

KIDS' TV SHOWS, FILMS & COMPUTER games

Any screen-watching can affect kids in different ways. Some become slack-jawed zombies. Others jump about and follow all the instructions of a perky presenter ('Put your hands on your head', 'Post Mummy's purse to this address').

Kids who are scared by what they see might scream and cry or they might watch silently, feeling confused and frightened on the inside. One toddler's family-fun DVD could be the source of a preschooler's three-night run of baroque nightmares. Research suggests that kids under 2 years shouldn't watch any TV or DVDs, as their brains can't process it yet, and that very few, if any, electronic games are suitable for the under-fives.

So – what's going on? And what should go off?

what *is* 'suitable for children'?

Most child development experts say that kids under 2 shouldn't watch any TV because they're too young to process any of it. And any TV- or show-watching beyond that should be strictly age-appropriate – meaning they should watch shows made specifically for young children and not watch stuff rated above G (general, see on the next page) before the age of 5 or so. Kid brains before the age of 7 or thereabouts cannot yet distinguish between real and not real, or happening, not happening and could happen here. (And that doesn't mean that once they're 7 they're ready for anything!)

And just because a child is silent while watching scary stuff doesn't mean there's no harm being caused. It often means the child is terrified, becoming desensitised to violence or emotional stress, or taking in images they're not able to understand or analyse, leading to copycat incidents and emotional damage.

It is not possible for a child under 5 to understand what is or isn't real or to understand that any death – on screen or in real life – is permanent. Often young children watching a DVD with older brothers, sisters or friends become frightened or confused even though the others are enjoying it. Unfortunately for older kids, a group DVD needs to be at the lowest common denominator, not the highest (which is not usually how the pecking order works). Shorter, episodic DVDs are better for littlies, especially those under 4.

If a child shows signs of being distressed or frightened by anything on screen, stop the show and discuss what is distressing about the subject. (Worries and fears may surface after the show has finished – that night or in the days to come.) Don't try to get the child 'used to it' – this may happen, but the fear will still be there. Put the DVD away until you feel your child is ready for it, then try again. It is generally accepted that handheld and screen video games are not recommended for under-fives because the content is unsuitable or because they are not developmentally appropriate.

A G or PG rating is not a guarantee that there will be no violence or adult concepts in a TV show or film. (And it is no guarantee the show isn't a parade of piffle either.) Lots of kids under 5 love the character, but the latest movie version of *Spiderman*, now on DVD, is too violent and puzzling for them. Despite the fact that many parents think PG means a child of any age can see a film if they are accompanied by an adult, it's not that simple. It means a 12-year-old might love it

while seeing it with a parent, but it's way too terrifying for a 5-year-old. Even some G films might be frightening or mystifying for the under-fives. And something that a friend's 3-year-old loves might send your 4-year-old into hysterics or inward turmoil. Unfortunately it's a matter of trial and error, and knowing the sensibilities of your own child.

violence in TV shows & DVDs

TV cartoons or shows with violence are not suitable for kids under 5 because they can't distinguish pretend from reality, and some will try to act out what they've seen – either on TV or in their own home. At this age kids are very much 'monkey see, monkey do'. They shouldn't be watching or listening to the news either, because it's simply too distressing or puzzling. They can't understand and process facts such as 'The war is a long way away and won't happen here'.

Many studies and guesstimates have shown that the average child watching several hours of TV a day will 'see' thousands of murders and violent acts by the time they reach their teens. It is generally agreed that this has a desensitising effect and may cause depression, but there is disagreement about the extent to which it could make a child consistently behave violently in childhood or adulthood.

'Violence on television does lead to aggressive behaviour by [some] children and teenagers who watch the programs . . . Not all children become aggressive of course . . . The research question has moved from asking whether or not there is an effect, to seeking explanations for the effect.' **TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOUR REPORT, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, US**

film & game ratings

Australian ratings for films and games include three 'recommended' levels. These are G for general audience, PG for parental guidance recommended (this means sit with your kid while they watch it so you can reassure them, explain some things and answer any questions or calm any worries) and M for mature audiences only, meaning you need to decide but it's probably not suitable for kids up to about 15, depending on the kid, the movie, the level of violence and sexual content, and other factors such as suspense and any number of difficult concepts for kids to understand.

