

Sleep Stealers: The Electronic Sandman

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The Electronic Sandman

One of the biggest and baddest bogeymen in and out of the bedroom that you as a parent face is the wonderful world of electronic media. After all, what child, when tempted by twenty-four hour cable networks or the seductive flickering glare of the computer screen, would actually choose to go to bed? What teenager would pass up the opportunity to instant message the object of a budding romance until midnight every night just to get some shut-eye, however badly needed? And for that matter, what adult can resist "just one more" segment of Letterman or Leno before he or she turns in for the night?

A survey of sleep and television viewing in children we conducted about eight years ago in a largely middle-class New England suburb found that 25 percent of kindergarten through fourth-graders had television sets in their bedroom. The Kaiser Family Foundation in 2000 reported that one-third of two-to-seven-year-olds and two-thirds of eight-to-eighteen-year-olds already have a television in their bedroom. And the most recent data from 2004 shows that this number is continuing to grow; a National Sleep Foundation poll found that 30 percent of preschoolers and 43 percent of school-aged children have a television in their bedroom.

What's more, the National Institute on Media and the Family reported that children with a television in their bedroom are likely to spend an additional five and a half hours a week watching it. That's about forty-five minutes a day that could be better spent reading, playing outside, or *sleeping*.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children's bedrooms be "media-free zones." That means no computer, video games, PlayStation, Game Boy, and no television set. Period. If you have not yet put a television in your child's room, don't! If you have already gone down that slippery slope, think very seriously about removing it. This is the kind of advice that, understandably, makes parents cringe, and there is no way we are pretending that this is an easy task. But let's review how TV can become a "sleep stealer" and why it just might be worth braving the screams of protest you are likely to encounter:

- **It can lead to sleep problems.** Children who watch a lot of television, watch television as part of their bedtime routine, and especially children who have a television in their room are more likely to have sleep problems. These include difficulty falling asleep, anxiety at bedtime, and night wakings. These children are also more likely to get less sleep than they need. Granted, this is only an association and does not prove cause and effect. That is, there might be a bit of a chicken-and-egg phenomenon going on here. It may be that children who have problems falling asleep to begin with might be more likely to watch TV to "help" them fall asleep. However, there are also a number of important reasons why trying to use the background noise and soft glow of a TV to fall asleep are a bad idea at best.
- **It's a stimulating activity.** Television watching (and this applies equally or more to video games and computer games) is much more likely to wake kids up than to put them to sleep. In other words, watching TV is counterproductive to achieving the state of relaxation that we all need in order to fall asleep. Think about it. Television programming is all about "what's coming up next." The whole point is to try to hook the viewer into watching one more segment, one more episode, one more show. You, as an adult, might be able to ignore that message, but most kids can't.
- **It's easy to become dependent.** If you need the television on to fall asleep at bedtime, you're much more likely to need it to fall back asleep if you wake up during the night. This is a basic principle of what is known as "conditioning." For example, if you always wear the same red sweater whenever you give an important presentation, then you are likely to feel somewhat panicked if it's not available the next time around. And since night wakings in kids are common, it's easy to create a situation in which they "need" the television at 3:00 AM to get back to sleep. We can't tell you how many kids we see in our sleep clinic who watch television at all hours of the night, often completely unbeknownst to their unsuspecting parents.
- **It's anti-sleep.** There may be some biological reasons why television watching might be "anti-sleep." Noise and particularly light, even low levels of light, can make falling asleep more difficult. Remember, light prevents the brain from turning on the production of the hormone melatonin, which in turn is absolutely critical to turning on sleep. The

bottom line is that bedrooms should be for quiet activities like reading, listening to music, daydream, and above all, sleeping.

- **It's easy to lose control.** To quote Joan Anderson, author of *Getting Unplugged and Breaking the TV Habit*, "TV is not a member of the family; it's a stranger. Would you let a stranger into your child's bedroom?" No matter what you think and how well-intentioned you are as a parent, once you've put that television in your child's bedroom, you've lost a lot of control over what, when, why and how much your child watches. According to a 1999 study by the National Institute on Media and the Family, while 81 percent of parents are concerned about the amount of violence their children see in movies on television, only 58 percent have rules about television viewing. You may reassure yourself that you have clear rules about television viewing in your household, but by putting a television in your child's room, you've lost much of your ability to enforce those rules. Ditto for playing computer and video games.
- **It cuts down on family time.** A television set in each household member's bedroom may cut down on arguments about what to watch. But it also means you've basically eliminated TV viewing as a shared family activity. You lose precious moments of "family time." In addition, you lose the opportunity to interact with your kids about what's on the tube, to share opinions, to put what they're watching in perspective, to talk about what might be scary, and maybe to find out more about what they like and who they are as people.
- **It can lead to obesity.** Numerous studies have found a relationship between TV watching and obesity in kids. The more television children watch (and the more time spent playing video or computer games), the more inactive they are, and the more weight they are likely to gain. Not to mention the constant bombardment of television advertising aimed at getting kids to eat stuff that is high in sugar, high in fat, and low in nutritional value. And being overweight or obese, in addition to all the other bad health effects, can also affect your sleep.
- **It can affect your dreams.** What your child watches can affect her dreams. JoAnne Cantor's book, *"Mommy, I'm Scared": How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*, eloquently describes the negative effects that the vivid visual pictures on the television screen can have on children (and the same would certainly apply to computer game graphics). As an adult, you can process and put into context the disturbing images you see on the nightly news or the latest crime drama, but your child may not be able to do the same and may incorporate those images into nightmares.

WHAT A PARENT CAN DO

- **Don't put a television set in your child's bedroom.** If there is one in there already, take it out. After all, having a television in your room is not a God-given unalienable childhood right.
- **Create a homework zone.** If possible, set up a quiet area of the house for studying that is free from distractions but accessible enough to keep an eye on things. Put the computer there instead of the bedroom.
- **Use modern technology to your advantage.** If all else fails (and granted, this does mean that you finally have to learn how to program the VCR) you can always tape (or TiVo) the darn show and watch it the next day. Contrary to what your child may claim, this is not borderline child abuse, and may even enable you to watch it together (come on, one episode of *The O.C.* won't kill you).
- **Don't make TV part of the bedtime routine.** Make the last thing your child remembers as she slips into dreamland the soothing sound of your voice reading the next chapter of *Harry Potter*, instead of the latest episode of some sitcom.
- **Step up to the plate.** Finally (and this is painful), you may want to consider *taking the TV out of your bedroom as well*, for many of the same reasons cited above. Not for nothing, this is a golden opportunity to be a terrific role model. And as a bonus, you just might get a better night's sleep yourself.