

PARENTAL LIFESTYLES AND CHILDREN'S TELEVISION VIEWING

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This study examined the relationship between aspects of family life and children's home television usage. Data were gathered from 282 families regarding: (i) their preschool child's viewing habits, (ii) their own leisure activities, (iii) their controlling and monitoring of television usage in the home, (iv) their attitudes to television, and (v) certain demographic characteristics.

This study established that the importance placed by parents on TV as a leisure activity was related to both the type and quantity of TV viewed by preschoolers, as were parental attitudes to the medium and socioeconomic status. These predictors were interrelated less highly, however, than anticipated. Measures designed to reflect the degree to which parents were *laissez faire* in controlling their child's TV usage added little explanatory value. Possible reasons for this finding and alternative explanatory variables are discussed.

Television unquestionably monopolizes the average Australian child's leisure time (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978) and is a potentially potent source of influence. The nature of this influence on child development has aroused concern both in Australia (Media Information Australia, 1979) and overseas (U.S. Report to Surgeon General 1972). Initially, research focussed on the negative aspects of television, particularly on viewing violence (cf. Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann, 1972). Recently, however, there has been a shift toward also understanding the beneficial aspects of television, for example, the promotion of social and cognitive skills (cf. Huston-Stein & Watkins, 1980; Poulos, Rubinstein, & Liebert, 1975).

Recognition of television as a potentially influential medium has highlighted the need to identify intervening

variables which, if appropriately manipulated, would maximize the positive consequences and minimize the negative. In this context, the role of parents has been regarded as extremely important (Bower, 1973; Leifer, Gordon, & Graves, 1974; Mohr, 1979). Despite this, the available research fails to provide a coherent account of which aspects of family life are most important.

One lifestyle variable which has consistently been found to relate to child viewing is parental viewing patterns (Anderson, Alwitt, Lorch, & Levin, 1979; Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). Not surprisingly, children who watch a lot of television are more likely to come from families where the parents are heavy viewers.

A second parental lifestyle variable that has been linked with children's viewing habits is socioeconomic status. Children from lower socioeconomic status homes have usually been found to watch more television than those from high status homes (Blood, 1961; Himmelweit et al., 1958; Medrich, 1979; Schramm et al., 1961; Tindall & Reid, 1975). Unfortunately, the identification of a class-viewing relationship

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does not necessarily advance our understanding of why some children watch more television than others. In part, this is because researchers have often confounded social class with other independent covarying variables such as family size (Borduin & Henggeler, 1981). In addition, the very broad concept of social class does not, by itself, provide an explanation for particular outcomes and there is a need to clarify just which components of social class might account for particular relationships. Only then can the relevant causal variables be identified. There is, therefore, considerable merit in attempting to identify a set of attitudinal and lifestyle variables which, while associated with social class, can act as more specific predictors of children's viewing. Thus, one obvious question requiring an answer is whether heavy viewing among lower class children can be explained by the reliance of their parents on television as a leisure activity for the family. Alternatively, lower class parents might simply be less aware of possible dangers from watching too much television or they may be less concerned. Blood (1961), for example, has argued that the more *laissez faire* child rearing practices of lower class parents account for the class-viewing relationship, but the available data do not consistently support this interpretation (Hess & Goldman, 1962).

The purpose of the present study was therefore to examine these parental lifestyle variables in more detail, their interrelationships, and their association with children's television viewing habits. The specific variables of interest were social class, parental use of television, and a set of indices reflecting awareness or concern regarding children's television usage. Included were measures of the knowledge and control parents had regarding programmes viewed by their children and four attitudes representing: acceptance of the educational value of TV; accep-

tance of the entertainment value of TV; concern for the negative effects of TV; and the need to control TV usage.

Two indices of television viewing habits were employed: amount and channel preference. The latter was interpreted as an indication of the type of programmes to which children were exposed. In Australia, the national station (ABC) focuses on news, information, current affairs and children's programmes, whereas the commercial stations focus on crime, adventure, western dramas, domestic comedy and, of course, advertising (Kippax & Murray, 1979). Thus, the second dependent variable was the use that children made of the ABC rather than the commercial channels. There is some evidence to suggest that the two dependent variables are related i.e., that high viewers are more likely to favour commercial television (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Report, 1978). If this relationship holds among preschoolers, high viewers are not only being exposed to more television, but they are more likely to view programme types often considered undesirable for their age group. The present study provided an opportunity for evaluating this problem.

METHOD

Respondents

Data were collected from 282 parents (98% of whom were mothers) who had at least one child attending a Lady Gowrie Child Centre. These centres were located in each capital city in Australia. The children's ages ranged from 3 to 6 years with a mean of 3.4 years. The sample was restricted to those families who had a television set in the home. The response rate for questionnaire return from parents was 64%.

