# Teach your child healthy media habits

**Source: Akhila Das Blah; Content Writer & Educational Consultant**

A while ago, my husband and I went for an R-rated superhero movie at a local theatre and were shocked at the number of children that were watching the movie with us. The parents around us either disregarded or were ignorant of the age rating clearly outlined for the movie. The management of the cinema also wasn’t interested in following the rules, as long as tickets were sold. The age rating was given for the high levels of violence showcased in the movie coupled with the excessive use of disturbing language and visuals. The mind shudders to think of the lasting effect of those images on a vulnerable 8- 12-year-old.

The unfortunate truth is that our children today have access to more media than ever before, including television, computers, tablets, smart phones and video games. And with that access, there is a whole world that opens up to them that they are in most cases, completely unprepared to navigate. As parents, we can either bury our heads in the sand like ostriches or ignore the reality or we can accept that media, digital or otherwise, is an integral part of their life and ensure that we do everything in our power to give them the skills to develop a healthy relationship with media.

**For younger children:**

**Avoid screen time for children under the age of 2 years**. Most parents use screen time to either keep their child entertained while they get a few quiet minutes to themselves or as a distraction while they shovel food into their mouths. While it is extremely hard to adopt a no-screen policy, studies have shown that a young child learns best from face to face interactions. Encourage your child to pick up a book and look at the pictures instead. Sing songs with elaborate hand gestures and puppets as props.

**Between the ages of 2 and 5 years old**, your child can have access to media for not more than an hour a day. Ideally, try and inculcate an “only on weekends” rule. The sooner you set boundaries in place, the easier it gets to implement them as they get older. Make sure your child watches content that you are familiar with and whenever possible, watch it together. Avoid keeping the TV on in the background. **Do not associate screen time to meal times or when you want them to be quiet.** Children are smart and quickly learn to manipulate and negotiate their way into increased screen time by holding you to ransom. If screen time is not part of the negotiation at meal times, they automatically lose any leverage they have over you.

Be picky. Look for videos and apps that use clear and simple language. They should be educational, age appropriate and encourage your child’s participation rather than promoting passive viewing. Young children are still learning to differentiate between reality and fiction. Shows like *‘Tom & Jerry’ or ‘Chota Bheem’* which have characters beating each other up with no apparent repercussions can encourage a child to assume that physically beating someone is harmless.

## ****For older children:****

As far as possible, preview the content.Don’t just assume that it is age appropriate because the neighbour’s kid is watching it. Your child will name a dozen children whose parents have allowed them to watch something. Please use your own judgment before allowing your child to watch the same.

Get involved with your child’s media usage.Talk to her about what she enjoys and why. Discuss the TV shows that she enjoys watching. Watching with her serves two purposes; it tells your child that you are interested in her world and it allows you to keep a general eye on the content that she is absorbing at an impressionable age.

Encourage your child to watch programmes that develop her natural curiosity about the world, nature and science shows or arts and history shows. When helping to choose age appropriate content, discuss messaging about gender, body image, violence, cultural and racial diversity and social issues. Share your values with your child. Explain how some programmes may not be age appropriate for her.

Avoid violent content. Studies have shown that children can get affected after watching scary or violent shows or playing violent video games. Be observant and notice any changes in how your child behaves or feels after exposure to violent or scary content.

Learn about age ratings for the books, movies, video games, music and television. Age ratings for children are based on the developmental requirements at each stage. Use the help of experts like Common Sense Media for age-based ratings and reviews. They screen each book, movie and video game for their use of positive messages, positive role models, violence, sex, language, consumerism, drugs, smoking and drinking.

Talk to your child about advertising content. Help them be aware of the different strategies that advertisers use to sell products to children and teens.

Set screen limits in place. Unless used for educational purposes, restrict screen time to weekends and not more than 2 hours a day. Treat screen time as a privilege that needs to be earned and not an entitled right. Encourage outdoor play, sports, hobbies and face to face interactions. If your child has a smart phone, make sure that late night chatting or surfing doesn’t cut into their sleep time. Research apps that provide parental controls, they can help block websites, enforce time limits and monitor the sites that your child visits. Discuss the need for parental controls with your child and as they get older, allow them a say in it. Remember that we are trying to equip them with skills to navigate this world rather than controlling their movements. The more open the communication, they better equipped they will be.

And last but not least, be a good role model. Let them see you prioritize family time over screen time. Put away your devices during meal times. Be aware of your choices. A child does what he sees and not what he is told.