The use and content of the media such as television, the Internet and video games are a significant health issue for children. The influence of the media on children can be both beneficial and harmful. Educational programs may improve a child's knowledge and understanding of the world, whereas food advertising, for example, may not be beneficial.

For further information, go to the discussion paper at: www.racp.edu.au

The expansion of media technologies, and the content they deliver directly to the minds of children, is unprecedented in human history. The influence of media on children is powerful, and this includes children's physical health, mental health and development.

Health professionals have an important role in our society. In partnership with parents, and as independent advocates for children, health professionals have a unique opportunity to raise issues about media and children, and empower families to manage this relationship in a way that is ultimately for the child's benefit.

**POTENTIAL AREAS OF HARM FOR CHILDREN AS A RESULT OF MEDIA INFLUENCE INCLUDE:**

- psychological distress
- increased risk of a range of violence-related child outcomes
- impaired academic, social, and physical development
- obesity and related health problems
- harmful consumption habits (cigarettes, alcohol and junk food)
- materialistic dependence
- sexual victimisation
- development of antisocial or stereotypic beliefs

**THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON CHILDREN OCCURS IN THE FOLLOWING TWO WAYS:**

- Media technologies potentially deliver their content directly to the minds of children, bypassing parents who are the primary protectors of developing children in our society. In this way children are often exposed to material that is developmentally inappropriate, and potentially harmful. Advertising to children is a clear example of this.

- By spending prolonged time engaged with media technologies, time is taken away from other activities that may be more beneficial, or even necessary, for children's optimal development.

**PARENTS WHO MANAGE THEIR CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO MEDIA WILL TEND TO:**

- have clear beliefs on what is beneficial for their children
- know what their children are doing, and discuss these matters within the family
- have clear family guidelines for what children watch and when, the games they play, and what they do on the Internet
- co-view material, and discuss this with their children
The influence of media on children is powerful, and this includes children’s physical health, mental health and development.

- preserve meal times as media-free times
- set a good example of media interaction themselves
- have a good understanding of children’s differing reactions to media content at different ages

CHILDREN MOST AT RISK DUE TO THEIR MEDIA USE NOT BEING MANAGED, INCLUDE:

- children who use media technology where it cannot be monitored (particularly in their bedrooms)
- children who have developmental or mental health problems
- children of families that are struggling financially, and where there is conflict or mental health problems between the parents
- children who have limited interaction with their parents

Some suggestions

1. Provide information about children and the media to parents, such as posters or leaflets in your waiting areas. (Young Media Australia can provide these: www.youngmedia.org.au)

2. Indicate to parents directly (during your consultations) that exposure to media is an important health issue for children.

3. Take a ‘media history’ as part of your routine systems review.

A ‘media history’

The screening level of a media history to elicit concerns could be started with the following statement:

“Do you have any concerns about your child’s media usage (TV, video, games, Internet)?”

A second level of media history is to ask specific questions of the parents:

- Do your children have a TV / Computer with Internet access in their bedroom? If so, how do you monitor how they use this? Is it possible to remove these from the bedroom?
- Do you know what they are watching / using? Who decides what your children watch? Do you watch programs with them?
- Are there any rules regarding TV viewing for the whole family (eg. only after homework, not at meal times). How do you make these rules? Do you stick to them?
- How many hours a day does your child watch TV, play video games or surf the Internet? On weekdays? On the weekends?
- By contrast, how much time are the children spending on physically active, cultural or social pursuits?
- Have you discussed specific issues of Internet safety with your children? It is helpful to encourage parents to read the Guide for Parents/Guardians/Carers – Children and the Media: Advocating for the Future and also to refer parents to the policy document on the RACP website: www.racp.edu.au