by certain inner directives and urges. This development occurs in stages from birth through adolescence that can be defined roughly by age. It follows principles which she discovered by observing children in an open environment which she 'prepared' with materials for their use. Instead of seeing learning as the task of filling the child's mind with information, Montessori realised that active freedom of choice for the child within the limits of a carefully arranged environment is the basis of concentration and that this freely chosen concentration opens the mind to learning.

Montessori observed that children achieve an integration of self through their work, appearing calm, rested and pleased after the most intense concentration on tasks they have freely chosen to do. The child's nature is to strive for independence; this independence lets the child listen to an inner guide in deciding upon actions that are useful to them in their work. If adults continually overpower this inner guide by making decisions or performing actions the child can perform herself, the child cannot develop will or concentration of her own.



Directed by their inner guide, the young child will be attracted to particular activities and objects in the environment with an intensity that absorbs all his attention and engages his whole personality. At first the child will be attracted to materials that appeal to her instinctive interest, such as bright colours. With more experience, the child accumulates ideas of how the environment works, which then begins to excite an interest in finding out more. When the child's attention becomes focused by this intellectual interest, rather than by instinctive impulses, the child grows calmer and more controlled. Concentration becomes a pleasurable act, from which he emerges rested and fulfilled.

With an ability for prolonged attention and concentration (internal coordination), the child can then work on strengthening her will by learning to inhibit certain impulses and adapt to the limits of the task they have chosen. Lots of opportunities for choice and action are needed for development of a secure will. Lectures about what the child ought to be doing don't help the child, because it is only by making their own choices that the child gains the strength to control his actions. It's quite possible to comply outwardly with a teacher's request and inwardly remain a thousand kilometres away.⁶

Intellectual development begins as the child becomes conscious of difference and distinction around him, ordering the perceptions of his senses into an organised arrangement in his mind. Montessori believed that the environment must be beautiful, harmonious, and based on reality if the young child is going to be able to usefully organise her perceptions of it. Only with realistic and ordered perceptions is the child able to begin the creative process of selecting and emphasising, abstracting the dominant characteristics of things and associating their images in her mind. This process of becoming creative requires freedom – freedom to select his own interests, freedom to work without interruption for as long as he likes, freedom to discover solutions and ideas and select answers on her own, freedom to communicate and share his activities with others, and freedom from the arbitrary control and judgment of an outside authority.

Montessori believed that fantasy play, symbolic poetry and fairytales have no place in the early education of the child. She did not want to banish fantasy from the child's life completely, and she knew that most Italian children of her time would return home each day to a family rich in oral traditions, with no shortage of adults to entertain them.



The classroom must be separate in the child's mind, a place to seek reality and pursue mastery over the environment. Montessori believed that adults too often inadvertently hinder the development of the child's intelligence and creativity by substituting their own imagination for the child's, and by taking advantage of the child's natural credulity. For Montessori, too much fantasy confuses the young child's emerging sense of reality, interfering with his quest to construct himself by mastering his environment.

Television and other screens are powerful storytellers; they compound these effects on the child's development, not only because they offer such a smorgasbord of fantasy, but also because of the nature of the act of watching itself.

Television interferes with the learning process

Articles on the beneficial effects of television on reading ability in children argue that programs like *Sesame Street* or *Play School* encourage language skills and letter recognition, and that literature-based shows like the classic *Reading Rainbow* (hosted by LeVar Burton, aka Geordi La Forge of *Star Trek* fame) can influence children to read by promoting books.⁷ According to Marie Winn, there is no evidence that television programs like *Reading Rainbow* led to greater love of reading in children; but there is a lot of evidence to show that when competition from screens are eliminated, children simply and easily turn to reading instead.

The educational results of *Sesame Street* were disappointing. This program was carefully designed by experts in child development with the expectation that it would bridge the gap between middle-class children who have had ample verbal opportunities at home and those children deprived of such opportunities. This expectation did not come about. With almost half of North American two to five year-olds regular watchers of the show in its early days, it seems that although many children exhibited small gains in number and letter recognition as a result of *Sesame Street*, their language skills did not show any significant or permanent gains as they progressed through school. In 1975, a study entitled 'Sesame Street Revisited' reviewed the highly-publicised evaluations of the program made by the *Educational Testing Service* in 1970-71. The authors found that the cognitive gains earlier ascribed to the program were due to adult/parental supervision and their use of promotional material which accompanied their participation in the ETS evaluation.⁸

Another researcher drew attention to other results of the show's quick-cut, fast-action format on preschoolers: a decrease in imaginative play, an increase in aimless running around, non-involvement in play materials, low frustration tolerance, poor persistence and a confusion about reality and fantasy. Programs like *Sesame Street* leave no time for response and reflection that are an important part of a child's complete learning experience, leading instead "to a shortened attention span, a lack of reflectiveness, and an expectation of rapid change in the broader environment," concluded the directors of the Yale Family Television Research and Consultation Center.



