

Reviewed by Kristina Lerman  
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*The Plug-in Drug – Television, Computers and Family Life*, 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition  
by Marie Winn

It is quite astonishing, that 25 years since its publication, this book remains the only popular parenting book openly critical of TV. I first read this book a number of years ago, hoping to understand why my young brother turned into a zombie as soon as the TV set was turned on, and why I let TV schedule control my own. I would like to say that the book contributed to my decision 10 years ago to live a TV-free life, but in truth, it was a purely financial decision. My roommate at the time refused to pay for cable, and not wanting to foot the bill myself, I decided to try <gasp> to live without TV. Now, TV-freedom is not purely a lifestyle choice, as with many others who made a similar choice, it is a crusade.

Much has changed since this landmark study of TV and its effect on children first appeared, but not for the better. In Marie Winn's view, TV has no redeeming features. While the book may be at times repetitious, at times folksy, its arguments not terribly rigorous, the evidence Ms. Winn presents about the deleterious effects of TV on family life, reading, educational achievement, childhood itself, is very damning. I would be surprised if anyone after reading this book would be able, in good conscience, let their child watch TV.

TV has many critics, especially among parents, teachers, doctors, and other child advocates. However, most assaults on TV have focused on the *content* of programs — the level of violence, for example — not the *act* of watching. Implicit in these attacks is the premise that we can fix TV by improving its content. Ms. Winn considers such attacks misguided: she argues that *watching itself is harmful* to the child and family life. Other critics have been slower. It took American Academy of Pediatrics several decades to make the bold recommendation that parents limit TV viewing (1995) and eliminate it entirely for children under two (1999). The inertia displayed by this professional organization is a testament to the grip TV has on all of us.

Why is TV viewing so bad for children? The evidence is manifold. The link between TV viewing and obesity and diabetes is well documented. What people find easier to ignore, however, is the negative impact TV has on academic performance and reading. Few studies have been done, because TV is too ubiquitous to find an adequate control population for a rigorous study. One such study exists. Before TV was introduced, the children of Notel (as the rural Canadian town was called in the study) scored significantly higher on reading and other skills than children in neighboring towns that had TV. A year after TV was introduced, the children's scores declined to levels comparable to those of neighboring kids. What's more, involvement in community activities dropped across the board, as did participation in outdoor sports, and other social events. In fact, other studies have shown positive correlation between TV watching and school performance — the more TV a child watches, the worse is his performance in school. These facts are consistent with Marie Winn's arguments — TV displaces reading and play as a child's #1 choice of how to spend free time. Without play and reading, a young child's intelligence,

creativity and imagination cannot fully develop. Moreover, by discouraging interpersonal interactions, TV is detrimental to family life— the more TV sets a family owns, or the more they watch, the less likely they are to spend time together, over dinner, games or family outings.

If TV is so bad, why do parents let their children watch it? Part of the reason is the effect TV has on both adults and children. Children *like* to watch TV. It is a passive, undemanding activity, unlike reading, which requires sustained attention, and god forbid – effort! Ms Winn proposes, with only anecdotal evidence to support her, that TV acts like a drug, causing a stupor and ultimately, an addiction. Parents are not immune to this seduction either. What’s more, they tend to see TV as a convenient child-rearing tool. They find it much easier to plop the child in front of a set rather than invest the energy to entertain the child, resolve conflicts between siblings, and to get some quiet time to themselves. As a result, parents never develop the skills necessary to nurture their children’s creativity, and in turn they promote dependence on TV as a sink of free time. Teachers old enough to have worked with kids before the advent of TV note a dramatic decline in creativity, imaginative play and ability to entertain themselves in children raised on TV.

For parents who recognize the detrimental effect of TV on their children’s development, the book has many practical suggestions for TV control. Firmness is important. A good rule, such as “No TV on school nights,” has no exceptions, no matter how many bargains the kids are willing to strike. Interestingly, families that follow this rule and do not impose any limits on watching on weekends, find that kids get used to no TV and end up watching less on weekends. The best way to control TV, of course, is to eliminate it entirely from the household – by getting rid of the set or cable (the latter option is also financially attractive). The best time to do so is when TV routine is disrupted, by a vacation or TV turnoff week. The latter should not be done without preparation. Have a good supply of books and games in the house, and expect to spend more of your time interacting with your children. Although this is the whole point of TV turnoff, many parents are still surprised by how demanding of their time and attention children can be.

I highly recommend the TV-free route. You will be amazed by how much you will do with the hours reclaimed for your life: play with kids, pick up a hobby, read a book or a newspaper, write a review... You will even thank me for it! ✍

**Remember: National TV Turnoff Week is April 21-27**