

Kids behaving badly after just two hours' TV

YOUNG children who watch more than two hours of television a day show clear signs of bad behaviour, lower social skills and disrupted sleep patterns, a study has found, *writes Steven Swinford.*

The researchers who carried out the study said the evidence against sustained television viewing was now so strong that parents should ration viewing for younger children. They also warned that having televisions in bedrooms posed particular risks.

The study adds to a growing body of research that suggests television can damage children's health and development. Prolonged viewing has previously been linked to obesity, attention deficit disorders and linguistic problems.

Cynthia Minkovitz, associate professor of family health at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, and one of the study's authors, said: "It is vital for clinicians to emphasise the importance of reducing television viewing in early childhood."

Researchers analysed the responses of a previous study in which almost 3,000 parents were questioned about their children's television viewing and behaviour when they were 2½ and 5½ years old.

Almost half (41%) had televisions in their bedrooms by the age of five. They showed clear signs of behavioural problems, poor social skills and disrupted sleeping patterns.

Further analysis showed that one in five children watched more than two hours of television a day at both ages. Their parents said that they showed clear signs of behavioural problems.

One in six children watched less television as toddlers but had increased their viewing to two hours a day by the age of five. They showed signs of lower social skills.

The researchers suggested that if children reduced their television viewing by the age of five, then the risk of behavioural and social problems disappeared.

It is estimated that more than half of Britain's children have a television in their bedroom by the time they are three.

Dr Aric Sigman, an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society and author of a book on children and television, said: "It is the greatest unacknowledged health threat of our time.

"Children are watching television at a critical stage in the development of the brain. They are being physically shaped, like a piece of clay, in response to what they are exposed to.

"The key stages of development are language acquisition and social skills and if they're displaced at this time they may be irreplaceable."

He added: "Television is isolating. Children end up spending years in front of a screen instead of speaking and socialising with real children. As a result, they don't learn how to get on with other people. At the same time, faster editing with colours, zooms and a constant stream of images has been linked to a lower attention span."