A screaming fight in a movie that has no impact on an adult can be very upsetting for a kid and raise their stress levels.

Even without the depiction of sex, or violence, there are many things in movies that can be weird or wrong for kids to see, including references to suicide or torture, characters in torment or fear, threats, accidents, scary music, mythical beasts or attacks, or sexual-style dancing, discussion or feelings. Small children cannot process or remain untroubled by such sophisticated stuff, even if you tell them 'it's not real'. Their brains are not able to make that distinction. To them it *is* real: they're seeing it right in front of them.

The legally enforced ratings at cinemas are MA15+ meaning only for people 15 years and older, and R, restricted to audiences 18 and older.

It's very clear that many parents are completely happy to put even young kids in front of M-rated movies. I always make a point now of saying politely before a play-date, party or sleepover that, because it usually causes upsets, I don't want my kid watching a movie that's rated higher than PG. I find it hard to understand, but sometimes even this clear request is ignored by parents who decide a movie is 'okay' based on their own feeling, or because there's 'nothing scary in it' (cue nightmares at our house again). You may need to train your kid to pipe up and say they aren't allowed to watch M-rated movies and hope for the best.

Many parenting and Christian websites rate films and TV shows. They often deem films unsuitable due to things that may not worry you, such as showing a gay relationship (without sex) or some low-level swearing or use of 'Jesus' as a swear word. But these sites will usually give a good wrap-up of the plot and possible parental concerns, so they can help you to make a decision about whether it's suitable for your kid. Make the decision based on individual emotional development and temperament, not just a rating on a DVD, and remember, always choose a movie suitable for the youngest – not the oldest and most powerful kid in the room.

When it comes to TV-screen, online and handheld games, make sure you know what it is your kids are watching older kids play, and don't let them see violent and brutalising images. There are lots of screen games designed for younger kids, although most handheld and other games are not recommended for kids under 5 anyway – they're better off having stories read to them, interacting with other kids and being active.



more info on film & game ratings

See also 'More Info on Kid Cinema' later in this chapter for more organisations that 'rate' and review films, TV and games for kids.

oflc.gov.au

The official Federal Government website on film classification explains the ratings system. From the main page click on a rating (for example, MA) for an explanation.

commonsensemedia.org

This US-based organisation rates children's screen games and websites.

supervising the TV watching

You can always make your own DVDs from bits of favourite TV shows that you think are suitable for your kid, but make sure you watch them first. You may think you can pop a small child in front of a delightful nature documentary so they can bond with a grazing deer family, but only for the first five minutes before a mummy lion with bigger muscles than Madonna chases down an adorable deer, tortures it, bites its head off, drags it around by the leg, spits out half a chewed ear and wanders off. Not to mention the charming doco on the lives of chimps I once watched, complete with a shriekfest cannibal chimp war. As the mummy lion says, let's move on . . .

Try to always be in the same room when your kid is watching TV so you can help explain something or turn off the TV. I realise that for many people the whole point of popping a little darling in front of the TV is to run away to another room and get something done, or talk to someone on the phone about, say, work. But at this age, for safety and other reasons, do try to be in the room with them. If you do need to be out of the room, make sure they're watching a tried and true DVD or recorded TV show. Even *Play School* has been interrupted by a hideous newflash. You never know what's going to be confusing or confronting. Even an incident in *Bananas in Pyjamas* can be shocking or worrying for a child who is too young or otherwise not ready to see the full horror of teddy bears – avert your gaze now if you're sensitive – falling off bicycles. Things that look as if they should be for kids

are sometimes deceptive: the hilarious Canadian animated *Angela Anaconda*, starring cute cut-out children, is aimed at 10-year-olds up to adults.

Preschoolers are probably the latest group of kids to be noticed by the entertainment world – now that they’re starting to influence what their parents buy, they’re a marketing target: see the advertising section coming up soon.

Good points about TV shows & DVDs

- ★ A parent can get a few things done while the box is on.
- ★ TV and DVDs can be a good reward or a mood changer.
- ★ They are relatively cheap (especially if you record programs).
- ★ You can record foolproof stuff that avoids the ads and unpleasant surprises on the telly.
- ★ They can be beautiful and educational.
- ★ They’re another means of storytelling apart from books and yarns.
- ★ They can be the best way for kids to see things, such as deep-sea jellyfish or lions in the wild (or people in other countries) that they’re unlikely to see in real life.
- ★ You can watch and talk about them together.
- ★ Your child’s reactions will tell you a lot about their temperament and personality.
- ★ While kids are watching TV they’re not making more mess in your house (usually).
- ★ If your child refuses to have a naptime in the day, or is starting not to need one anyway, they can usually be convinced to have a ‘rest’ in front of the TV for half an hour or so, which gives parents a moment of peace and quiet (or the chance to have a shower at last).

