

**B**efore Ellen Currey-Wilson became a mom, she pondered the role television had played in her life. In her own words, she'd "grown up addicted," and she didn't want her son Casey to do the same.

Currey-Wilson, who lives in southwest Portland, overcame her addiction in the months before – and just after – Casey was born, documenting her experiences in *The Big Turnoff: Confessions of a TV-Addicted Mom Trying to Raise a TV-Free Kid* (Algonquin Books, 2007). While she doesn't shun TV altogether (the family owns a television and occasionally watches a movie or newsworthy televised event), she's achieved her goal of raising a child untethered by electronic media.

"He's developed so many interests and become so good at so many different things," she says of Casey, now 12, "he's not a kid who even wants it."

Like Currey-Wilson, many local parents are choosing to raise their children with little or no screen-centric entertainment – which includes not only television and DVDs but also cell phones, computers, video games and beyond. The benefits are immense, they say; the sacrifices minimal.

### The Whys

Most screen-free parents cite numerous advantages to the lifestyle, not the least of which is minimizing their children's exposure to commercials. "I'm sort of an anti-consumerism type and I didn't want my kids exposed to commercials," says Ariel Tindolph, a Hillsdale mother of three, ages 11, 10 and 16 months, who unplugged her family about six or seven years ago. "I didn't want my kids asking for sugary cereals and Transformers." (They don't, she adds. "They're not really even aware of that.")

Tindolph also was motivated by studies showing a correlation between aggression in children and the number of hours they spent watching TV. Other studies have indicated increases in sleep disturbances, attention problems and negative attitudes toward school as well as decreases in academic performance, all of which appear to be connected to excessive leisure screen time. According to Jean Rystrom, practice director for pediatrics for Kaiser Permanente Northwest, numerous studies show negative effects that are both immediate (significant changes in sleep patterns appeared after one night of video games or a movie, for example) and longitudinal (the effects of early viewing habits show up in later years).

Rystrom, who offers workshops for parents and educators on the effects of screen time, is careful to point out there are studies refuting



Many local families have concluded that the pros of unplugging far outweigh the cons.

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"I would rather have a messy house (with) toys scattered all over the place than have them sitting in front of the TV."

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– Ariel Tindolph

## Why - and How - Families Are Going Screen-Free

By Emily Puro

the correlation between television and attention problems "so the jury is still out." Still, with scene changes that cause your attention to shift every few seconds in today's typical television show, she says, it's easy to see how a developing mind could be trained to shift rapidly – rather than sustain – its focus.

While research is a powerful motivator, many parents decide to limit screen time based on personal experience as well. Jodie Dierickx, a single mom who lives in North Portland says her biggest influences were her sisters. "I have one sister who doesn't

even have a TV," she says, "and my other sister has the big screen TV and they have it on a lot." Dierickx noticed that her niece would be glued to the screen at one sister's house, "yet when she's at my other sister's without the TV she's interacting with you the whole time." Dierickx decided to keep her daughter, now 3, off television for the first two years but has enjoyed it so much she's continuing.

Southeast Portland mom Sara Tetreault has seen the effects of screen time on her children's attention spans first hand. (While the Tetreaults aren't screen-free, they limit television to a few hours on the weekends and unplug every summer.) "I noticed that when we traveled," she says of the long trips the family took when their children, now 9 and 11, were young, "if I made the kids have no screen time the week before we left, they were more likely to be able to entertain themselves (en route)."

Currey-Wilson was largely unaware of the research about screen time before Casey was born, but she, too, had plenty of anecdotal evidence. As an elementary school teacher, she surveyed her students about their viewing habits and found that "the kids that watched the least amount of television or none at all tended to be the ones who were the most focused, the brightest, the most creative and well socialized," she says. "The kids that watched too much tended to be the ones that were more hyper and aggressive. It just became obvious to me that this really has an impact."

Childhood obesity is another issue that's intricately linked with screen time, notes Rystrom. Not only are children typically sedentary while watching television, playing video games, or engaging in other

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