

How children see television (1-6 years)

Television for children

When children watch television, they do not see and experience the same things grown-ups do. Some things can be hard for them to understand, and they might have trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality, or content from advertising. Some things might be confusing, very scary or overwhelming for your child.

What's important about how children see television?

When you know more about your child and television, it can help you make the best choices about TV time for your child.

Television at different ages

Watching TV can make babies very tired. If they are not old enough to turn their heads away for a rest, some babies might even get distressed. In general, **babies and toddlers**:

- are attracted to light, movement and activity on TV, but cannot work out what these things mean.
- might recognise familiar TV characters or voices after seeing and hearing them lots of times.
- might copy what they see on TV but are more likely to do it with you – for example, they will copy clapping more if you clap with them.
- cannot filter out unimportant details like other sounds in the room.
- cannot understand even simple plots.
- cannot tell the difference between TV and real life until they are about 18 months old.
- cannot apply what they see on TV to real-life situations until they are about 2½ years old.
- Do not understand that an advertisement is trying to sell something.

In general, **older children**:

- focus on the visual aspects of TV but do not always follow the non-visual parts of the story, like the spoken parts.
- enjoy interactive TV (for example singing along or calling out responses) where the hosts speak directly to the camera.
- enjoy cartoons and animations and understand that some cartoons are made for older children or adults.

- Do not always understand the difference between fantasy and reality and can think that what they see is real, particularly if the fantasy uses high-quality special effects.
- can be influenced by the advertisements for the latest toys, clothes and gadgets.

Tips to make sure programmes are right for your child to view

Try these tips when you choose what your child watches:

- Check the rating on a movie or programme to see if it is age appropriate for your child.
- Talk with your child about what she is watching. This can help you understand more about how she sees television – for example, what is difficult to understand or scary for her.
- Limit the number of advertisements your child sees – for example, watch on ad-free channels or use the ad breaks to chat about what you have just watched.

Things to watch out for

Scary visual images can have a big impact on your child. Images of monsters, nasty animals or horrible faces can stay in her mind for a long time. Scary images or scenes on the news can also have a big effect. For example, your child might be really worried by images that show war and suffering, violence, fire or accidents.

Violence on TV can be a problem for your child. On TV, characters often get better quickly after violence, but your child might not understand that this does not always happen in real life. This means she can hurt herself or others if she copies TV violence.

TV programmes sometimes send the message that it is OK for heroes to use violence, as long as it is for a good cause. This can make your child think that violence is a good way to sort out conflict and get what she wants.

From about five years, your child will start to be interested in contemporary music. If she watches **music videos that show sexualised images**, actions and dance moves, she might copy these moves.



Recommended Reads

- [TV, yes or no](#)
- [When the TV broke](#)
- [The Berenstain bears and too much tv](#)