Bad points about TV shows & DVDs

- ★ When watching TV and DVDs a kid isn’t doing anything creative.
- ★ You can’t choose what’s on TV.
- ★ There’s not enough quality TV programming for kids under 5.
- ★ On TV there could be a violent newsflash, disturbing ads or an unscheduled program that worries them.
- ★ The TV ads are designed to make your kids whinge for things that aren’t good for them or you can’t afford.

- ★ The TV ads are deliberately and carefully designed to make your kids feel bad and inadequate if they don't have the stuff being advertised.
- ★ A lot of TV shows are geared towards selling matching merchandise.
- ★ A TV show could come on that bombards their brain with information or concepts they can't process yet.
- ★ TV and DVDs can overstimulate and overexcite kids.
- ★ They can turn children into zombies who don't use their brain.
- ★ A lot of kids' animation is ugly and cheap.
- ★ A lot of DVDs are annoying to adults.
- ★ Hire DVDs for children are often scratched, worn out, dirty or of bad quality.
- ★ Some TV programs for kids aren't useful for their development, they just fill in time.
- ★ Seeing violence over and over desensitises kids so that they come to think violence is normal and okay.
- ★ If TV is on constantly as background to the day, it raises the level of noise over which anyone in the household needs to talk loudly to communicate.
- ★ It's nigh on impossible to get a zombified preschooler to put on their shoes or eat their breakfast and get out the door if the TV is on in the mornings.
- ★ A lot of kids' shows are an assault on the senses: noise, colour, flashing images. A recipe for winding up kids (and adults).

how much screen time is too much?

According to statistics, the more TV a kid watches, the more likely they are to be above a healthy weight, unfit and falling behind at school. Surveys routinely suggest that children of all ages are watching up to 7 hours a day and that many of them even have a television set in their bedroom, which they can watch unsupervised.

You can tailor the TV and DVD rules in your house to suit yourself. A baby shouldn't be watching any TV at all because they won't understand it. After the age of 2 they can be fascinated by something like the *In the Night Garden* for, say, half an hour, every few days. By 3 or 4 they could watch a DVD or show that lasts for 40 minutes to an hour. Some older preschoolers will enjoy watching a whole DVD.

You may like to let your child watch TV or DVDs for a set time each day, only every other day, once a week or on special occasions, depending on your own feelings. Some parents are happy with once a week, others are happy for preschoolers

to watch for hours each day. Anything more than an hour every couple of days, or every few days, for preschoolers is probably taking too much creative time away from them.

Some parents say they want their kids to watch TV so they can talk to other kids their age about the programs and not be 'left out'. While this is a wheedling tactic used by teenagers, it isn't even really very convincing at that age. Preschoolers don't need to watch TV to 'keep up' with what their friends watch. If your kids are being 'left out' of a game because their friends won't play anything except TV-inspired copycat fantasies, then it's time to find them some new little mates, or encourage the gang to play hide and seek or go a bit feral outside for a while.

Whether watching TV is mentally healthy or not depends not only on the number of hours, but what is on. A lot of kids will watch anything, even Thud and Sherisse or whatever their names are on *The Bold and the Beautiful*. You look at kids in front of the TV and realise their brain has been sucked into the world of the screen – sometimes you have to speak to them loudly three times before they hear you. (But if your child is always asking you to turn the volume up a few notches higher than needed, get their ears tested. And if they're always a nose away from the screen, get their eyes tested.)

Don't forget to factor in computer and other handheld-device use when considering how much time your kid spends staring at a screen.

NO TV AT ALL?

