The Dangers of TV

By Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen

What They Don't Want You To Know About TV and Videos.

During their wanderings, ancient Jewry happened upon some of the most abominable practices of the pagan world, including child-sacrifice. The contrast between the world's wanton violence and promiscuity on the one hand, and the Torah's pristine standards and sensitivities on the other, must have been astounding. For those who had seen the dark side of polytheism and yet knew of a brighter truth, nothing could have been as repulsive as cultures of idol worship. One would think there was little danger of Jewry being drawn into pagan rituals.

God did not feel the same confidence. He saw a vulnerability through which even those who knew both paganism's horrors and Torah's wholesomeness could succumb: If Jewry would bring idols into their own homes, even for aesthetic enjoyment or academic study, they could corrupt Jewish sensibilities. "Do not bring an abomination into your house since you will become accursed like it," He warned His chosen people. "You should utterly detest [an idol] and utterly abhor it, for it is an objectively cursed thing." Ancient Israel needed a commandment to detest the detestable, abhor the abhorrent, and keep it far from their homes, the Torah teaches, because once even the most crass influence passes within, it grows gradually less offensive and more acceptable.

Traditional Jews long understood that the home is not just a dorm and restaurant: It is the center of the child's world, and it is the heart of the family. As such, it demands protection. Heart infections kill. Influences that are only offensive on the streets can be deadly in the den.

The Television Question

Following in their ancestors' footsteps, traditional Jews guard their hearts, carefully sifting through their generation's popular culture before allowing it through the front door. Their first question has always been, "How will this affect my children?"

In March 1975, four leading, traditional Jewish scholars issued an advisory warning about television to traditional Jewish communities. Their paper was rooted entirely in Talmudic sources and contained no references to the scientific literature. Nonetheless, it cited what secular scholars would term psychological and developmental dangers. It suggested that these dangers were related to both content and medium, and it recommended that parents not expose their children to television. At the time, the warning must have seemed provincial at best to those unfamiliar with the uncanny insight of traditional Jewish wisdom.

In 1975, television research in secular, academic circles was just beginning. The entire scientific literature consisted of only about 300 research papers and a summary report issued jointly by the United States Surgeon General and the National Institute of Mental Health. The summary report weakly raised the possibility of an association between television watching and aggression, but concluded, "a great deal of research remains to be done before we can have confidence in these conclusions."

By 1980, investigators had produced 2,500 studies on the effects of watching television, and the Talmudic scholars' early warning was beginning to look less provincial and more prophetic. In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contracted the leading television researchers—professors from Harvard, Stanford, the University of North Carolina, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale—to summarize scientific opinion about television's safety. Their highly critical two-volume statement failed to gain much attention outside of academic circles, but it shook the world of research-psychologists and inspired a flood of further studies about the dangers of television. Thousands of subsequent investigations confirmed the early findings, and today a rich literature documents the negative outcomes of exposing children to television.

CONTENT

Most discussions focus on the deleterious effects of television content (as opposed to medium); so let us begin our review there.

Alcohol

In 1993, one out of three high school seniors, one out of four tenth-graders, and one out of seven eighth-graders got drunk at least once every two weeks. Where are so many children learning to abuse alcohol?

The 1982 report of the Surgeon General revealed that alcohol is the most consumed beverage on prime time television shows. Television characters drink alcohol twice as often as they drink tea or coffee, 14 times as frequently as soft drinks, and 15 times more often than water. Eighty percent of prime-time programs showed or mentioned alcohol consumption, and in half of these instances it was heavy alcohol consumption - five or more drinks. In 1990, there were 8.1 drinking references or portrayals per hour on prime- time. Of deep concern to the Surgeon General, "The

drinkers are not the villains or the bit players; they are good, steady, likable characters," and portrayals are entirely devoid of "indications of possible risks." When we consider that, in addition to alcohol consumption portrayed during programs, the average U.S. citizen also sees 100,000 television advertisements for alcoholic beverages before age twenty-one, it seems reasonable to suspect that TV exposure might affect our children's drinking habits.

New Zealand researchers in fact discovered a direct correlation between frequency of television viewing among 13 to 15 year olds and quantity of alcohol consumed at age 18. The more TV young teens watched, the more alcohol they drank three to five years later. Researchers from the University of Rochester School of Medicine in New York replicated the New Zealand findings with a random sampling of 14 to 16-year-old U.S. teens. A follow-up study concluded that it was the TV watching that produced the alcohol consumption (and not the alcohol consumption that encouraged TV watching).

A team at Stanford University recently succeeded in quantifying television's effect on teenage drinking. Studying over 1,500 ninth-grade public high school students in San Jose, California, the Stanford researchers discovered that "one extra hour of television viewing per day was associated with an average 9% increase in the risk of starting to drink over the next eighteen months; [and] similarly, one extra hour of music video [MTV] viewing per day was associated with an average 31% increase in the risk of starting to drink over the next eighteen months." These probabilities remained even after controlling for the effects of age, sex, ethnicity, and other media use. The Stanford team concluded:

The findings of this study have important health and public policy implications… The large magnitudes of the these associations between hours of television viewing and music video viewing and the subsequent onset of drinking demand that attempts to prevent adolescent alcohol abuse should address the adverse influences of alcohol use in the media.