The reason for these poor results is that *Sesame Street* is not a real life linguistic experience. There is a world of difference between a language experience that requires nothing from the child and one in which the child is able to involve himself actively. No matter what the content, staring into a screen is a right-brain activity involving non-verbal cognition, and does not encourage the sort of left-brain mental effort that forming one's own thoughts and feelings and moulding them into sentences requires. Unlike tired adults who turn on the television to unwind, to stop thinking, children have a continuous need for mental activity. Having only recently made the transition from non-verbal to verbal thought, young children are still in the process of developing the mental structures, concepts and understandings required to achieve their highest potential as rational beings. Everything depends on the opportunities they have to exercise their growing verbal skills.

Watching television will not prevent a child from acquiring language; what is at stake is their **commitment** to language as a means of expression. The child's commitment may have a physiological basis in the balance of right and left hemisphere brain development.⁹ Winn believes it is likely that a predisposition toward 'openness' (the opposite of focal concentration) acquired through years of TV viewing, can deteriorate viewers' ability to concentrate, to read and write clearly, "in short, to demonstrate any of the verbal skills a literate society requires." In other words, if the home stresses television as a source of entertainment, activity, interaction and information, the child's reading development and ability to concentrate may be damaged.

So why is it so hard to stop watching? For Winn, the relaxed, open, right-brain nature of the activity partly explains its addictive nature. Because watching is such a passive activity, television has to hold the attention by giving the illusion of fast-paced activity. The relentless velocity limits the workings of the imagination and prevents the viewer from transforming material on the screen into something that serves their own emotional needs. At such a pace we cannot invest the people and events we see on television with personal meanings that help us understand and resolve relationships and conflicts in our own lives; we are under the power of the imagination of the show's creators, our eyes and ears overwhelmed with the immediacy of sight and sound.



And then there are things about the electronic images themselves which mesmerise our eyes. The whole television image is perceived through the fovea, the sharp-focusing part of the eye. This eliminates the fuzzy peripheral part of vision which normally diffuses the focus. The unnatural absence of a diffuse periphery in the image we are seeing on the screen abnormally heightens our attention to the image. Moreover, while the natural contours of real life objects are normally stationary, the electronic mechanism that creates images on the screen produces contours that are constantly moving. Although the viewer is unaware of this effect, the eye is drawn to fixate more strongly on these moving contours, defocusing slightly in order to compensate for the lack of sharp outline. This slight defocusing of the eyes normally accompanies fantasy or dream states.¹⁰

All these perceptual anomalies may combine to fascinate viewers and keep them glued to the set. They may also have contributed to changes in reading style and preferences. The mental diffuseness demanded by the television experience may cause children who were raised on television to enter the reading world more superficially, more impatiently, or more vaguely. Winn believes that the decline in the popularity of children's fiction since the mid-1960s may be related to the amount of fiction available to children on television. Along with this,

there has been a huge rise in popularity of what she calls the 'non-book' – a book with no sustained argument or developed storyline that needs to be read from beginning to end. The non-book requires little concentration or inner visualisation, and can be scanned in fits and starts.¹¹ It consists largely of pictures and presents none of the ambiguity which makes a good book satisfying in exchange for sustained concentration. This type of book (the Guinness Book of Records and comic strip collections are the most conspicuous examples) appeals to many children weaned on television who are not comfortable with the traditional sequential style of reading.

Reading assists the learning process

Books give us new experiences in a very different way. Books are active because they require us to participate by decoding and manipulating symbols. Reading a good book draws on the reader's own experience and reflects their own needs. There is a creative process in reading which nurtures and encourages the imagination, as the reader produces their own imaginary experiences. Books give the reader freedom to choose when to pause for breath, allowing time to cope with any emotions the material may arouse. As Bruno Bettelheim said, "TV captures the imagination but does not liberate it. A good book at once stimulates and frees the mind."

