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Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

Yes, You Can Make TV Time Count

New ideas for watching, bonding, and learning from TV. By [Sierra Filucci](#) 10/14/2019

Topics: [Early Childhood](#), [Screen Time](#)



I admit I've thrown on a TV show and plopped my kid in front of the screen when I needed to [get dinner on the table](#).

But on the occasions when I've sat down and [watched my kids' shows with them](#), I've been amazed by how rewarding the experience was.

Take [Phineas and Ferb](#), for example. I never realized how clever it was until I took the time to watch a whole episode with my kid. And I found so many things to talk about with him afterward. How did the boys solve the problem? (By working together.) Why was Candace so mean to her brothers? (Because she was embarrassed.) Do you think you'd do that kind of thing without asking Mom or Dad first? (No way!)

When you can, watching TV alongside your kids can help you bond through a shared experience. It can also give you an opportunity to reinforce your values and counteract any negative messages. And the window into your kids' world is priceless.

Here are some realistic conversation starters to keep in your pocket for when a show ends:

Ages 2-4

Watching TV with kids ages 2-4 is less about delving into provocative topics than it is about reinforcing shows' positive social messages and lessons.

Ask:

- How did that song go again? Let's sing it together.
- What were the colors of the rainbow the kids saw?
- How many balloons did the girl have?
- Why were the characters happy/sad/mad?

Ages 5-8

Kids in the 5-8 age range start to see a lot more action and interpersonal conflict, though many shows targeted at this age portray positive resolutions. Asking kids to relate what they see to their own experiences helps the positive lessons sink in. Also, anything that can help kids start to be more media savvy is a good thing.

Ask:

- How did the characters work out their problem?
- Did the characters do something you wish you could do?
- Who were your favorite characters, and why?
- Do the boy characters dress differently than the girl characters? Why?
- What made the show more exciting/scary/funny?

Ages 9-11

As kids get a little older, they're more curious about the outside world and are figuring out how people relate to each other. Kids this age can be very receptive to age-appropriate guidance, and using TV as a jumping off point can be a super-helpful tool.

Ask:

- What was the consequence for that character's behavior?
- Can you tell that the show is edited? What are the clues?
- What makes that character appealing? Or not?
- Did anything in this show surprise you or teach you something you didn't know?
- Does this show intend to teach something or get a certain message across?

Ages 12-14

As kids enter the teen years, watching TV together can get a little hairy. They're interested in pushing boundaries, and you might have to talk about exactly why certain shows are off limits. But even controversial TV can be an opportunity to get conversations started and gain some insight into your kid's social life and inner thoughts.

Ask:

- Does that situation seem realistic?
- Do any of your friends act like that?
- What would happen in real life if someone acted that way?
- Do any of these characters seem like "types"? Why do so many shows repeat the same stories or create such similar characters?
- In reality shows, what do the participants stand to gain or lose by appearing on the show?

[About Sierra Filucci](#)

Sierra is a journalist with a special interest in media and families. She has a master's degree in journalism from the University of California at Berkeley, and she's been writing and editing professionally for more... [Read more](#)

Comments (5)

Adult written by [nicolai123az](#)

April 7, 2016

A long time ago, someone told me that I should always watch TV with my kids. The advice was irrelevant to me at the time, but for some reason I always remembered it. Maybe that's because the message is continually reinforced in articles written about parenting or on TV talk shows that discuss childrearing. The advice is simple: If you're going to let your kids watch TV, then sit with them and watch along with them. This is good advice when it comes to your child's viewing of educational TV programs. Children who watch educational programs in the company of caregivers actually learn more from the material than children who view without co-viewing caregivers. Why? Children pay more attention to the TV, and view the material as more important, when a caregiver watches with them. It's almost as if the child says, "Hmmm...if mom is watching, this must be good." According to your child, the simple fact that you're in the same room and watching the same program means that you endorse the content. Unfortunately, the same process occurs when caregivers co-view less desirable TV programs, such as those

containing violence. Some research has shown that children whose parents co-view violent TV shows are more aggressive than children whose parents do not co-view. This may be because children have the same interpretation of their parent's presence in the room. That is, kids may assume that if mom or dad is watching the violent show, then the behavior they are witnessing must be okay. [read more](#)

Teen, 13 years old written by [Fullmetal Noah](#)

August 21, 2015

A show I would highly recommend for any of the age groups listed above (except of course for 2-4 year olds) is Steven Universe. The show delves into surprisingly dark and mature themes frequently (war, love, homosexuality, death, I could go on) but does it very subtly and always keeps its sense of fun and optimism alive. It has the entertainment value any good cartoon should have while pushing the boundaries of what a good cartoon can do.

Kid, 11 years old June 27, 2012

If you really want it to count, get out the computer and show the kid Hetalia.

Adult written by [Cornholita](#)

November 27, 2013

Another Hetalian? Sweet! Me and my Sis love that anime. Sis was 12 when we started watching together. It may be racy sometimes, but it helps Sis with her history. Seriously though, CSM should totally review more anime! I want to see what they'd think of Hetalia, and I really wanna see how they would review Panty and Stocking. I'm sorry but I do!

Parent of a 5 year old written by [CarrieWard](#)

June 26, 2012

I love that Phineas and Ferb was used as an example here. So many people think it's a "bad" show, but I agree...there are so many things that the kids learn, and the questions posed above will be a great help! One of the things my son frequently reminds me of is in one episode of P&F when they call spring and winter "swinter".

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