Each year, students spend $5.5 billion on alcohol—more than they spend on soft-drinks, tea, milk, juice, coffee, and books combined. Alcohol is implicated in more than 40% of all academic problems and 28% of all dropouts. Alcohol was found to be a factor in 60% of women who were diagnosed with certain infectious diseases. On a typical weekend in America, an average of one teenager dies every two hours in a car crash involving alcohol. Children who drink recreationally are 7.5 times more likely to use any illicit drug and 50 times more likely to use cocaine than children who abstain from alcohol. In light of these statistics, we must consider whether we want our children to absorb TV's messages about alcohol consumption or whether there is something more productive they could do with their time.

Violence
The earliest content-based TV research focused on violence. Between 1952 and 1992 the average number of violent acts per hour ranged from 6.2 to 32.

In the early 1990, MTV averaged 22 violent acts per hour, half of which involved major physical assaults, assaults with weapons, and threats accompanied by weapons. In 1993, the most violent prime-time shows exhibited as many as 60 acts of violence per hour. That year the average child living in the United States watched 10,000 murders, assaults, and other violent acts on television, and by 1997 that number had climbed to 12,000 and was still rising.

Initially psychologists wondered whether exposure to so much media violence would affect behavior. Three early studies suggested an answer.

First, Dr. Brandon Centerwall, professor of epidemiology at the University of Washington, Seattle, led a group of researchers in an electrifying cross-cultural investigation. The University of Washington project took advantage of the fact that television was introduced to North America almost thirty years before it arrived in South Africa. Dr. Centerwall and his colleagues compared white homicide rates before and after television's arrival in the United States and Canada with white homicide rates in South Africa during the same period.

Centerwall predicted that he would find a 10 to 15-year lag between television's arrival and spikes in U.S., Canadian, and South African murder rates:

Given that homicide is an adult activity, if television exerts its behavior-modifying effects primarily upon children, the initial "television-generation" would have had to age 10 to 15 years before they would have been old enough to affect the homicide rate.

And so he discovered. Initially all three countries had nearly identical rates. However, the University of Washington team found that ten to fifteen years after television arrived in the United States and Canada, white homicide rates in both countries suddenly jumped by 92% and 93%, respectively. In contrast, in South Africa, where television had yet to arrive, rates remained consistently low throughout this period. A follow-up study conducted after television's arrival in South Africa found that white homicide rates there followed the North American pattern, jumping 130% fourteen years after television's introduction.

The University of Washington group also analyzed when television was introduced into various United States census regions and homicide rates within those regions. They found a precise correlation between when television arrived in each U.S. census region and when its homicide rate spiked. For example, television was introduced to the West South Central census region six years after it was introduced to the Middle Atlantic region, and West South Central homicide rates did not begin to ascend until 1964—exactly six years after the 1958 Middle Atlantic spike began.

After successfully testing their theory against eleven falsifiable hypotheses, the University of Washington researchers concluded:

The timing of the acquisition of television predicts the timing of the subsequent increase in rates of violence… A doubling of the homicide rate after everyone is exposed to television implies that the relative risk of homicide after (prolonged) exposure to television, compared with no exposure, is approximately 2:1.

Writing for the Journal of the American Medical Association, Centerwall stressed:

The epidemiological evidence indicates that if, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults.

The second experiment to gain widespread attention in research circles was conducted by Dr. Tannis MacBeth Williams, professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. Until the summer of 1973, television broadcasters had been unable to reach a certain Canadian town (which Williams dubbed "Notel"), but they expected to resolve these signal reception difficulties within a year. Williams' team got word that Notel was about to receive television and quickly identified two other Canadian towns with demographic profiles identical to Notel but which already possessed television. Researchers then began a two-year study of randomly selected first- and second-grade students in all three towns, focusing on rates of objectively measured noxious physical aggression (e.g., hitting, shoving, and biting).

In the two years after television's arrival in Notel, Williams' team watched while rates of physical aggression among Notel's students shot up 160%. Over the same period, rates of aggression in the two control towns remained unchanged. Six groups of university investigators verified that the only significant difference between Notel and the control communities was the introduction of television.

The third early study to grab researchers' attention was conducted by Drs. Leonard Eron and Rowell Huesmann, professors of psychology at the University of Illinois. They followed a large random sampling for 22 years, from third grade through adulthood, tracking violent behavior and a range of other habits and environmental stimuli. Eron and Huesmann discovered that the amount of television children watched at eight years old was the single most powerful predictor of violent behavior at age thirty - more than poverty, grades, a single-parent home, or even exposure to real violence. Professor Eron told a Newsweek reporter:

Of course, not every youngster is affected. Not everyone who gets lung cancer smoked cigarettes, and not everyone who smokes cigarettes gets lung cancer. But nobody outside the tobacco industry denies that smoking causes lung cancer. The size of the [television watching-aggressive behavior] correlation is the same.

A follow-up investigation by the University of Illinois team studied more than a thousand children in Australia, Finland, Israel, the Netherlands, and Poland over a three-year period. This international sampling produced identical results: Exposure to television was the greatest determinant of aggressive behavior.

