

# Parent Communications—Lifestyle Theme

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Adapted from President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2006, Food & Fun After School Unit 8 Parent Communications.

**Newsletter article:** Use this *Planet Health* article in your class or school newsletter. Think about publishing a *Planet Health* message each month to help parents and students tune in to healthy lifestyle choices and tune out of screen time.

## Tune Out Your TV for Better Health

American children, on average, watch 3 hours of television a day. Many watch more than that. Sound like a lot? Think about your average day. In the morning, the kids might watch about an hour while they eat breakfast and wait for the bus. After school, it's hard to argue with a child who just wants to flop in front of the TV for an hour to unwind. Before bed, everyone gathers to watch the baseball game or favorite sitcoms. Three hours come and go pretty easily.

So, how is TV a problem for health? Watching several hours of TV each day can result in less physical activity, more overeating, and more risk for becoming overweight. Watching television often means being inactive, snacking during viewing, and being exposed to lots of advertising for high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. In fact, new research shows that food advertising is very effective at influencing what children eat, and that exposure to TV advertising is strongly linked to overweight.

A few quick facts...

- Each day, children receive about 58 commercial messages from television alone. About half of those are for food.
- Close to 98% of food commercials on weekend morning network TV are for unhealthy foods high in fat, sodium, cholesterol, and sugar.
- The amount of marketing aimed at kids has more than doubled during the last 10 years from \$7 billion to \$15 billion a year.

What's a parent to do? Protect your children by setting limits. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that school-age children watch no more than 2 hours a day of high-quality programming—and the less, the better. You can make the biggest impact by keeping television sets out of children's bedrooms and by banning TV during homework and mealtimes. Although you may get complaints at first, these limits can actually help you spend more time interacting as a family, and it can free up time to do other things, like play games, read, or just be together.

Another thing you can do is to help your children make appropriate choices when they do watch television. Whenever possible, watch programs with children to monitor the content, including commercials. Talk with them about the hidden messages and motivations of commercial advertisements. When it comes to food advertising, children are easily misled by commercials that promote diet foods and fast foods as nutritious choices.

And finally, set a good example by keeping your own TV viewing habits in check. For

ideas on promoting TV turnoff in your community, check out [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org). You can also find helpful ideas for activities to substitute for TV time by visiting [www.verbnow.com](http://www.verbnow.com) or [www.bam.gov](http://www.bam.gov).

Optional sidebar:

### ***Tips for Success***

- Use technology. Screening devices (like TiVo) can remove advertising and allow you to view TV shows in less time.
- Be a good role model. Keep a check on your own TV viewing habits. Kids will take their cues from you!
- Endure kids' complaints. This may be a parent's biggest challenge. But stick with it!
- Help kids deal with boredom. Be prepared to suggest other activities. Over time, kids will learn to entertain themselves.

**E-mail message:** Use this sample e-mail message to send *Planet Health* messages home to parents.

### ***Subject: Planet Health Tips for Parents: Tune Out the TV***

Dear Parents:

This month our class will use the *Planet Health* curriculum to explore the concepts of (insert curriculum goals here), using television and other screen time as a case study. Here are the key messages:

(Alternative message)

This week our class will do a *Planet Health* lesson called Power Down: Charting Screen Time. Here are the key messages we'll promote:

- TV, video games, and movies can keep you inactive and expose you to lots of advertising for unhealthy foods.
- Replace TV time with active time to keep you fit and feeling good.

Our goal is to raise children's awareness of their own screen-viewing habits (TV, computer, video games) and encourage them to trade some of that time for activities that are more positive for their bodies and minds. Setting limits on screen time can benefit your children's health and school performance. To help your children reduce their screen time, follow these *Planet Health* tips for parents:

- Be a good role model. Keep a check on your own TV viewing. Your children will take their cues from you!

- Limit TV and other screen time (Web surfing, video games, and so on) to a maximum of 2 hours per day. The less, the better. You can do this by keeping television sets out of bedrooms, limiting viewing to specific days or times, watching *only* favorite shows, and not allowing TV during meals or homework times.
- Consider having screen-free days, and do not feel obligated to allow 2 hours of TV or other screen time each day!
- Help children deal with boredom by suggesting other activities. For example, plan a family game night, or offer incentives to children who trade 30 minutes of TV for 30 minutes of reading.
- If your budget allows, consider purchasing a screening device such as TiVo to remove advertising and allow you to watch favorite shows in less time.

Want to learn more? Click on [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org) for ways to promote TV-free family time. Visit [www.verbnow.com](http://www.verbnow.com) or for ideas on keeping kids busy without TV.