Removing access to traditional computer and TV screens eliminates our son's tics

TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO, WE WERE at a major crossroads in our son Todd's life. It started near his eighth birthday, when he developed an eye tic that became progressively worse over the next few weeks. He soon had multiple types of motor tics intermittently throughout the day.

I read up on tic syndromes. My gut told me that something specific was triggering the tics, and I wanted to avoid using drugs. After discussing the situation with his pediatrician and learning there was no medical emergency involved, we took it upon ourselves to try to find and stop whatever was causing this problem.

It only took about two weeks to connect tic symptoms with Todd’s computer play. He had played on the computer from an early age, so this wasn’t something new in his life. But when we removed the computer and he did not use one elsewhere, within about 14 days the tics were completely gone. Just a coincidence? We wondered too, and we began to experiment over the next year, allowing short exposures to the computer. I soon learned there was a definite visual connection to the tics.

The event that erased any doubt was a trip to a “Star Wars” movie. Todd had not had any significant tics for quite a while, but when the movie’s night laser scenes started, it was like a giant strobe test for him. He ticced nearly incessantly, on average every five to ten seconds, throughout the movie. After we left the theater, his tics disappeared. I am convinced it was not an issue of stress or excitement—it was the visual experience that triggered the tics.

Over time, my son became more sensitive and even reacted while watching television. We found that continued exposure to flickering screens had both a cumulative and lingering effect.

Solving the problem
We finally made a major effort to eliminate all screen viewing, and Todd stayed tic-free. I have experimented with this process repeatedly, and know this is not a random occurrence. Todd knows it, too. Of course, this was a difficult limitation for him. So one day we bought a 15” LCD monitor with a TV tuner. LCD stands for liquid crystal display, and these screens produce no flicker, in contrast to the 60 Hz flicker rate so common to TV and CRT computer monitors. We reduced the monitor brightness and requested Todd to view TV from across the room, which he now does with no problem. We also found that he can safely do static computer work and play games on this monitor, but we ask him to avoid those with rapid action and/or significant flicker in the image itself.

Getting feedback from others
I have been active on some message boards with parents of children with tic syndromes, including the Latitudes.org forum. I posted our experience with uncovering flickering screens as a major trigger and our subsequent delight when removal resolved the issue.

I initially received a mixed reaction, and ran into the prevailing view that some kids tic while watching TV because they are “relaxing and letting the tics out.” Parents on the forum had rarely considered that when tics were worse during TV viewing (certainly not the case for everyone) it might be a reaction to the TV itself.

After some time, four parents I had been corresponding with took their children off TV for a week, and all four noticed a dramatic decrease in tics—so much so, that as of this writing, only one went back to occasional TV viewing with their child.

I know that my evidence is only anecdotal, but I encourage others to experiment with this. For best results, it is important to be sure that TV viewing or computer/video game use is not taking place outside the home while you are testing this concept.

Meanwhile, we are pursuing integrative medical approaches to address biochemical imbalances uncovered during lab testing and hope this will help lessen his visual sensitivity in the future.

I am pleased to report that placing a priority on physical activity and board games over TV and computer time has improved the quality of Todd’s life.

Please share what you learn!
If you explore this idea, I hope you will share your results with ACN. The director, Sheila Rogers, has promised to compile any comments received on this topic and publish the outcome.

Editor: Please send comments on the above topic to the e-mail address, fax, or mail address below.

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