These early studies stimulated an avalanche of recent research: Investigators compared the playground behavior of ordinary groups of elementary school children with experimental groups who had been shown typically violent television shows before recess. Before and after exposure to prime-time and children's programming, investigators monitored the behavior of children living in circumstances so violent that one would expect the effects of media to be overshadowed. Researchers ranked preschoolers for aggressiveness and then interviewed the children's parents to determine the frequency of the children's television viewing. There have been retrospective surveys, longitudinal studies, and meta-analyses. Tens of thousands of infants, children, teens and young adults have been studies in every continent for their reactions to television, and the results have all produced the same conclusion.

To date, more than a thousand investigations have documented a causal link between television viewing and violent behavior, and no study has contradicted this hypothesis. Looking back over decades of television research, the leader of the University of Illinois team, Professor Huesmann, observed, "At this time, it should be difficult to find any researcher who does not believe that a significant positive relation exists between viewing television violence and subsequent aggressive behavior under most conditions."

Ten years after their first report, the United States Surgeon General and National Institute of Mental Health issued an update clearly stating that the latest evidence "seems overwhelming that [watching] televised violence and [acting with] aggression are positively correlated in children." The Surgeon General's 2001 report cited statistical links between television watching and violent behavior similar in strength to the evidence linking smoking and lung cancer. Dr. Jeffrey McIntyre, legislative and federal affairs officer for the American Psychological Association, echoed these sentiments in an interview with the New York Times: "The evidence is overwhelming. To argue against it is like arguing against gravity."

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry conducted its own battery of investigation and concurred that television watching produces aggressive children. The American Medical Association's House of Delegates surveyed the burgeoning evidence and declared: "TV violence threatens the health and welfare of young Americans." An American Medical Association "special communication" proclaimed: "Children's exposure to television and television violence should become part of the public health agenda, along with safety seats, bicycle helmets, immunizations, and good nutrition." In an editorial entitled "Exposure to Television Poses a Public Health Concern," the Annals of Epidemiology declared, "Public health's mandate of prevention, originally used to combat infectious disease, must now be called forth to

address mass media content." ***As Professor Eron observed, "The scientific debate is over." Television makes children violent.***

Commercialism

Why do broadcasters continue to offer alcohol-related and violent programming, given the overwhelming data testifying to the damage done by such fare? Our question stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of television's clientele. As a writer for the Journal of the American Medical Association observed:

Cable aside, the television industry is not in the business of selling programs to audiences. It is in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. Issues of "quality" and "social responsibility" are entirely peripheral to the issue of maximizing audience size within a competitive market.

Television does not exist to entertain us; it exists to sell to us. Colman McCarthy, professor at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland, explains, "It is a commercial arrangement, with the TV set a salesman permanently assigned to one house, and often two or three salesmen working different rooms." Dr. John Condry, professor of human development and family studies at Cornell University, writes, "The task of those who program television is to capture the public's attention and to hold it long enough to advertise a product."

While this amazes some parents, it is a reality that everyone in the television industry thoroughly understands. Doug Herzog, while serving as president of Fox Entertainment, thus justified the level of alcohol, sex, and violence on his network, saying, "This is all happening because society is evolving and changing, but the bottom line is people seem to be buying it." Gene DeWitt, chairman of one of the leading firms selling television advertising time, similarly admitted, "There's no point in moralizing whether this is a good or bad thing. Television is a business whose purpose is gathering audience."

Indeed, children see one hour of commercials for every five hours of programs they watch on commercial television. This means that during calendar year 1997, when the average U.S. child watched television 25 hours a week, he spent 260 full hours (or the equivalent of 6.5 weeks of 40-hour-per-week shifts) just watching commercials.

This is significant when we consider that the most essential product of the advertising industry is hunger. That is, commercials are intended to create a feeling of lack in the viewer, a deep ache that can only be assuaged by purchasing the product. As Dr. Neil Postman, chairman of the Department of Communication Arts at New York University, points out, "What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer." So we hand our children over to Madison Avenue to be told, hundreds of hours a year, how hungry, bored, ugly, and unpopular they are and will continue to be until they spend (or

persuade their parents to spend) a few more dollars. And then we wonder why our children feel so hungry, bored, ugly, and unpopular, and why they are so needy.

Planting the Right Seeds
Nicholas Johnson, a former commissioner of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, once said, "All television is educational. The question is, what does it teach?" Violence educates. So does alcohol. So do commercials. These are seeds that television plants.

And these are only a sampling of the values and perspectives that pass directly from TV to child. Television plants other seeds too. For example, researchers at Syracuse University and State University of New York discovered that television programs almost never advocate reading books and lend the impression that one could get all the knowledge one needs from watching TV. They theorize this might be responsible for the finding that "young people who view greater amounts of television are more likely to have a decidedly low opinion of book reading as an activity." If we do not approve of television's portrayals of alcohol and violence; if we think book reading is important; if our life goals include more altruistic principles, like kindness, integrity, commitment, faithfulness, and the like; or if the television plants other seeds incompatible with our basic values, then shouldn't we be concerned about every minute our children spend sitting before a television absorbing its perspectives? If the programmers and advertisers are not properly educating our children, then do we really want to turn our children over to their care? If television exposes our children to influences we disapprove of, why should we bring it into our homes?

