

30 Days Live: Nutritional and Physical Activity Change During TV/Screen Withdrawal

Dr. Barbara J. Brock, EWU professor; bbrock@ewu.edu; ph: 509/359-6040

Cheney Middle School sixth grader Daniel never thought he'd enjoy playing with his three sisters. But, beginning with National TV-Turnoff Week 2003 and 2005 and continuing even longer with the "30 Days Live", he found fun with siblings, bike riding, and other outside activities "actually better than watching TV." Several of his classmates in the Howling Coyote Core, an entire fourth and fifth grade class at Windsor Elementary school, and a 4th and 5th grade class from Nine Mile Falls Elementary School joined Daniel in this unusual challenge to forego their screens. Of the 120 children who began the program, 78% kept extensive journals, met regularly, and not only survived, but thrived without television, for 30 days. The second pilot study in 2005 included pedometer readings and Body Mass Indexes (BMI's) recorded before and after the project. As mentioned earlier, the six-month follow up in January 2004 and again in January, 2006 showed nearly 80% of the children continued to watch less TV than before 30 Days Live. When asked if they wanted to do it again, 97% said yes and 93% of the children felt kids all across the U.S. would benefit from turning off their TV's and screens for 30 days. For the 2005 pilot, the pedometers were difficult to regulate, thus the data on the readings was not reliable, however, the BMI's showed a slight decrease in weight across the board for all classes.

In 30 Days Live, I wanted to take the mystery out of the TV withdrawal process by documenting it, a concept often discussed but never tackled. The hypothesis being: If TV withdrawal isn't so bad, others might try it - discovering startling benefits including a ton of interesting and oft forgotten fulfilling leisure time activities just as Daniel did.

Implementation

Children used journals to keep track of activities and snacks during certain hours of the day. They also ranked each day and had a small space to draw or write trials, tribulations, joys, and discoveries. There were also inspirations and statistics for each day, for example, "Did you know the average kid spends 900 hours a year in school and 1,023 hours a year watching TV?" or a quote from 2nd grader Drew Henson, "I really didn't like turning off the TV except I noticed that my grades went up and I was in a good mood all week." For the second pilot, pedometers were handed out to 10 children in each classroom and asked to record steps for a 48-hour period, then the class exchanged pedometers for the other half of the class. Also, Body Mass Indexes were taken by a school nurse at the beginning and end of the experiment.

Incentives

Children who survived one week without TV received something "writable" - a silly foam fish pen. Two-week survivors were treated to something "eatable" - a pizza party. Three-week survivors received something "playable" - a little game box. Those surviving the entire 30 days received something "wearable" - a red, white, and blue ribbon medallion with the 30 Days Live logo on it. Total cost of incentives was less than \$8.00 per person. The incentives were purposely meant to be minor. I felt if kids could get over the hump of the first few days, they would discover the fun all by themselves and that alone would be the primary motivation.

Research Questions

Though not necessary to do in a typical classroom, for the purposes of this research, several questions were placed in the little journals. The first few dealt with behavior (self-efficacy) and how ready they felt they were to change. Last were 13 post-test questions dealing with the logistics of the turnoff. There were also interview questions asked each week in small groups, i.e.: (a) what were your activity choices, (b) how much support did you receive at home. Finally, the parents and teachers filled out a final questionnaire of six questions when the program was complete, i.e.: (a) what changes did you notice in the child's behavior, (b) do you think their habits will change, (c) would you do this project again?

Findings

Just over half of the children involved in the 30 Days Live program predicted 100% success. Of those who predicted success, 90% actually made it 30 days. Of those who predicted failure, 80% still made it 30 days! In other words, those who predicted success were highly likely to make it and those who predicted failure were almost as likely to make it.

At the halfway point, children were asked if they were happier, 90% of the children reported, "Yes:" (the other 10% said, "the same"). Most responded they were getting more sleep, grades had improved, and they spent more time talking with friends and family. Many reorganized their bedrooms, started books, discovered long lost toys, and tried a few new hobbies. All say they spend more time playing with pets and just being outside. Most reported the first week was easier than they thought. By this time, 16 had dropped out stating they could not survive without a favorite show.

By the end of the 30 days, 11 more dropped out. Some quit because of new computer games their parents purchased for them, and others could not bear missing out on the last episode of Survivor. When asked if the whole experiment was worth it, 100% of those who finished said, "Yes." Of the entire group, including those who dropped out, 40%

stated they would cut back “a lot” in the future, 43% would cut back slightly, 8% would forego the box completely and 8% would keep the same viewing habits. In other words, 91% of the entire group agreed they would cut back their TV viewing. On the final day, one sixth grader came up to me with tears in her eyes on the last day and said, “This was really the best month of my life.”

Research Summary

According to the teachers involved, this experiment was of tremendous benefit to their classes, especially due to the fact that it was held during some strenuous testing times. I was very conscious of their over-packed curriculums, but they insisted it fit right in. Students read their assignments, turned in more homework and were in better moods.

It was a surprise to all of us to see the numbers who stuck it out for the entire month. The eagerness with which the students accepted the challenge was inspiring. During 30 Days Live, in the 4th grade language arts curriculum, students were asked to write about a great event in their lives, one that affected them deeply. Several students chose to record their experience of 30 days without TV. And, as previously mentioned, one girl stated it was truly the best month of her life. What more could we ask?

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