Best of all, reading and writing go together in a two-way process. As we read we fall back on our own writing experience. While the child has no acquaintance with the building blocks of television, from the start children wield power over the words they are struggling to decipher on the page, making the reading experience satisfying and empowering. Reading develops concentration and attention span, as well as facilitating clear-thinking (the ability to use precise words and established meanings in a coherent sentence structure). All the child needs for this is their own mind; in the lounge room or on a mountain top, anywhere a child can go a book can go with them.

Imagination versus entertainment

For the school age child, reading and writing are the keys that unlock the doors to culture in the Montessori classroom. Prior to age six, abstract mental processes are still being built by concrete activity and physical interaction with objects. During the 6-12 years it is the acquisition of culture rather than the absorption of the immediate environment which becomes the focus of the child's development. "Consciousness is thrown outwards with a special direction" and the child begins to hunger for the reasons for things. Even while she lacks the skills to articulate the logical abstractions to which her mind is opening, the 6-12 child has the ability to envision what she cannot see, to explore what cannot be taken in by the

senses. The child is learning to distinguish between fact and fiction, and is interested in large endeavours and the exploration of concepts large enough to ponder for a lifetime.

At this level the Montessori guide provides limits by offering a vision of the whole within which individual details take their meaning. Television, like traditional education, tends to parcel out knowledge to children in fragmented bits, confusing their attempts to make sense of the relationships between things. The Great Lessons of the Montessori elementary classroom capture and focus the imagination of the child, providing a panoramic view of the universe and the sweep of human history. They are impressionistic, dramatic and endeavour to inspire wonder at our connection with the grandeur of the cosmic process. The Creation Stories, Clock of Eras, Fundamental Human Needs and the Time Line of Life all attempt to address the child's awakening search for order and meaning, nurturing the idea that the universe was formed out of love, that everything has a role to play in the existence of everything else.

"...when we propose to introduce the universe to the child, what but imagination can be of use to us?...The knowledge he then acquires is organised and systematic; his intelligence becomes whole and complete because of the vision of the whole that has been presented to him, and his interest spreads to all, for all are linked and have their place in the universe on which his mind is centred."

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Such development of the imagination is a very different process from the passive entertainment offered by television. The child who is used to being entertained comes to school expecting to be entertained rather than actively engaged, and will have a much harder time making lasting personal connections with the details they uncover in the course of a day in the classroom.

Living without screens

Many parents have an ambivalent relationship with screens. Although they may be aware that much of children's television is the intellectual equivalent of junk food, screens are a reliably mesmerising babysitter for busy parents. And with digital technology increasingly blurring the line between work and family life, parents' own addiction to screens at home makes it harder for them to preach abstinence to their children. Helping children unplug requires that parents are willing to examine their own technology habits first and foremost and model the behaviours they want for their children.

In the absence of television and other screens, a universal increase in reading by parents and children is reported, along with a whole host of other activities like playing board games, storytelling, cooking and planning menus, singing, rough-housing, drawing and art projects, card games and relaxing. Among the changes in family life commonly reported by families who have lived without television for a time are more interaction between children and adults, a greater feeling of closeness as a family, and a more peaceful atmosphere in the home. Children are more likely to become involved in household tasks, more likely to spend time playing together, and more likely to play outdoors. Mealtimes become longer as conversation lingers; bedtimes earlier.¹³ With no television schedules, there's just more time.

Making the transition to living without television can be stressful at first. The powerful images of television take up much of its viewers' waking thoughts. Many children spend a lot of time in the classroom and on the playground rehearsing attitudes and dialogues taken from television or social media. Removing this mental clutter can expose uncomfortable feelings. However, most young children adapt to the change without much difficulty, never looking back.

The most important factor for the child seems to be the conviction of the parent. Many of the difficulties parents encounter in controlling their children's television watching, or eliminating television altogether, stem from their own ambivalence about the role they want screens to play in their family life.¹⁴

Television and screens offer the universe to the child as an infinite parade of details. The true gift of learning springs from the child's sense of wonder about the world they live in, from reinventing those details for themselves. This kind of learning flourishes with the companionship of someone who can share the child's joy and excitement about the fresh new world they live in. Perhaps the most cherished aspect of living without television for many families is the ritual of reading with their child, no matter what their age.

School can teach the child to read, but the most important factor in helping children choose to read for pleasure is the habit they learn at home.

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