Medium
Most popular discussions of television's downside focus entirely on television's deleterious content, and in doing so they miss at least half the problem. Perhaps the medium itself, regardless of content, does damage.

Achievement and Intelligence Japanese researchers conducted some of the earliest research on the relationship between television and impaired academic achievement. In 1962, they published findings that reading skills declined among Japanese fifth to seventh graders as soon as their family acquired a television set.

Two years later, the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare conducted the first large-scale American study. The survey, covering 650,000 students in 4,000 U.S. schools, included a handful of questions about television viewing patterns. ***Government officials were surprised to discover that the more television students watched, the lower their achievement scores.*** *Unfortunately, the media largely ignored these results, and the findings were not widely known and soon forgotten.*

Almost 15 years passed before research on television and impaired achievement attracted any serious attention again, but then interest in television's cognitive

effects suddenly burgeoned. Statewide assessment programs conducted in Rhode Island (1975-76), Connecticut (1978-79), and Pennsylvania (1978-79) surveyed thousands of children and came up with remarkably similar results: ***The more television children watched, the worse they performed in all academic areas***.

Also in 1979, University of New Orleans investigators extended research down to five and six year olds. Studying first-grade classrooms in the New Orleans metropolitan area, they also discovered that *"first graders who watched a lot of television in their preschool years earned lower grades than those who watched less."* They further demonstrated that the number of hours children watched television was the single best predictor of low grades—a better predictor than parents' low educational achievement, insufficient time spent in school, insufficient time spent with family, and a host of other negative factors.

One year later, ***Drs. Larry Gross and Michael Morgan, professors at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications, made headlines when they found that television did not just impair academic achievement, it retarded intelligence.*** They discovered that the more television tenth graders watched, the lower they scored on IQ tests. The inverse relationship between IQ and television watching held even after the researchers controlled for socio-economic status, sex, and family size. The drop in IQ scores was large and consistent, and it could not be attributed to television attracting an abundance of children from lower socio-economic groups or crowded families. "It is extremely unlikely that the association between viewing and [low] IQ scores is spurious," they concluded.

Although data trickled in throughout the late 1970s, the dam finally burst in 1980 when the California State Board of Education became interested in the television question and decided to launch a thorough investigation. That spring it distributed a comprehensive questionnaire to more than half a million sixth and twelfth graders, evaluating writing, reading, and arithmetic skills, work habits, family profiles, and television viewing patterns. The astonishing results caught the attention not only of research psychologists, but also (for the first time since television research began) the popular press.

The New York Times reported: A California survey indicates that the more a student watches television, the worse he does in school. Wilson Riles, California schools superintendent, said Thursday that no matter how much homework the students did, how intelligent they were, or how much money their parents earned, the relationship between television and test scores was practically identical. Based on the survey, Mr. Riles concluded that, for educational purposes, television "is not an asset and it ought to be turned off."

The survey was repeated the following year, and statisticians and psychologists performed even more detailed analyses of the data. Their reports shocked parents and educators alike. Students from households with no television set in the living room earned an average reading score of 74% correct, versus 69% correct for

students who had TV sets in the living room. Children from upper socio-economic strata were even more negatively affected than those from the middle class or lower class. Even one hour of television viewing a day reduced achievement scores, and every additional hour of viewing made things worse. It made no difference whether parents discussed the programs afterward with their children, whether children chose their own programs or parents chose for them, or what sort of programming children watched. Across the board, even small amounts of television viewing hurt academic achievement.

Five Paths to Cognitive Damage

In the wake of the California surveys, researchers began to ask why exposure to the stimulating and potentially enlightening content of television should retard achievement and IQ. Even more confusing, *studies revealed that television reduced educational aspirations.* These studies demonstrated that, even though TV programs portrayed an overabundance of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, *the more television children watched, the less time they wanted to spend in school.* The effect was especially pronounced among adolescents who, as they watched television, lowered not only their educational aspirations but also their professional hopes. The more TV a child watched, the lower status the job he eventually wanted to pursue. Something about the medium seemed to undermine whatever positive content television offered. Five explanations emerged.

First, Harvard investigators confirmed that television ate up time children would otherwise have used to study or read for pleasure. They found, for instance, that children from homes with no television were 11% more likely to do homework on weekdays and 23% more likely to do homework on Sundays. Professor George Comstock of Syracuse University, arguably the leading scholar in the study of television, wrote in 1999, "Learning to read is often hard work for a child, whereas television viewing is comparatively undemanding. Children are certainly tempted to watch television instead of mastering reading, and those who succumb will be permanently impaired scholastically."

In a spontaneous experiment in 1982, a New Jersey elementary school announced a "No TV Week." According to the New York Times report of the event, "Students in every class started spending more time reading books and talking to their friends and families." Two years later the entire city of Farmington, Connecticut voluntarily gave up TV for one month. When Wall Street Journal reporters interviewed Farmington residents, both adults and children most often mentioned reading as the activity they used to fill the newly available hours. *Children who do not practice reading find themselves "impaired scholastically," they do not enjoy school, and, recognizing how much preparatory schooling the elite professions demand, they scale down their aspirations.*

A second way that the medium itself depresses achievement and IQ (and perhaps thus aspiration) is by making children sleepy. Not only do children stay up past their bedtimes watching television, a team at Brown University found that children's

sleep onset time was prolonged when they watched television anytime during the previous day or evening, producing shortened sleep duration and daytime sleepiness. The researchers suggested that at bedtime children conjure forth "excessively violent and/or stimulating" television scenes viewed in the last 24 to 48 hours. Thus, even children who went to bed on time were less alert if they had watched television the previous day.