A demographic analysis of the sample revealed a predominance of high socioeconomic families. Socioeconomic status was indexed by the male head of

the household's occupation as classified by Broom, Jones, and Zubrzycki (1965).¹ These data were collapsed into three broad categories. Fifty-four per cent of respondents fell into the high socioeconomic category defined by professional managerial occupations. Skilled, clerical and sales occupations constituted the middle socioeconomic group and comprised 29% of the sample. The remaining 17% constituted the low socioeconomic group which was characterized by unskilled and semi-skilled occupations.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire elicited information from parents regarding (i) their preschool child's viewing habits, (ii) their own leisure activities, (iii) their controlling and monitoring of television usage in the home, and (iv) their attitudes regarding: the negative effects of television (e.g., TV makes children lose touch with reality); its educational benefits (e.g., TV broadens children's understanding of the world they live in); its entertainment value (e.g., TV keeps children entertained); and the need for its control (e.g., it is important for parents to control what their children watch on TV).² Data were also gathered on the demographic characteristics of the family.

The staff of the Lady Gowrie Child Centres distributed questionnaires, usually to mothers, when they came to collect their children. Upon completion,

questionnaires were deposited in boxes made available at the centres to ensure anonymity for respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dependent Variables

The amount of television viewed by preschoolers was measured by asking parents to estimate the number of hours their child watched TV on each day of the week. Estimates varied from 0 to 45 hr per week with a mean of 11.26 hr. The estimate is somewhat lower than figures typically reported in north American studies (cf. Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978). Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1979), however, have reported that viewing times clearly reflect seasonal variations and it seems likely that our lower figures are related to the fact that the survey was conducted in summer.

The second dependent variable, the type of television viewed by preschoolers, was assessed by asking parents whether their preschoolers watched mainly the national station, the commercial station or both equally. In the present sample of preschoolers, 45% were found to watch mainly the national station, 17% mainly commercial stations and 38% watched both equally.

A Pearson product-moment correlation of .40 ($n = 280$, $p < .001$) was found between the amount of television viewed and the extent to which preschoolers watched commercial television. This finding, that high viewers are more likely to watch commercial television, supports the data reported earlier by the Australian Broadcasting Commission Report (1978).

Independent Variables

Social class. As indicated in Table 1, the current research confirmed the findings of earlier studies that children who watch a lot of television are more

¹ While recognition of the contribution of both the father and mother to the socioeconomic standing of the family would have provided a more sophisticated index, the present procedure seemed more appropriate for this sample given the high proportion of women who were not in full-time employment (90%).

² The attitudinal indices were derived from a factor analysis of 43 items which represented the viewpoints spontaneously expressed by first year university students on the subject of children and television. Parents responded to each item on a four point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

likely to come from low socioeconomic status families (Blood, 1961; Himmelweit et al., 1958; Medrich, 1979; Schramm et al., 1961; Tindall & Reid, 1975). Additionally, it was found that children from low socioeconomic households were also more likely to favour commercial television.

Parental use of television. An index of the importance of television for parents' recreation was obtained by asking respondents to rank a set of activities in terms of the amount of leisure time each parent devoted to them. Data were coded in terms of whether or not watching television was given priority over most other activities.

Positive correlations (see Table 1) were found between the importance of TV as a leisure activity for each parent and high viewing by their children. These data support the trends noted by Schramm et al., (1961) i.e., where children are high viewers, parents tend also to be high viewers.

Similarly, Table 1 shows that child preference for viewing commercial television was associated with either parent assigning a high priority to TV viewing.

Parental control of television usage. Surveillance and control of the television viewed by preschoolers was measured through two items which assessed programme suitability and selection.

Firstly, parents were asked to list the programmes they considered unsuitable viewing for their child. Parents who were unable to specify either a particular programme or programme type in response to this question, were assumed to be non-discriminating in relation to their child's viewing. No relationship was found between parents' ability to list unsuitable programmes and hours of child viewing. Discriminating parents, however, were more likely to report that their preschoolers viewed more commercial TV. This surprising finding suggests that parental knowledge regarding the potential harm of commercial television does not necessarily reduce the amount of such viewing by children.

In the second set of control measures, parents were required to specify the extent to which the television viewed by their preschoolers in the past week was selected by a parent, sib-

TABLE 1
Correlations of Amount and Type of Child Viewing with Parental Characteristics

	Amount of TV viewed	Preference for Commercial TV
Socioeconomic status	-.27** (255)†	-.43* (254)
Parents' TV habits		
High leisure ranking of TV by mothers	.31** (270)	.22** (248)
High leisure ranking of TV by fathers	.23** (248)	.22** (248)
Parental control of TV usage		
Ability to list programmes unsuitable for children	.04 (281)	.15* (280)
Programme selection by parents	.00 (266)	-.34** (266)
Programme selection by siblings	.05 (143)	.23* (143)
Programme selection by child	.30** (252)	.14* (280)
Parental attitudes toward TV		
Negative effects of TV index	-.24** (281)	-.23** (280)
Control of TV index	-.17* (280)	-.31** (279)
Educational value of TV index	.21** (281)	.07 (280)
Entertainment value of TV index	.30** (279)	.07 (278)

* $p < .01$.

