

Switch on to new lifestyle

Three hours viewing per day may cause later-life illnesses, says **Helen O'Callaghan**



SCREEN YOUR CHILDREN: Limit the hours they watch TV.

IRISH primary schoolchildren watch, on average, three hours of TV a day. Half of the children have a TV in their bedroom. This is according to national school surveys conducted by RedBranch, a Clare-based charity that promotes healthy eating and physical activity in children.

"Although children now spend time on Facebook and the internet, this is not displacing their TV time. All this screen time is eating into other areas of life, which is worrying from a health perspective," says David Egan, of RedBranch, who cites research that illnesses such as cancer and heart disease take decades to develop.

"Many researchers would say they [diseases] have their roots in childhood. We need to get our kids off the couch," he says.

By encouraging children to be active — to kick a ball or play chasing — we protect them from serious illnesses as they get older.

TV TIPS

■ No more than a half an hour per day of TV for children under two. An hour per day for three- to five-year-olds.

■ Plan with children what you'll watch, rather than TV becoming the default activity.

■ Watch the programme with your child. Afterwards, talk about what happened.

"Heart disease is the end result of a lifetime of sedentary living. Being physically active has been shown to reduce colon cancer risk by 50%," he says.

Egan says parents should monitor their own TV habits and question how they live. "Go out and be active with the kids. That will help you bond and you'll look back with nostalgia rather than with regret," he says.

If your child has a TV in his or her bedroom, it more than likely means they're watching more television than they otherwise would (unless you're strict around how often it's switched on). Egan says parents should take control. "Remove the TV, explain your reasons and be prepared for protests. Remember: you're the parent and you've got to make decisions for your child."

According to the Irish Association of Speech & Language Therapists (IASLT), for every hour per day that young children watch TV their vocabulary slows down or decreases, because when the TV is on people talk less. "One study found that, on average, parents say over 900 words an hour, but when the TV is on they hardly talk at all," says Sinead Kennedy, of IASLT.

"TV doesn't improve children's communication skills. Communication is about the to-and-fro, the interaction. TV's pretty passive," she says. ■

■ Visit www.parents-forhealth.org and www.red-branch.com.

Good snews

HAVING a baby can be daunting, and establishing routines is often a struggle. If a baby doesn't sleep well and wakes often during the night, parents can quickly become exhausted and feel alone. An estimated one in four families experience sleep problems during a child's early years. The good news is that there is help out there for parents in Ireland in the form of sleep coaching.

Yvonne and Geoff O'Sullivan have two children, Josh, nearly three, and Sophie, 18 months — they live outside Ennis, Co Clare.

"Josh was fine until he was unwell and came into our bed," says Yvonne. "After that he wouldn't go to sleep without me. He would play with my hair while he was asleep so I couldn't leave him or he'd wake up. Sophie was waking up for two bottles during the night. I was at my wits' end when a friend mentioned a sleep expert called Lucy Wolfe. Geoff and I drove to see her in Cork for a two-hour consultation."

Paediatric sleep consultant and mum of four young children, Lucy Wolfe understood what Yvonne and Geoff were going through. "When I had my first child almost 10 years ago, I was surprised that there were no resources here for parents struggling with sleeping difficulties. I bought every book out

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there and managed to get my little man sleeping for 12 hours straight. I became the 'go to' person among friends and family looking to get some sleep, and decided to get properly trained."

Baby sleep consultant Edal Gargan also started her business after experiencing difficulties with her two children — Anna, eight, and Laragh, five.

"Anna had a dependency on the soother and I was up every 20 minutes replacing it during the night. The only advice I could get through my public health nurse/doctor and books was to let her cry it out. As I am a Montessori teacher, this method went against all my beliefs. I found the whole process soul destroying, although it did work.

"Laragh had wind so I was constantly picking her up and she would only go to sleep on my shoulder. I didn't want her to have to cry it out like Anna. I did a lot of research about different techniques and got Laragh sleeping using a very reassuring approach. As time went by I found more and more people were asking me for help. I then decided I wanted to formally train as a sleep consultant."