Marie Winn, a Wall Street Journal columnist, discovered another way television makes young children overtired. She writes:

Today parents do not "work" to keep the nap. Instead, with relief in sight second only to the relief they feel when their child is asleep at night, parents work on their young children to encourage them to watch television for reliable periods of time, a far easier job than working on a child to have a nap.

Third, television's quick cuts alleviate the need to concentrate. George Comstock explains, "The pacing of much television suppresses impulse control and the ability to attend to the slower pace of schooling." New York University's Neil Postman reports that the average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, "so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see." Robert MacNeil, executive editor and co-anchor of the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, writes that the idea "is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead to provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action, and movement. You are required to pay attention to no concept, no character, and no problem for more than a few seconds at a time."

In the famous 1854 debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, Douglas led off with a three-hour opening statement, which Lincoln took four hours to rebut. During the televised presidential debates of 1987, each candidate took five minutes to address questions like "What is your policy in Central America?" before his opponent launched into a sixty-second rebuttal. This sort of parody is as intellectually taxing a presentation as anyone will see on television.

Since our children sit passively while the television dances, their ability to become deeply involved with books, school teachers, and other less frenetic sources of wisdom—their ability to think—atrophies. It should be no wonder that they abandon books, manifest lower intelligence quotients, fail to achieve academically, and have depressed professional aspirations.

Fourth, television impedes imagination. A study of gifted fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, included in the Surgeon General's report, shows that watching a range of television shows - from cartoons to "educational television"—depresses the students' subsequent creativity scores. Commenting on experiments in which children went on television "diets," researchers at the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry write:

Experience has shown that children who cease watching television do play in ways clearly suggesting the use of an imaginary world. Resuming their viewing, the children decrease this kind of play. Research findings also suggest that children who are light television viewers report significantly more imaginary playmates than those who are heavy viewers.

Harvard professors Dorothy Singer and Jerome Singer discovered at least one mechanism by which television corrodes creativity: Viewers never need to conjure up an image. "Children accustomed to heavy television viewing process both the auditory and the visual cues afforded by that medium simultaneously," they write, "and may become lax in generating their own images" when reading or listening to a story.

A fifth explanation emerged from the work of Harvard University Professor T. Berry Brazelton. Brazelton hooked newborn babies up to electroencephalographs and then exposed them to a flickering light source similar to a television but with no images. Fifteen minutes into their exposure, the babies stopped crying and produced sleep patterns on the EEG, even though their eyes were still open and observing the light. *Brazelton's experiment revealed that the medium (television) itself, with no content, acts directly on the brain to suppress mental activity.* The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry confirmed Brazelton's finding in 1982. They reported that the brain waves generated while watching even the most exciting shows were those of low attention states. The researchers found that while subjects viewed television, "output of alpha rhythms increased, indicating they were in a passive state, as if they were just sitting in the dark."

Every activity a child engages in during his busy day refines some set of skills. Reading is practice; writing is practice; a sport is practice; engaging in fantasy games is practice; and interacting with people is practice. All these activities in some way help prepare a child for the challenges of adult life. Television is also practice, but not for any activity. *Television is practice for inactivity. When children watch television they are practicing sleeping - often for hours every day. One does not need a Ph.D. to realize that this could have all sorts of deleterious effects on cognitive development and later aspirations.*

Social Interaction

Parents sometimes justify television's presence in their household by arguing that it creates a venue for "family time"—that is, everyone comes together to watch television "as a family." Eleanor Maccoby, professor emerita of psychology at Stanford University and a member of the National Academy of Sciences, investigated this theory and concluded:

It appears that the increased family contact brought about by television is not social except in the most limited sense: that of being in the same room with other people…the viewing atmosphere in most households is one of quiet absorption in the programs on the part of the family members who are present. The nature of the

family social life during a program could be described as “parallel” rather than interactive, and the set does seem quite clearly to dominate family life when it is on.

A mother of one child who participated in the New Jersey “No TV Week” effused, “My daughter and I rediscovered each other.” Another mother responded with shock, “My three children actually played together.” A group of elementary students who had participated confessed, “Play is more fun than TV,” and said they would never watch as much television as they had before the experiment.

According to a United States government report, these anecdotes are not atypical: “Extended and frequent television viewing has been shown to decrease the time and opportunity available for social interaction within the family.”

Not surprisingly, the social skills of children atrophy when they watch television instead of playing. An experiment carried out by researchers at the University of New Orleans measured the social skills of 128 first graders and then interviewed to determine the amount of time the child spent watching television every day. After controlling for a range of other variables (including sleep, time spent with peers and family, parents’ educational levels, etc.), the number one determinant of social skills was how little television the child watched. Those who watched the least television had the best social skills.

Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim suggests that television retards social skills not just by depriving children of playtime, but also by accustoming them to unrealistically stimulating characters:

Children who have been taught, or conditioned, to listen passively most of the day to the warm verbal communications coming from the TV screen, to the deep emotional appeal of the so-called TV personality, are often unable to respond to real persons because they arouse so much less feeling than the skilled actor.