Many world governments have accepted the general policy that kids under 2 shouldn't watch TV or have any screen activities, as this can hinder their brain and eye development. Some parents don't let their kids watch TV at all, even after the age of 2. This is also a legitimate decision. It's important to know that what's on offer for kids has changed since the days of being able to choose between *Humphrey B. Bear* or a Western. There is now some great kids' TV for older children, that in short bursts is fun and educational and helps their development. It seems to make more sense to be very fussy about what your kids watch, and watch a little bit of good stuff, rather than let them watch absolutely anything – or nothing, ever.



more info on no TV

turntvoff.org

A non-profit campaign site for reducing screen time and turning the TV off for a week regularly throughout the year. Some great ideas for alternatives, and for a no-TV experiment to see what your family starts doing instead.

turnoffyourtv.com

A non-profit US activist site advocates the ditching of TV. Lots of articles about the bad points of TV-watching.

approved TV for preschoolers

It might seem odd to think the Prime Minister cares about what's on *Bananas in Pyjamas*, but the Federal Government has an Australian Communications and Media Authority that regulates free-to-air commercial TV channels and requires them to show a certain percentage of shows that are made in Australia specifically for kids. Various standards and quotas apply, but the main thing to know is you need to look for the shows rated by the Authority as good-quality made-for-preschoolers: that's the P rating. Without the regulations we'd be flooded with cheap, crappy TV shows said to be for kids but really just ads for merchandising, or any old 1960s wildlife doco, or something made for \$2.50 by a drunken teenager and sold off the back of a truck in Latvia. The Authority also regulates what times certain shows of different ratings can be shown on TV.

The ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which is funded by the Federal Government), SBS and cable TV stations are not subject to this requirement for original Australian productions, but the ABC's charter ensures that it makes programs such as *Play School*, which is designed to be educational, interactive and helpful to the development of its target age group (4-year-olds) as well as entertaining. The ABC, like the commercial stations, also shows heaps of overseas material for kids. Most preschooler programs will be on ABC1 and 2, as ABC3 is dedicated to programs for school-aged kids. Cable TV channels often have some good programs for littlies, but they are rarely Australian, although there is sometimes an Australian presenter 'top and tailing' a show, with introductions, some chit-chat and hefty servings of ads.

KIDS' TV RATINGS RECOMMENDATIONS

A P rating means a TV show approved for preschoolers by the Australian Communications and Media Authority in its Children's Standards. A C program means the same thing for kids under 14. A G rating indicates a show is considered suitable for all ages. A PG (Parental Guidance recommended) rating tells you that you need to watch the material with your child to help them understand the concepts in it and to reassure them if necessary.



more info on approved TV for preschoolers

abc.net.au

This is the official site for the ABC. From the 'Kids' tab at the top of the page, click on 'Playground', which takes you to endless games, activities, video content and promotion of ABC programs for preschoolers. Clicking on 'ABC3' will take you to the dedicated channel for programs for school-aged kids.

kids' TV and DVD favourites

Many of the following preschoolers' shows are perennials – always on TV somewhere and with lots of merchandising on sale in shops. Others may come and go from the TV schedules but still be available on DVD. Still others may be long gone but still live on your screen and in your child's imagination because DVDs or recordings have been passed down from older kids. Check your local TV listings and DVD shops for the following, and you can use the listed websites to check out merchandising and touring stage shows. Many sites have games but they're usually not a good idea for the under-fives, so it might be best to access a website when the tinies are in bed or wait until they're a bit older. The sites listed are all original or official ones; some with similar names are merchandising sites only.

Play School

The ABC's educational, endearingly daggy, long-running show is aimed at the average Australian 4-year-old and is best for 3- to 5-year-olds. Parents will remember the theme music ('There's a bear in there'), looking through a window and Jemima and Big Ted. A few other things have been changed in a groovifying revamp of staff and

graphics, but luckily the philosophy, format, crafts, book readings and old standard songs remain, as does a focus on child development. Enjoy a bit of nostalgia yourself with the DVDs or recordings of *Play School*. Kids love a bit of repetition; it's the screen equivalent of comfort food.

(The *Play School* website is off the main page of abc.net.au/abckids.)

Hi-5

Some people who used to make *Play School* ran away and invented *Hi-5*, which is about a gang of warm, super-polite Aussie twenty-somethings (two guys, three girls, 'And together, we're Hi-5!') who cheerfully (and, it seems, tirelessly) sing, dance, tell stories and look as if they've been dressed by a hippie mum with a sewing machine and a direct chute from the fabric remnant shop. Each member of the *Hi-5* team focuses on a different aspect of child development through play, movement, stories and music. Now with all non-original cast members, the franchise rolls on.