Both sleep consultants interview and consult with the parents about their child's habits, give tailored advice, but do not work directly with the children as they feel this comes better from the parents. They are there to give support to the parents throughout what can be a difficult time.

"Mostly I am contacted by parents whose

children are waking multiple times in the night," says Lucy Wolfe. "Ordinarily, the children have developed wrong sleep associations at bedtime and require intervention to help them to go to sleep and to go back to sleep, like rocking, feeding or nursing. I believe that the parent should be the one to deal with the child in order to maintain their secure bond and to alleviate any unnecessary stress on the child," says Lucy. "Based on the information the parents give me, I will identify the issues and work out a suitable plan that suits the family unit and the individual child. I do not endorse 'cry it out', and educate the parents on how they can respond and soothe their child while fostering good sleep habits."

Yvonne and Geoff came away from their meeting with Lucy Wolfe with tons of ideas about what to do. "I had to sit beside Josh's bed for the first three nights," says Yvonne, "then at the end of his bed for three nights, at the stair gate and then at the bottom of the stairs. So over 12 days he was learning to go to sleep in his own bed, on his own. We gave him a doll's head for comfort



A TO ZZZZ: Yvonne O'Sullivan with husband Geoff and children, Sophie and Josh and seen here at home, have reaped the benefits of working with a paediatric sleep consultant. Picture: Eamon Ward

and he plays with her hair. Again, it was exhausting at first and I told Lucy that I wanted to give up and let him back into our bed, but she encouraged me to keep going. Josh now sleeps from 7pm 'til 6am."

Lucy's advice for how to help Sophie sleep was different. "We went 'cold

turkey' with the bottle, so we didn't give Sophie another bottle at night. When she cried we went in to comfort her, and sat by her cot until she settled, and then we left the room. It was exhausting at first, but after two nights she stopped waking up.

"We paid €300 total for

both children and it was well worth it," says Yvonne. ■

■ Edal Gargan: www.babysleep-academy.com
 ■ Lucy Wolfe: www.sleepmatters.ie
 ■ www.naturallynurturing.co.uk
 ■ *The Sleep Lady's Good Night, Sleep Tight: Gentle Proven Solutions to Help Your Child Sleep Well and Wake Up Happy* by Kim West is published by Vanguard Press

Sleep tips

■ **Age appropriate bedtime:** Some time between 7pm-8pm is a natural bedtime for a young child. Missing your child's sleep window can make it hard for them to go asleep and to stay asleep.

■ **Relaxing and calm bedtime routine:** A sequence of events focused on helping to wind the child down and get them ready for sleep, instead of doing something to put them to sleep like rocking, nursing or walking.

■ **Peaceful sleeping environment conducive to sleep:** Should be adequately dark, avoiding bright external lights. Remove distractions, scary pictures, etc.

■ **Avoid night time feedings once no longer necessary:** Frequent feeding through the night may result in a persistent requirement for night feeds with conditioned hunger and recurrent night-time waking.

■ **Put the child to bed more awake than asleep:** This will allow your child to learn how to fall asleep on their own. Be emotionally, physically and verbally responsive to them while they perfect the skill.

■ **Be consistent in your responses during the night:** Changing your child's sleeping location throughout the night, lying down with them, sometimes feeding them, sometimes allowing them to play, when they should be asleep will confuse them and ingrain night time activity.

■ **Adequate daytime sleep when appropriate:** Make sure your child is getting enough sleep in the day. ■ Source: www.sleepmatters.ie

Online and in the shops

■ **NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT** For many, early summer is the 'sneezing season' A.Vogel luffa complex tincture, €10.50, contains fresh herbs, including sponge cucumber, to prevent and alleviate the symptoms of allergies and particularly hay fever.