Indeed, it is not just television personalities that often outshine real people. Anything portrayed on television can be made more exciting than almost anything in real life. A 1999 commercial for a popular minivan shows a happy family on vacation, riding through stunning mountains and plains. The parents are quietly absorbing the scenery. The children in the back seat are also quiet, but for a different reason. The camera zooms in to reveal the children mesmerized by individual television monitors mounted in front of them.

A similar commercial appeared in 1992. The ad shows a name-brand television set sitting on the rim of the Grand Canyon. On its screen appears the same panorama that forms the actual backdrop. A boy is drawn to the set, oblivious to the surrounding natural grandeur. He turns back to his parents, points to the screen, and yells, “Hey, look, it’s the Grand Canyon!” When a child has television, of what interest is Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, or anything else that’s real?

Obesity

Television makes children fat. Harvard University researchers discovered that the odds of a child becoming obese rise 12 to 20% for each daily hour of television he watches. Epidemiologists also agree that watching two or more hours of television daily is a global marker for high risk of pediatric hypercholesterolemia. Physicians have identified four ways that television puts children at risk for obesity:

First, television displaces more active play. Especially today, leisure time is limited. Every daytime hour spent in front of a television set is therefore one less hour the child has to ride a bike, play ball, join in team sports, or engage in other activities that would burn calories or raise the child's average metabolic rate. Investigators also report that television makes children less active when they do play, although no one is yet confident exactly why this happens.

Second, children love to snack while watching television. Even if these snacks were healthy, this snacking is calorie consumption that simply would not happen were the children out playing.

Third, the snacks children consume while watching television are overwhelmingly high in fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar, and low in vitamins, minerals, and fiber. The U.S. Surgeon General attributes these unhealthful snacking habits to the success of television advertising. He writes that the average American child sees 2,500 commercials a year for "high-calorie, high-sugar, low nutrition products." He also reveals that 70% of food advertisements are for foods high in fat, cholesterol, sugar, and salt, while only 3% are for fruits and vegetables.

Consistent with the Surgeon General's theory, epidemiologists at the University of Minnesota surveying children's Saturday morning television recently discovered that 56.5% of all commercials on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and Nickelodeon advertised food products, and the most frequently advertised product was high-sugar cereal. Comparing the food products advertised on TV with the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommendations for pediatric diet, the researchers found that "the diet depicted in Saturday morning television programming is the antithesis of what is recommended for healthful eating for children." They further observed that children see a food commercial about every five minutes on Saturday morning TV, and that the main explicit messages used to sell food products are taste and the promise of a free toy. The University of Minnesota team leveled the obvious charge, "The heavy marketing of high-fat foods and foods of low nutritional value targeted to such a vulnerable group can be viewed as exploitation."

The fourth and perhaps most insidious link between television and obesity was discovered in 1993. Psychologists and epidemiologists at the University of Tennessee and Memphis State University monitored metabolic rates in eight- to twelve-year-old children under two conditions: lying down in a dark room, and sitting up watching television. In every case, the child's metabolic rate while sitting

and watching television was far lower than his metabolic rate while lying down in the dark. Watching television is worse than doing nothing.

Equally surprising, the effect of the TV session on metabolic rate persisted after the session for at least the length of time the child had watched television. That is, a 25-minute TV session depressed metabolic rate not only during television viewing but also for at least 25 minutes after viewing had ended.

The Tennessee study has two astounding implications: First, since TV slows metabolism, the same child, eating the same types and quantities of food and participating in the same amount of activity, could remain healthy or become obese depending on how long he is exposed to television each day.

Second, since metabolism remains depressed even after the TV session ends, a child who watches television gains more weight from food eaten even when he is not watching television, and will have more difficulty burning off excess fat, than children who do not watch TV. The researchers conclude:

Those children who watch an excessive amount of television are more at risk for becoming obese because their resting energy expenditures are lower than if they were doing nothing at all. This finding emphasizes the potential importance of controlling the amount of television watched by children at risk for obesity.

Children's Television and "Kosher" Videos

Many parents who admit that prime-time programming contains inappropriate content instead encourage their children to watch special children's programming (like Sesame Street, cartoons, and "kosher" videos). Here, the theory is, the content is better. Regardless of whether the content really is better (a hotly debated topic among experts in the study of television), the medium that carries children's television is just as problematic.

Attention Deficit Disorder

The late Dr. Dorothy Cohen, a professor at the Bank Street College of Education, was among the first secular scholars to discover the damage done by children's television programs. Back in 1973, she reported that although Sesame Street does teach letter recognition, it also is responsible for "a decrease in imaginative play and an increase in aimless running around, non-involvement in play materials, low frustration tolerance, poor persistence, and confusion about reality and fantasy." By capturing the daily attention of 80% of America's two to five year olds, she argued, Sesame Street was "fostering an increase in frenetic behavior and the impoverishment of play." Sesame Street, Cohen said, was creating a "literate but unteachable" generation.

