



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on September 12, 2011

## SpongeBob May Impact Behavior of 4-Year Olds

According to a new behavioral study, Spongebob SquarePants may cause short-term attention and learning problems in 4-year olds. The study indicates that watching a mere nine minutes of the program can have such an effect.

Fox News [reports](#): "The problems were seen in a study of 60 children randomly assigned to either watch [SpongeBob](#), or the slower-paced PBS cartoon *Caillou* or assigned to draw pictures. Immediately after these nine-minute assignments, the kids took mental function tests; those who had watched *SpongeBob* did measurably worse than the others."



Those who watched SpongeBob SquarePants scored an average of 12 points lower than the other groups. The children who watched *Caillou* and drew pictures scored nearly the exact same. Another test administered to the three groups was how long the children were able to wait before eating snacks presented to them when the researcher left the room. Those who watched *Caillou* or drew illustrations waited approximately four minutes, as opposed to those children who watched Spongebob, who waited just two and a half minutes on average.

*US News* [reports](#), "Only 15 percent passed the problem-solving task, for example, compared with 35 percent of *Caillou* viewers and 70 percent of those who spent time drawing."

*US News* explains the study's results, "Fast-paced shows revolving around unrealistic events are likely detrimental because they overstimulate the brain, making it harder to maintain focus, plan, organize, and control inappropriate behaviors, the researchers speculate."

The study's main author, Angeline Lillard, psychology professor at the University of Virginia, [admits](#), however, "We do not know how long this effect lasts. It may be that children recover quickly. Certainly, immediately after, there was a strong impact particularly on the most challenging tasks."

In general, watching television has been shown to have long-term attention problems in children, but according to this newest study, even more immediate problems can result after minimal exposure, a problem of which parents should be aware, the study's authors indicate.

The authors went on to speculate that children have shown marked behavioral changes after 9 minutes of programming, so watching a full 22 minutes of a program "could be more detrimental."

Others warn that the study should be carefully scrutinized, since it is small in size. Dr. Dimitri Christakis, a child development specialist at Seattle Children's Hospital warned that the study's small size should force a cautious interpretation of the results. He adds, however, that the data seems to be robust in that it encourages the notion that media exposure is a "public health issue."

Christakis also indicates that parents should be careful about how much fast-paced television to which



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they expose their children. "What kids watch matters, it's not just how much they watch," he asserts.

Lillard said Nickelodeon's SpongeBob should not be singled out, since the same effects would result from any fast-paced cartoon programming.

"I wouldn't advise watching such shows on the way to school or any time they're expected to pay attention and learn," Lillard adds.

Naturally, the people behind SpongeBob SquarePants have taken offense to the study, and has defended the program by asserting it is geared towards kids aged 6-11, not 4-year olds.

"Having 60 non-diverse kids, who are not part of the show's targeted (audience), watch nine minutes of programming is questionable methodology and could not possibly provide the basis for any valid findings that parents could trust," said Spongebob spokesman David Bittler.

But Lillard contends the reason 4-year olds were selected for the study was because that age "is at the heart of the period during which you see most development" in self-control abilities. Lillard admits that it cannot be determined whether other age groups would be impacted in the same way by programs like Spongebob SquarePants.

Still, analysts indicate that the study's results are limited in that the children were not tested before they watched TV. Lillard adds, however, that none of the children involved in the study had been diagnosed with attention problems and all received similar scores on parents' evaluations of their behavior.

Ari Brown, pediatrician and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media, said that study raises questions about long-term effects on children and about how those effects are impacted by the type of shows, how they are structured, and the amount of television watched.

"Technology is great, but we also want to explore how does that impact our kids. If in fact there is some impact from chilling out, watching a fun show on immediate executive function afterward, my message to parents would be get your kids to finish their homework first before they sit down and watch TV," said Brown.



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