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Media Bombardment Is Linked To Ill Effects During Childhood

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In a detailed look at nearly 30 years of research on how television, music, movies and other media affect the lives of children and adolescents, a new study released today found an array of negative health effects linked to greater use.

The report found strong connections between media exposure and problems of childhood obesity and tobacco use. Nearly as strong was the link to early sexual behavior.

Researchers from the [National Institutes of Health](#) and [Yale University](#) said they were surprised that so many studies pointed in the same direction. In all, 173 research efforts, going back to 1980, were analyzed, rated and brought together in what the researchers said was the first comprehensive view of the topic. About 80 percent of the studies showed a link between a negative health outcome and media hours or content.

"We need to factor that in as we consider our social policies and as parents think about how they raise their kids," said lead researcher Ezekiel J. Emanuel, director of the Department of Bioethics at the National Institutes of Health, which took on the project with the nonprofit organization Common Sense Media. "We tend not to think of this as a health issue, and it is a health issue."

The average modern child spends nearly 45 hours a week with television, movies, magazines, music, the Internet, cellphones and video games, the study reported. By comparison, children spend 17 hours a week with their parents on average and 30 hours a week in school, the study said.

"Our kids are sponges, and we really need to remember they learn from their environment," said coauthor Cary P. Gross, professor at [Yale School of Medicine](#). He said researchers found it notable how much content mattered; it was not only the sheer number of hours of screen time. Children "pick up character traits and behaviors" from those they watch or hear, he said.

Marcella Nunez-Smith, a lead author and also a professor at the Yale School of Medicine, described the project as a "mammoth" undertaking that spanned more than 18 months.

In probing childhood obesity, for example, researchers found 73 studies over the past three decades, with 86 percent showing a negative association with media exposure. The studies most central to the analysis were large high-quality efforts and controlled for other factors.

Researchers are not interested in any sort of censorship, Nunez-Smith said, but rather an increased awareness among parents, teachers and society at large. "It really is a wake-up call," she said.

The study did not touch on issues of violence and media, which researchers said was systematically reviewed by others. Researchers also excluded analysis of advertising or marketing. Most studies used in the analysis, as it turned out, focused on movies, music and television. Researchers said a big gap was the lack of research on the

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effects of the Internet, cellphones, social-networking sites and video games.

In their study, they rated as above average evidence to support the link between media exposure and drug use, alcohol use and low academic achievement. Evidence was weaker for the association with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. "It does not mean the link is not there, but the research evidence has not gotten there yet," Gross said.

The report's authors hope it will be taken to heart by parents, as well as educators, pediatricians and policymakers. They came up with suggestions for each group, and James P. Steyer, chief executive of Common Sense Media, suggested that parents get involved in what their children see, hear and play -- and for how long.

"It's as important as going to their parent-teacher conferences or going over their report cards," Steyer said. "You have to know what [Facebook](#) is, and [YouTube](#) and [MySpace](#) and [Twitter](#) are, even though you grew up with 'Gilligan's Island' and 'All in the Family.' "

The new report was a systematic review of every study since 1980 that met set scientific criteria and examined media effects on obesity, tobacco, drug and alcohol use, sexual behavior, low academic achievement and ADHD.

Adam Thierer, a senior fellow at the market-oriented think tank Progress and Freedom Foundation, said it is important to recognize that "correlation does not equal causation" in research studies. He said he looked forward to reading the studies that the report is based on and was glad that there was no call for regulation.

Those involved in the project said they were not opposed to children using media and noted that several studies reached positive conclusions, including one for adolescents who used the Internet more frequently.

The issue, said Steyer, is: "How do we make this the most positive experience it can be? How do we get the most educational value . . . and how do we limit the negative effects?"

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