Shortly after Cohen's first attack on Sesame Street, Dr. Werner Halpern, director of the Children and Youth Division of the Rochester Mental Health Center, revealed the results of his own research:

The program's pulsating, insistent visual and auditory stimulation can act as an assault on the nervous system of young children with immature neurological and perceptual development. [In some two year olds] sensory overkill produced by the show's overheated teaching techniques triggered pressured speech, constant movement, frantic reactions and a compulsion to recite and identify numbers and letters.

Then came the report from the Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center: "Sesame Street creates a psychological orientation in children that leads to a shortened attention span, a lack of reflectiveness, and an expectation of rapid change in the broader environment." The Yale researchers warned that "well intentioned parents who allow their children to watch nothing but Sesame Street…might actually be encouraging over-stimulation and frenetic behavior."

In 1979, Israeli researchers registered complaints with the creators of Sesame Street, describing how children in their country who watched the show regularly showed less perseverance on a routine task than a control group of non-viewers. Although Sesame Street executives shrugged off the Israeli results as insignificant, the U.S. Surgeon General felt differently and included them in his 1982 report.

Sesame Street spokesmen defended the show, saying that it really helped children focus. They provided supporting studies documenting how well children attended to the television while watching Sesame Street. Teachers on the front line were not impressed. A New York Times article detailed how "teachers report they cannot hold the attention of a kindergarten class for more than two or three minutes - the average length of a Sesame Street segment. And they say the show is to blame." Referring to the visual effects common not only on Sesame Street, but also on other "educational" children's programs like Electric Company and Zoom, a Connecticut teacher testified before the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, "Kids today are accustomed to learning through gimmicks, but I cannot turn my body into shapes or flashlights." The educational psychologist Jane Healy wrote in American Educator, "It amazes me that so many people seem to have accepted the notion that this peripatetic carnival will somehow teach kids to read—despite the fact that the habits of mind necessary for reading are exactly those that Sesame Street does not teach." New York University's Professor Neil Postman summarized the educators' objection: "We now know that Sesame Street encourages children to love school only if school is like Sesame Street"—which it is not.

Violent Toddlers
In 1982, investigators at the University of Kansas reported finding that the very excitement that keeps children glued to children's TV shows and videos also creates "a state of generalized arousal" leading to aggression. Although the fast pace of shows like Sesame Street hold the children's attention, it also frustrates them, the researchers explained. Yale University's Professor Dorothy Singer made headlines in 1995 with parallel findings. "Even innocuous programs like the quick-cutting Sesame Street or variety and game shows were so stimulating that they prompted aggression," she told Newsweek.

Other Effects
While quick cuts and over-stimulating programming present certain unique threats, children's television and videos also carry all the medium-related dangers of adult shows. The 1982 California Assessment Program discovered, for example, that children who watched educational (public) television once a day earned achievement scores identical to children who watched commercial TV, and both groups scored 10% lower than children who did not watch TV at all. Moreover, like their commercial counterparts, educational TV and videos devour not only the time a child would otherwise be reading, writing, or practicing arithmetic; they also consume playtime, which means less opportunity for learning how to interact with others and less physical exercise. And like any TV show, educational programs increase daytime sleepiness and impede the development of independent imagination.

Why We Let Them Watch
Why, then, would any parent sit their child down in front of a television for an hour or two? There seem to be two primary reasons.

First, some parents are themselves TV addicts. According to the New York Times report, during the New Jersey "No TV Week":
Parents seemed to have more trouble kicking the habit than their children. Several mothers were caught watching "General Hospital." Fathers buckled during hockey and basketball games. One of the fathers furtively watched Warner Wolf's sports report with an earplug. Another, who said he could not cheat because "I have two little detectives in my house," taped the Rangers' hockey games.

Parents want to spend time with their children…and with the television, and the easiest compromise is to watch television with the children. This is not to imply that parents interact in any serious or deep way with their children while the set is on. Generally, they do not. However, it is time spent together; and since both parties slip into the TV trance, interpersonal difficulties are usually limited to arguments over what show to watch.

A second reason parents give in to TV is that it is such an effective babysitter. Raising good children is tough. It's really tough. It demands creativity, endurance, and especially patience. It demands time and commitment, and more time. For any

normal person, the challenge can be daunting. TV provides what seems to be an easy way out. Jack Gould, the New York Times' first television critic, thus observed, "Children's hours on television admittedly are an insidious narcotic for the parent. With the tots fanned out on the floor in front of the receiver, a strange if wonderful quiet seems at hand." With the click of a switch, our parenting responsibilities seem to drop to making meals, doing laundry, and handling bedtime.

Of course, this is an illusion. The child's cognitive and emotional needs remain, but in a TV trance he becomes incapable of expressing them. The Wall Street Journal columnist Marie Winn laments:

Perhaps because encouraging children to watch television was so easy and pleasant when compared to the more disagreeable or difficult strategies of the past, parents overlooked the fact that those very behaviors that cause them trouble, those explorations, manipulations, and endless experiments in cause and effect, are profitable and indeed necessary activities for a small child, and that dealing with children's difficult behaviors by eliminating them entirely via the television set is not dissimilar to suppressing a child's natural behavior by threats of physical punishment, and surprisingly similar to drugging a child into inactivity.

