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Point of View

Should I let my child watch television?

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Abstract

While the prevalence of autism has been increasing globally, there is a search for the causative factors behind the rise. The point of view presented here examines the possibility of children brought up in social deprivation and watching television being at higher risk for developing autistic symptoms. The association is evident in the clinical experience of child psychiatrists and in several recent studies. There is no conclusive evidence for a causative role for increased television viewing causing autistic disorder. However, caution may need to be exercised in those children who are at risk.

Key-words: autistic disorder, television, gene-environment interaction, risk factors
Point of View

There is strong evidence of increasing prevalence of autism the world over [1]. Theories about the etiological causes of autism are aplenty, but none can explain the rise in prevalence entirely. One subset of autism encountered in Child Guidance Clinics is of children brought up in social deprivation and watching excessive television. The typical history is of both parents being employed, a paucity of social interaction with the child during the day usually coupled with excessive exposure to television for as long as four to eight hours a day while the parents are at work. The increasing number of working parents, rarity of joint families and increasing availability of television probably contributes to this subset of children with autistic symptoms. The child who is made to watch television for long hours in the absence of adequate social stimulation is often brought to the Child Psychiatrist with features of autism. This trend is worrying. Very often there is a dramatic reversal of the autistic symptoms during a vacation spent with grandparents or when speech therapy is initiated. The lack of grandma's tales is probably leaving a void in many modern Indian family.

Children born in the 1980s and did not watch much television as infants and toddlers of today. Doordarshan was the only television channel in India at that time, with limited

hours of transmission. At present there are an uncountable number of channels that are ‘on air’ 24 hours. There is no denying that the television has become pervasive in our life with widespread reach in rural areas as well. From a coverage in seven cities in 1975 to achieving over 90 percent population coverage today [2], the television has become commonplace in the Indian home. Early exposure to television has been found to be associated with the development of autism in one recent study from Thailand [3]. This retrospective study claims an association and not a cause-and-effect relationship. Children with autism were exposed to about four hours of television per day compared to about two hours for controls. Though we do not have concrete evidence to prove this causation as of today, there are pointers to a causal role. First, there are certain ‘windows of opportunity’ for development to occur. At each age, the child’s brain is maximally suited to develop and learn certain skills [4]. This is supported by the common observation of how children are quick in learning languages before the age of two to three years than their parents who have been transferred to a new place. By exposure to television, are we losing the opportunity to teach basic rules of social reciprocity to our infants and toddlers? Second, the reversal of the autistic symptoms is quite dramatic in such children once the television is removed and intensive multimodal stimulation is started, often with the help of grandparents and their set of folk-lore which seems to have been lost in the past decade or two. This points out to an ‘environmental’ as opposed to a ‘genetic’ basis of autism in this subset of children. Such reversal has been shown to occur in a previous study of autistic traits in adopted children with severe degrees of deprivation [5].

This evidence is insufficient to implicate increased hours of television watching as aetiology for autism. However, it may be an important environmental factor that may lead to development of autistic symptoms in vulnerable children, such as those with a family history of autism or developmental language delay. Moreover, the observation that children with autism spend more time watching television [6], may be a reflection of their autistic disorder per se and a preference to watching television over activities that involve social reciprocity. The observation is only an association and does not necessarily implicate television as a causative factor in every case. Autism is neuropsychiatric disorder with both genetic and environmental underpinnings. Television could potentially play an important environmental factor in those with genetic susceptibility to autistic disorders and developmental language delay.

So, when a parent asks, “Should I let my child watch television?” The answer perhaps is, “Not until he/she is three years of age and not more than 2 hours a day.”

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