(hi-5.com.au)

The Wiggles

The Wiggles have a perfect provenance for a kids' act – they met while at teachers' college and two of the four members were already part of a band. The Wiggles are four grown-up singing men with 'friends', including Wags the Dog, Dorothy the Dinosaur, Henry the Octopus (all people in animal suits), the puzzlingly spooky Officer Beaples, and the most entertaining character, a buffoonish, fally-down pirate called Captain Feathersword.

The Wiggles' main attractions include catchy songs and the fact that each member wears a signature coloured skivvy. Their most recent DVD releases have the highest production values and much better direction. They are a humungous hit and tend to appeal to the 2- to 4-year-old set. The Wiggles merchandising empire is of mammoth proportions, including everything from pool toys to band-aids. There are now several Wiggles troupes worldwide. A 24-hour Wiggles shopping channel is not out of the question (even though I just made it up).

(thewiggles.com)

Sesame Street

The Children's Television Workshop, which makes *Sesame Street*, was originally formed as a charity but now makes a profit from sales of DVDs, song CDs, toys and heaps of licensed products, which is put back into productions. *Sesame Street* stars Big Bird, Elmo, Bert and Ernie, Oscar the Grouch, Baby Bear and Snuffleupagus. It emphasises community harmony and preschool learning of the alphabet and numbers. A lot of money is spent on this series and the production values are high.

One possible drawback: your kid will identify with American cultural references. Elmo is especially popular with the 3- to 4-year-olds.
(sesamestreet.org)

Teletubbies

These strange burbly creatures (grown-up people in big nappy-bummed, toddler-shaped suits) with rudimentary toddler speech patterns ('e-oh' instead of 'hello'), live in an odd bunker, with a vacuum cleaner called Nu Nu, surrounded by green fields, dull, drizzly weather and wild bunnies (that would be England). There are live-action sequences of real children doing various activities that are supposedly screened on the tummies of one of the Teletubbies, whose names are Tinky Winky (dressed in purple), Dipsy (green), La La (yellow) and Po (red and the littlest).

The series is made for the under-threes but can be screened as the equivalent of comfort food for a year or so after that. Bizarre and baffling for adults and older children, who regard it with scorn, the show speaks very directly to toddlers.
(bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/teletubbies)

In the Night Garden

From the people who made *Teletubbies*. The characters have names that appeal to kids but which most parents find idiotic: Iggle Piggle, Makka Pakka, Tombliboos. The 'action' takes place in a picture-book woodland, and actors dressed in huge costumes carry out such activities as stacking stones slowly or riding around in the psychedelic Pinky Ponk (I am not making this up after a chardonnay). The show is very calming and at the end of each episode all the characters settle down to sleep.
(bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/inthenightgarden)

The Fairies

I only mention it because 2- to 4-year-olds love it and because I hate it with an unhinged passion. It's about two fairies called Rhapsody and Harmony (but not in our house, where they are known as Travesty and Mediocrity) and the production looks as if some posh Year 11 schoolgirls got lost on their way to a Bachelors and Spinsters Ball and met up with someone who said 'I've got \$2.50, let's put on a show!'. In one ep I saw, Barnaby the Busy Buzzy Bee sounds as if he's auditioning for a part called Gigantic Stereotypical Queeny Chap in a costume home-sewn from a throw rug, and the outfit of Elf the Fairy Cake Maker causes hot, stinging tears of pity.

The songs are astonishingly banal, the staging like a kindergarten end-of-year show. Sadly nothing remotely bothersome ever happens to the characters, but on the plus side this means you can leave the room when the show is on. It's somehow unendurable and compelling at the same time.

(thefairies.com.au)

Angelina Ballerina

The cartoon series Angelina is wussier than the original book Angelina, but on the plus side Dame Judi Dench does a voice in it.

(angelinaballerina.com)

Charlie and Lola

A charming animation series based on the fab Lauren Child picture books. Four-year-old Lola is a fussy eater who is struggling to learn to share and longs for constant entertainment from her older brother. Charlie is the wonderfully loyal 7-year-old older brother. The setting is very London – kids live in apartments and go outside to the park to play, bundled up in scarves and gloves.

