

Is SpongeBob Bad for Your Preschooler's Brain?

We all know that TV isn't the best thing for us (or our kids), but can TV actually hinder our brain power? A recent [study](#) released by the American Academy of Pediatrics in their journal *Pediatrics* found that brief exposure to Nickelodeon's famed TV series "SpongeBob SquarePants" impeded preschoolers' attention span and executive functions. It argues that the fast-paced storytelling and quick cuts of the Bikini Bottom show are decreasing smarts in preschoolers.

Susan Linn, co-founder of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, says that the show "deprives children of opportunities to explore in a leisurely and in-depth way, which is essential to learning."

A group of 20 4-year-olds were tested after watching SpongeBob for just 19 minutes, and compared against another group of 20 children who watched *Caillou*, a slower-paced popular PBS show. A final group of preschoolers colored for 9 minutes and steered clear of the tube.

The kids who watched SpongeBob, which changed scenes every 11 seconds, did significantly worse on tests than both the *Caillou* kids, and those who colored. The theory is that overstimulation during the time when a child's brain is developing makes it harder to focus on sustained tasks later on. Reps for Nickelodeon argue that SpongeBob is intended for kids 6-9 years old, though the show itself is heavily marketed to and for preschoolers. While the study comes with loads of its own caveats, the results of the study are just another confirmation of what researchers have been saying for years.



What to Look For

So what can parents do about it? If you are going to allow your preschooler screen time (and chances are they're going to get it anyway), there are a couple of things every parent should look for in a good TV show for their kids.

- **Who's misbehaving?** Linn says that it's important to remember that children learn through modeling. TV (or any other theater experience) provides kids with opportunities to model behavior, and for this reason, parents should seek out TV shows which model the kinds of behavior parents want to see in their kids. Regardless of the show's purported educational purpose, ask yourself if characters like SpongeBob, Dora, or any others, are behaving how you might want your child to behave.
- **Pacing matters.** Children need time to explore concepts, make connections, and soak up information. TV shows with quick cuts, fast-paced plotlines, and hectic hijinks can deprive children of the time and the space needed to learn in a meaningful way. Linn says, "Just because you may be bored watching children's programming, doesn't mean your child will be bored." Look for shows that allow children to learn at a leisurely pace and explore the concepts being presented.
- **Pay attention to bragging.** Deborah Linebarger, Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and director of the Children's Media Lab, says that television producers have to put their money where their mouth is. Her most recent research found that programs making specific claims like, "this show teaches kids their ABCs," tend to include more learning strategies, compared to shows that say they "inspire" learning. "Basically, shows that make explicit claims do so because they know they can back it up with curriculum based objectives, goals, and the way they assemble the content," she says.
- **Read the credits.** Linebarger also says parents should "look for shows with a clear curriculum behind them. You'll notice education consultants listed in the credits and on the website, and they will clearly lay out what the curriculum is. Why? Because there's been obvious forethought in putting together a program using strategies that help kids learn." The credits can give you a clue about the educational chops behind the show.

Must-See TV

At the end of the day, parents want to know, "OK. What *can* my preschooler watch?" Should you choose Dora or Sesame Street? We asked two experts, Deborah Linebarger and Betsy Bozdech, Executive Editor of Common Sense Media, which shows they thought were Must See TV for preschoolers. Here are 5 shows they love:

- **Super Why** This show sets your kids up for reading success, by teaching key early literacy skills like the alphabet and phonemic awareness. The kids on the Super Why crew speak directly to the viewers: asking for their help, giving them time to respond, followed up with instant feedback. This is a highly interactive and personalized approach to kids' programming.
- **WordWorld** This series literally brings words to life – every character, place, and object is made of the letters that make up its name. Kids explore the world around them through words, making connections between the letters of a word and the meaning of the word itself. *WordWorld* helps preschoolers identify letters and understand how they form words, laying the ground work for early literacy.
- **Zoboomafoo** "I just love this program. I have found that kids' vocabulary scores go up when watching programs like this," Linebarger says. *Zoboomafoo* is another great example of interactive kids' television. The hosts, the Kratt brothers, speak directly to viewers and help kids learn all about animals. On top of that, along with the help of a lively lemur named Zoboo, they teach positive forms of model behavior. The educational portion of the show focuses on building kids' understanding of concepts, which is key for preschoolers.
- **Sesame Street** "There's a reason Sesame Street is a perennial favorite," Bozdech says. It teaches kids about a wide variety of subjects, from word building to smart snacking, and has some of the most loveable characters in TV history (who doesn't love Muppets?). And its sprinkling of satire makes it fun for parents, too. In recent years, Sesame Street acknowledged the importance of pacing in kids' programming and started slowing things down.
- **Sid the Science Kid** Think science is a snore? *Sid the Science Kid* does a great job of making science fun and easily understood. "What I like about the show is that it accurately portrays preschool, does a great job of breaking down the scientific method and explaining it, and focuses on writing and documenting what you observe daily," Linebarger says. "It also captures the enthusiasm for learning that is typical of this age group." And, it's all done in within the context of a story, which makes it easier for preschoolers to learn the sometimes-stuffy science content.

A few additional tips: avoid commercials whenever possible. If you're able, watch television on demand, rather than in real time. It's very hard for kids to distinguish between a commercial and a program, which can be problematic when it comes to mismatched marketing. If your child does see a commercial, talk about what the intent of a commercial is. Also, don't be afraid to set limits. Rules surrounding how much TV, when to watch, and what's on the screen are all key to ensuring your kid's getting the most out of her tube time.

Linebarger says programs developed using a curriculum to convey educational messages can positively impact academic achievement through childhood and adolescence. Ultimately, parents should look for programs with lots of interactivity, a narrative format with a slow pace, and explicit claims about the educational benefits of the show.

No matter how much screen time your kid's getting, be sure she's getting lots of time to explore outside, use her imagination, and of course play!

Want to Take Action?

Check out [Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood's "Take Action" initiative](#) for parents to tell Nickelodeon to shelve their marketing to preschoolers.

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