



TV truths

Is allowing our kids to watch telly more help than harm?

WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

"The amount of TV children are allowed to watch should be monitored according to their age group, and it's also important to regulate the type of programmes they're exposed to," says Leatia Stemmet, a counselling psychologist in Linden, Joburg. "TV can inhibit children as it reduces the time spent on developmental activities such as exploring their environment, playing games and interacting with parents and peers – all of which are important for their physical, social and emotional development. Unmonitored TV watching can result in health problems, increased aggressive behaviour, desensitisation or increased fear, as well as poor academic performance." For more info visit www.jmdpsych.com.



HARM
Robyn von Geusau is a Cape Town-based freelance

writer and mother of two daughters – aged 19 and 21.

Let me out myself straight away. I do like my telly. I have an unabashed crush on boerbul lookalike Commissioner Frank Reagan in *Blue Bloods*; Dr 'McDreamy' Shepherd of *Grey's Anatomy* and I have a long-standing affair; and I adore Horatio's thousand-yard sideways stare in *CSI Miami*. But I'm so very glad I didn't have a TV for much of my childhood. And I'm equally grateful that, when my girls were much younger, that most of what is shown on TV now wasn't around then. That's not to say

Kideo and *Teletubbies* didn't play a role but there was none of today's endless wall-to-wall 'stuff'. I look at a darling 11-year-old I know. So much of her time has been spent in front of fashion and style-focused programmes. Most of these involve watching uber-complexed Americans, obsessed with their weight, looks and status. And I can see how she battles to marry this with her own suburban reality and body image. The truth is that while there's a lot that's good about programming that informs and educates, there's an awful lot of shlock out there.

And remember, the average child isn't equipped to pick up on irony, satire or deliberate editing/scripting that makes a programme feel or look more real, exciting or instant than it is. Too often the reality is, well, not

real, and kids (and many adults) just don't get that.

The thing about television is it doesn't allow for one to be bored. And boredom is a good thing: It allows creativity to creep in. TV does away with socialising, conversation and play. It's easy for both parents and children – no one has to make an effort.

Time magazine reports that of all forms of sedentary, inactivate behaviours examined, television-viewing is the worst. It's linked to significantly higher blood pressure in children – the more they watch, the higher their blood pressure – regardless of weight. And they're sitting targets for advertisers.

“The thing about TV is it doesn't allow for one to be bored. And boredom is a good thing: It allows creativity to creep in”

We live in an increasingly screen-obsessed world, be it cell phone, tablet or TV. More and more kids can be seen with heads bent and eyes focused, lost in a world of cyberspace.

I say: “Step away from the screen!” As I left on a visit to New York my husband waved me off with the words: “Don't forget to look up.” It was only when I got there and walked those streets where giants had trod that I understood. Away from the fabulousness of street level was a skyline of history and beauty that was there for the looking. And so it is with the world beyond the TV screen: Don't let it pass your children by.



HELP
Radio and TV personality Sam Cowen is based in

Joburg. She has written two books and has an eight-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter.

Before I became a mother, I made a list of things I would never do when I became a parent: I would never: shout at my children for getting dirty in the garden and accidentally tracking soil through the house; spit on a tissue and wipe their faces; let them eat the poison otherwise known as refined sugar or let them watch television.

My children are now eight and five years old respectively.

“You have control of what they watch and when they watch it. And your responsibility, as with their diet, is to manage it”

They have been threatened with toy removal if they track dirt through the house; I have licked a finger and rubbed pen ink off my daughter's cheek; they're connoisseurs of confectionary and, shock horror – they watch television.

I've read all the research about how TV is harmful for kids – it all makes perfect sense. It shouldn't act as a babysitter and it provides no educational benefits for kids under two. Children need real interaction with actual people in order for language and motor skills, not to mention social skills, to develop.

There's a lot of sex and violence on television. And it makes kids overweight if they sit in front of the screen for hours at a time every day. It's all true.

It's also true that mothers and fathers work longer hours than they ever had before. And that we're not always present the way our parents were to entertain and engage us. It's also true that television, like sugar, is not an absolute. As a parent you have control of what your children watch and when they watch it. And your responsibility, as with their diet, is to manage it.

Sugar is fine in limited amounts. So is television. There's new research that shows that children who watch educational shows when they're young develop a better grasp of maths and reading. And most importantly, in a world where almost 50% of marriages end in divorce and kids are often in the eye of the storm, scientists from the University of Siena in Italy found that children experience a soothing, painkilling effect by watching cartoons.

It is in fact, the equivalent of the adult's nice cup of tea and a little sit-down. And let's face it, if half an hour of *Barney* can give both parties the same soothing feeling of calm, is there any real harm in that?