Children (two -12 years) can take one drop per year of age, two to three times daily, in a little water. Children over 12 can also use luffa nasal spray, €11.69, which rinses the nose, cleansing it of hay fever-causing allergens. It also restores moisture in the nasal passages, soothing the nose. A.Vogel products are available from health stores and pharmacies; www.avogel.ie.



■ **SANDS OF TIME** Keep the little ones occupied during the summer with this sand- and-water table, now €29.99 at Smyths. It also comes in pink and has a protective cover and removable legs for easy storage and fun play accessories. www.toys.ie.



■ **IN THE SHADE** The cot canopy breeze, €72, is a blackout canopy that can be placed over a cot, so that babies can sleep peacefully without the family having to sit in the dark while on holiday. Made from approved, UPF protection mesh, it also shields against insects and the sun. It's available from McCabe's pharmacy stores and online at www.mccabespharmacy.com.



■ **LIVING IN A BUBBLE** Since its launch in Oct 2010, one bottle of Johnson's baby 2in1 bubble bath and wash, €2.99, has been sold for every toddler in Ireland. The mild formula is designed to make lots of bubbles that are still kind to baby's skin and eyes. For babies up to six months old, Johnson's recommend that you fill the bath with about 13cm (5in) of water. For those a bit older, and ready to have some bubbling fun, water can be waist high, but always remember to never leave your baby unattended in the bath.



DAD'S WORLD

A friend said to me recently: "I think it's powerful the way you've kept a sense of yourself after all these years being at home with the children".

Well, sometimes I wonder. "Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!" my youngest daughter calls out. There's only me and her older sister in the car. "I mean, daddy," she says, finally giving me my rightful title.

"I'm not your mummy," I growl. My wife comes upstairs to kiss me goodbye before going to work. "Don't come in," I say. "I'm only half-dressed."

I'm in a snot. Well, a tiny snot.



She didn't leave the shower switch on for me after her shower this morning.

Oh, alright, there's a history there, as there always is with these things: I didn't pick her pillow up off the floor when she was making our bed, she didn't wake up when the child called 'Mummy!' in the

"I also married my sister, which is why I called my wife by my sister's name for the first two years of our marriage"

middle of the night (though, of course, come to think of it now, she could have been calling me), I didn't pour her out a glass of wine last night when I was pouring out my own ...

You get the picture. "What do you mean I can't come in?" my wife says, barging into the

bedroom. "I'm your husband?" "My husband?" I say, indignant. "So, what does that make me then? Your wife?" I say, taking her in my arms to kiss her — or is it him?

By now, I am sorry I didn't pour her out that glass of wine last night.

But it's even more complicated. "Daddy, where are my socks?" It's a question I'm asked at least once a week.

"How do I know?" I say. "Ask my mother!" It's my wife's turn to be indignant.

You see, I married my mother. Actually, worse again — I also married my sister, which is why I called my wife by my sister's name

for the first two years of our marriage. "Not in bed, of course. Oh, no, there, I called her Gerard. "Move over, Gerard!" I'd mutter, though I hadn't slept with my younger brother in 20 years.

Anyway, where was I? If I can speak of an 'I' anymore! Oh, yes, my husband was in my arms, mummy was half-dressed, my mother was telling me she was my wife, I'd just left my brother in the bed, and my youngest child, Ciara, is now calling out to us from downstairs, "Mummy! Tell Becky to stop annoying me!"

"Do you want to take this one, or should I call for the men in little

white coats?" I say to my wife. I am certain she is my wife now; it's that old, familiar taste of her lips that does it for me every time — but I am still not sure if I am mummy or daddy in my daughter's eyes...

"Leave it to me," my wife says. "Look, Aish, no, Beck, no, Ciara, tell Aish, eh, Ciara, em, Beck that she is to leave you alone or I am going to tell Ciara, em, Beck, eh, Aish that she is using her hairbrush."

Family life: it's a miracle that we survive at all. And thrive. ■

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Weekend tomorrow

School summer holidays special: 50 FREE things to do this summer. Plus, 50 ways to keep the kids amused.

