

# Study blaming youthful obesity on TV is cop-out

By Richard Huff  
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There's a link between fat preschoolers and the number of hours they spend in front of the television, according to a study released this week.

Researchers at the University of Michigan Health System found that a 3-year-old child exposed to two hours or more of television a day was almost three times more likely to be overweight than a child who watched fewer than two hours.

That stands to reason: If a kid is watching television, he's not burning off fat.

Once again, however, television is being blamed for society's ills, rather than society being blamed for its own problems.

"Television viewing for preschool age children appears to be a powerful predictor of overweight risk," the lead study author, Dr. Julie C. Lumeng, said in a statement. "Even if a child comes from a two-parent, upper-class home and the TV being watched is considered educational, that child is still at a higher risk for being overweight than a child who watches fewer than two hours of TV a day."

There was no reference to how many times those two parents in the upper-class home pulled their Escalade into McDonald's for a Happy Meal before dumping the kid by the television so they could practice pilates.

Researchers did note that kids watching television are likely to snack and be exposed to commercials for bad foods, which could contribute to weight gain.

Amazingly, researchers considered children to be watching television, whether they were looking at the television or not.

"TV exposure — defined as being awake in a room when

the TV is on whether or not the child was actively watching, and (including) broadcast and cable TV as well as videos — was determined based on a questionnaire completed by the children's mothers," the study said.

One has to question the notion of counting intervals when kids aren't actively watching as part of their total TV time. What if the television was on and the child was off in a corner doing push-ups? Or what if an uncaring parent was watching "Jerry Springer" while the kid played in the same room but was not watching?

No one would argue that a completely sedentary lifestyle is good for a child's health. But why blame television for a child's bulging belly when he's not actively watching?

It's much harder to put the blame on the parents, and even harder to get parents who are filling out questionnaires to admit they've fallen down on the job.

TV programmers know getting kids to be physically active is important — and they're aware that parents won't take the initiative on their own. For example, Nickelodeon has an ongoing campaign to get kids outside to play.

Moreover, much of the preschool fare airs without commercials, or with limited time allotted for ads.

As the parent of a 6-year-old, I've watched in amazement when she stands in front of the television and dances, stretches and moves along with the freakish creatures in PBS' "Boobah."

Is it all she needs? Of course not. What's needed, though, is more attention to what parents do or don't do, rather than fingering a television as the fat-building meanie.