(charlieandlola.com)

Bob the Builder

The perennial boy-skewed *Bob the Builder* is consistently well made and has a good voice cast. Kids are enthralled by the various types of diggers, trucks, cranes and forklifts and after watching an episode, someone will often be found racing around the room singing the theme song: 'Bob the Builder; Can we fix it?; Bob the Builder; Yes we can!' And that's just Mummy.

(bobthebuilder.com)

Thomas and Friends

This show starring Thomas the Tank Engine is perennially popular, especially with preschool boys. On the idyllic Island of Sodor, Thomas and his engine friends get into scrapes as they are given tasks by the unkindly named Fat Controller. There's always a gentle moral to each story – perhaps not surprising since the show is based on the *The Railway Series* books by Reverend W. V. Awdry. There's a single storyteller and if you're lucky enough to get hold of episodes made in the mid-80s, you can enjoy ex-Beatles drummer Ringo Starr's Liverpool-accented narrations. *Thomas and Friends* has become a huge merchandising machine with the model trains and tracks being a particular favourite in households all over the Western world.

(thomasandfriends.com)

Dora the Explorer

An extremely American animation series that airs on Nickelodeon and is a DVD favourite. In each episode, Dora sets out with her friend Boots the Monkey to find something or help someone. Dora is always wearing her magic backpack (which is oddly interactive). She asks viewers to call out 'Map' and out pops the trusty map – cue a dinky little song. Swiper the Fox is supposed to be the villain but never succeeds in making Dora even a little bit miffed. Dora remains curiously calm, always happy to compromise and help others. The creators of the show advertise its educational qualities as it incorporates Spanish words throughout. I'm just relieved that it has a female star who gets to do some interesting things.

(nickjr.com/dora-the-explorer)

A lucky dip of other quality favourites

Milly Molly is an animated series with Aussie voices based on a Kiwi book by Gill Pittar; *The Koala Brothers* is animated with Aussie voices but made in the UK; *Johnson and Friends*, with a whole lot of toys (and a hot-water bottle) coming to life in a bedroom, is made by the ABC; *Pingu* is a whacky blue plasticine penguin; *Shaun the Sheep* is from the studio of *Wallace & Gromit* creator Nick Park; *Madeline* is based on the Bemelmans drawings from the books; *Hairy Maclary* is another Kiwi export phenomenon; and the *Rolie Polie Olie* cartoons feature a futuristic alien family who behave just like 1950s Americans.

POSITIVE GIRLS

A lot of girl characters are whingey or frothy and tutu-obsessed, or with a princess complex that can make Tinkerbell look a bit butch. I like a fairy as much as the next person, but if it's wall to wall it can get a bit freaky. Look for feisty girl heroines on TV, such as *Dora the Explorer*, and otherwise find them in books (see Chapter 49, 'Reading', in the book, and the reading suggestions on the website). Most shows made for children of this age have male heroes, although Bob the Builder's receptionist, Wendy, has started doing some building (not that there's anything wrong with answering phones); the *Madeline* books have been made into a cartoon series; and in the *Maisy* cartoons Maisy has a girly name although, more to the point, is a mouse. You may prefer to avoid *Thomas and Friends*, in which all the engines are men and the carriages female, or you might think a bit of *Thomas* is great as long as it's balanced with other role models. The male Bananas in Pyjamas are the stars, the fatty female teddy bears very much the also-rans . . . well, second bananas. Preschoolers are probably too young to recognise the obvious exclusion of girl characters, especially from the exciting bits, but because it is so prevalent I wouldn't be surprised if it had a subconscious effect on them. *Play School* seems to be the most equal-opportunity show for preschoolers.

advertising on TV

Kids can't distinguish between ads and a good idea somebody is telling them about. They're easily manipulated and a marketer's dream. Studies show that advertisers can fully achieve 'brand loyalty' and logo recognition among kids before they turn 4. One of the best things you'll ever do for your kid (well, all right, it's actually so they don't nag you) is to keep them away from advertising and teach them what

advertising is when they're old enough to understand. After about age 10 kids can feel superior when they recognise marketing techniques: 'They're trying to make it look like if I buy that food I'll have more fun.' You'll need to watch ads with your kid and explain why the ads try to make them feel they're not worthy if they don't have the products – and why they don't need the products. The under-fives have no way of comprehending that ads on TV are different from the shows they watch: ads aimed at this age group are truly preying on their innocence. The best way to subvert ads is not to watch them.