The Time and Newsweek columnist Peggy Noonan confesses that both of these reasons—her own addiction to TV and its magical ability to mesmerize her children—undermined her resolve to protect her children from television:

I have tried to turn off the TV in my house, I really have. Once, I shut it off for a week, and I was never, ever allowed to talk on the phone because I was never, ever alone. On the third origami paper house, I began to sob. Once, we shut it off for the night, but then I read it was The Simpsons episode where Lisa is sent to the Ayn Rand Preschool, so I had to make an exception for that. Once, we had it seriously limited for a while, but then Kosovo came along and Mom started hitting the network news and then CNN and then mainlining MSNBC… Well, as you can see, Mom is part of the problem.

Kicking the Habit

We cannot be blamed for falling into the television and video trap. Not everyone is attuned to proclamations from traditional Jewish scholars; the secular, scientific data did not pile up until very recently; and the facts still have not garnered much attention in the mass media. ***Most parents have no concept of how bad television really is.***

But now we know. Perhaps more than any other influence, television is the antithesis of the traditional Jewish educational ideal. It often plants cruel or self-destructive values and perspectives and builds harmful behavioral routines. We see the damage done to children all around us - the cognitive, emotional, and physical signs of too much TV. And yet we wonder whether our children and we can survive and thrive without our daily dose of television. Perhaps the time has arrived to find out.

An Addiction Test
The first step towards mitigating television's negative influence on the family is determining which if any family members are TV addicts. Addicts of all sorts often deny that they are addicted. Many alcoholics claim that they could quit at any time but say that they "choose" to partake because they enjoy the experience. Many drug addicts say the same thing. So do those addicted to food. Often, addicts only realize that they are out of control when they are challenged to control their addiction for a month or so and realize they cannot do it.

Every family deserves a 30-day vacation from television—with all the play, reading, and family time this promises. If this can be accomplished while the TV set is physically accessible, it is a sign that family members are probably not addicted and can be casually weaned off of television's corrosive commercials and programming. As a group, the family can voluntarily limit television watching to weekends - a move that might cut TV consumption by half or more. Making plans to spend time together as a family on weekends could further reduce consumption without introducing any further restrictions. As family members discover each other and taste more wholesome activities, interest in television might wane altogether.

A Family Detox Plan
If family members (including ourselves) discover that it is impossible to keep the TV set off for thirty days, we must be honest enough to admit that we are facing an addiction - an addiction that negatively impacts intellectual, emotional, and physical well being. When this is the case, we need to employ the same strategies used by addictions experts.

First, parents must slowly introduce alternative activities to take over television hours. These alternatives—"TV methadone"—simultaneously reduce withdrawal symptoms and begin the weaning process. On Thursday nights the family could participate in some fun sort of charitable work in the community. Most traditional Jewish communities have volunteer groups that deliver crates of free food to the poor on Thursday nights in anticipation of the Sabbath, and family members of all ages enjoy the hustle and good spirit of these activities. After a month or so, parents might want to expand the program, dedicating Wednesday nights to a library visit.

If children are TV addicts, they probably will not immediately appreciate the pleasures of reading, and a parent will need to help them discover magazines and books dealing with the themes they find most exciting. After another month, Tuesday nights could be set aside for helping with homework and test preparation. Everyone could sit together for an hour or two, doing their own homework and assisting others with theirs. Parents will immediately appreciate that this is a perfect opportunity to get a clear picture of their children's academic strengths and weaknesses, and even children begin to appreciate a homework night as soon as they see that it improves their grades. Further down the line, Monday nights could become arts-and-crafts night, or music night, or even Monopoly night. If Mom and

Dad participate too, and the activity is well organized, everyone could have a lot of fun.

These are only sample recommendations, and creative parents will have little difficulty thinking of many activities that would be more enjoyable and worthwhile than vegetating in front of the television. (The TV Turnoff Network website at http://www.tvturnoff.net gives a range of alternatives to TV watching.) With commitment, parents can thus ease an addicted family off of television in about half a year.

Addicts of any sort should not be forced to choose between their addiction and its healthy replacement, and TV addicts are no different. The choice is painfully difficult and often inspires rebellion. Just as no heroin is available when addictions experts offer their subjects methadone, so too the television should magically disappear (or be disabled) in anticipation of a special family activity and magically reappear (or be re-enabled) when no replacement activities are scheduled. The TV should be moved (or disabled) when the children are not present so as to avoid creating an opportunity for conflict. Nothing need be said about the TV's absence unless the children notice and ask, and then a brief statement is best: "We don't need it right now, so I put it away."

If despite these precautions, our children become very emotional when denied access to television, we must sit with them, tell them how much we love them, show affection, and calmly explain why we think it is worth trying a new activity. If, during the early stages of the weaning process, the child is very panicked about missing a particular television program, we can offer to videotape it for him so that he may view it sometime when the family has not scheduled a replacement activity. We should not display anger or frustration as we help family members progress in the detox program. Addictions experts succeed through firm patience and love.

Of course, television is not the only threat to our children's development. It is but one especially noxious example of the sort of danger we are now capable of identifying and avoiding. We might also detect problematic aspects of Walkmans, Gameboys, and computer games. Even media like the Internet take on a different appearance when viewed from this perspective. Each of these educational challenges demands our attention.

Now, our job is to muster the willpower—and the love—to take a courageous stand for our own sake and for the sake of our children.