

# The Flickering Screen

By Elsje de Boer

Today's preschoolers spend more time watching a two-dimensional flickering screen than exercising their muscles and their sense of balance, developing spatial skills, and experimenting with sticks and stones, mud and water, building blocks and trees. They rarely play kick-the-can, they don't jump rope, play hopscotch, leap frog, or marbles. There is nothing wrong with watching television or playing electronic games. There is nothing wrong with eating macaroni and cheese or a burger and fries, either, but a steady diet of nothing but these is lacking in many of the essential nutrients we need to grow and stay healthy. The same can be said for a steady diet of electronic games, tv programs and movies. They are entertaining and may even be educational, but a steady diet of nothing but this is lacking in experiences essential for optimal brain development. "*As we develop from infancy to adulthood, the design of brain circuitries .... seems to depend on the activities in which the organism engages,*" says Antonio Damasio (Descartes' Error p. 111). In other words, to a large extent our experiences and activities form and shape our brain circuitry.

In order to develop good spatial cognition, we need a great variety of spatial experience such as running, jumping, climbing, throwing, building. Clicking a mouse to create images on a screen is not the same experience as climbing a tree or walking a balance beam, building a fort or a block structure, hitting a baseball or playing tag.

The convenience of television, video, and electronic games, together with the often hectic work schedules of both parents, have dramatically decreased time spent in conversation or in reading aloud to children. There is a difference between watching a movie and hearing a story read aloud. In the former, the images are there, ready made. In the latter, we have to create the images out of the words we hear. Reading therefore not only fosters language development, it also develops imagination, and imagination is the cornerstone of conceptual thought.

More time spent in front of a flickering screen and less time spent in independent, unstructured play has also affected attention span. There are two kinds of attention, the involuntary attention or startle reflex we share with animals, and the voluntary, sustained attention required for complex tasks. Television programs and electronic games rely on the startle reflex with sudden changes in size, sound, or action which irresistibly draw attention back to the screen. Sustained attention requires effort and it requires screening out distractions, both internal and external. It is this sustained, focused attention which is required in a school setting, and too many children have too little practice in it. Activities like walking a balance beam, climbing a tree, or building with blocks, playing marbles or playing cards, or listening to a story all develop the sustained, voluntary attention that seems to be in such short supply today.

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