'It's estimated the average American child sees more than 20,000 commercials every year – that works out to at least 55 commercials per day.' AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, 'TELEVISION AND THE FAMILY' FACT SHEET



more info on advertising on TV

newdream.org

A US website pledged to fight the commercialism aimed at kids. (Ignore the 'New American Dream' slogan and there's lots here that's relevant.) From the main page, choose 'Home' (it's not the home page, it's about what you can do at home) then click on 'Kids & Commercialism'. You can download a booklet called *Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture*.

Adproofing Your Kids: Raising Critical Thinkers in a Media-saturated World

by Tania Andrusiak and Daniel Donahoo

If your kids are old enough to watch ads, they're old enough for you to start talking to them about how smart they can be in spotting the manipulation. This book looks at the why and how.

OWNERSHIP & MERCHANDISING

Seek out the old original classics, such as *Winnie-the-Pooh* in the A. A. Milne stories and poems with the original Shepherd drawings. Find Australian accents reading kids' books and British accents reading British stories on CD. Now that the Disney Corporation 'owns' so many stories (even *Tarzan* and *Snow White*) it's always worth giving your kids a wider cultural experience.

Be careful of TV and movie tie-in websites, which can just be rather cynical marketing ploys to get your kids to play a couple of games online and then sign up for marketing material to be sent to them, or to buy toys or food or other related, 'branded' merchandise. Your under-five is much better off using their limited screen time to see a show with a story, or draw their own picture, developing crayon-holding skills and imagination, than be just clicking around on a website doing what they're told by a corporate expert in customer manipulation.

And avoid like the plague a book that's a TV or film tie-in. They're usually cheap and nasty trash churned out to maximise profits: often a badly written mishmash thrown in around images of the live action or animation.

GROWN-UP FILMS FOR MUMS WITH BABIES

Keep an eye out for daytime 'Babes in Arms' sessions at local cinemas where the other members of the audience, all being mums with bubs, won't throw Jaffas at you when your baby cries – or only if you catch and eat them (the Jaffas, not the babies).

kids' cinema

Very few if any full-length animation or feature films for children are suitable for under-fives. Taking kids under 5 to a cinema can be a very hit and miss affair – especially for a birthday party – because someone will spill something, someone else will wet their pants, one will scream, another will be transfixed and refuse to leave, and a few will run away in terror. It's always worth explaining beforehand what the cinema experience will be like as it can be overwhelming for littlies, and picking a dead-cert movie with no frightening scenes can be impossible before you've seen it. Wait until your child is really interested or you're sure they'll enjoy it, talk about it a lot and maybe call into a cinema and have a look around but not stay for the film the first time. Some kids may be ready at 3, others at 6 or 7.



more info on kid cinema

youngmedia.org.au

From the main page of this comprehensive government-funded site run by the Australia Council, click on 'Choosing fright-free fight-free viewing' for non-violent program options, 'Too sexy Too soon' for age-appropriate material or 'Know before you go' for details and recommendations about current movies.

commonsensemedia.org

A US site that reviews movies and online games so you can have a sneak peek before giving the green or red light. There is a special parent advice section and you can sort by age to find the appropriate information.

kidstvmovies.about.com

This US site, owned by the *New York Times*, offers useful reviews of the latest kids' movies and television shows.

movieguide.org

This Christian site asks you to 'help us bring God's light to an industry with much darkness' and manages to work Bible quotes into every kids' movie review.

radio & podcasts for kids

ABC radio used to run shows for children, which was great for those in isolated areas particularly, who had, and still have, little other available entertainment tailored for them. Unfortunately the ABC doesn't do this any more. Commercial radio, as far as I can tell, never bothers.



more info on radio & podcasts for kids

Some podcasts are available from the websites listed earlier in this chapter, but some of them are just 'advertising'.

abc.net.au/science

From this main page of the ABC Radio science department choose 'Dr Karl', then 'Great Moments in Science'. You'll have to listen first to make sure an episode is suitable for a little one but some of these 'stories' about animals, planets or other fascinating science subjects can be good family listening, say, in the car.

bbc.co.uk/podcasts

Choose 'Children', then 'CBeebies Best Bits' for a weekly download of 'favourites, fun, songs and stories for those under 6'. There are also other great podcasts for kids here, but be careful about which age they're right for.