** $p < .001$.

† Numbers in parentheses represent sample size.

lings, or the preschoolers themselves. The pattern of relationships here was unclear. There was a trend, however, for preschoolers who selected their own television to have higher viewing rates and to watch proportionately more commercial TV (cf. Table 1).

Parental attitudes to television. Parental attitudes showed expected relationships with the amount and type of television viewed. From Table 1, children who were heavy users or who watched proportionately more of the commercial stations had parents who were less likely to express concern over the negative side effects of watching TV. Such children also tended to have parents who perceived less need to control their child's use of the medium. Furthermore, the data in Table 1 suggest that parents with heavy viewing children may avoid concern through their belief that watching TV has value from an educational or entertainment perspective.

Partialling out the effects of parental attitudes and leisure preferences. In the previous section the direct relationships between the independent variables and amount and type of TV viewing were examined. The next question which needs to be answered is the extent to which the independent variables are interrelated. The notably significant relationships are presented in Table 2. The four parental attitude indices were consistently related with socioeconomic

status and with parental use of television.³ This raises the question of whether attitudinal variables can explain firstly, the class viewing relationship and secondly, the parent-child viewing relationship. In other words, are the television viewing habits of children from low socioeconomic homes or from homes where parents rank TV as a high priority leisure activity merely a function of parental lack of concern about TV's harmful potential.

In view of these relationships, the two indices of children's usage were correlated with parents' leisure priority and socioeconomic status once again, but this time partialling out the effects of the attitudinal variables. Attitudes were not sufficient to explain either relationship. The correlations between parental use of television and the amount and type viewed by the child remained significant at $.23$ ($n = 262$, $p < .001$) and $.16$ ($n = 262$, $p < .001$) respectively. Similarly, socioeconomic status still correlated significantly with amount viewed ($r = -.22$, $n = 251$, $p < .001$) and station preference ($r = -.40$, $n = 251$, $p < .001$).

³ Parental use of television is represented by the data from the mother. Relationships involving fathers' use of television as a leisure activity followed the same pattern as that found with the mother and, therefore, have not been included in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Correlations of Socioeconomic Status and Mothers' High ranking of TV as a Leisure Activity with Attitudinal Indices

	Socioeconomic status	High leisure ranking of TV by mothers
Negative effects of TV index	$.16^*$ (258) [†]	$-.22^{**}$ (270)
Control of TV index	$.17^*$ (257)	$-.16^*$ (269)
Educational value of TV index	$-.19^{**}$ (258)	$.10$ (270)
Entertainment value of TV index	$.06$ (257)	$.18^*$ (269)

* $p < .01$.

** $p < .001$.

† Number in parentheses represent sample size.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirmed earlier reports associating socioeconomic status and children's use of TV. Additionally, it established that the importance placed by parents on TV as a leisure activity was related to both the type (commercial, ABC) and quantity of TV viewed by preschoolers and that parents' attitudes to the medium were related to their child's viewing habits. High-viewing children or children who were exposed to proportionately more commercial TV had parents who were less concerned about the negative effects and who saw less need to control the TV. These children also tended to select their own programmes more often.

Examination of the interrelationships amongst the independent variables indicated that while attitudes were correlated to some extent with both parental usage and socioeconomic status, the constructs measured in this study appear to operate as relatively independent predictors of preschooler's TV habits. If there are parental lifestyle variables that explain these relationships, particularly the well established class-viewing relationship, either additional constructs need to be identified or current measures need refinement. Blood's (1961) notion of lower class parents adopting a more laissez faire approach to their child's television use may warrant elaboration. Certainly the measures related to this notion in the present study — parental awareness of inappropriate children's programmes and who selects the television programmes viewed by preschoolers — contributed little to explaining preschoolers viewing habits. Other measures, however, which are geared to finding out about household rules regarding television use may tap Blood's construct more adequately. Such an approach may be less influenced by situational factors which could have confounded the behavioural

measures used in the current study.

Similarly in the domain of leisure activities current measures could be elaborated upon. Parents' leisure priorities do seem to be relevant to child's useage though they do not explain high viewing amongst lower class children. Related variables, however, such as the extent to which parents actively direct and structure their families' leisure activities, may be more relevant.

Finally, interpreting the class-viewing relationship as a social desirability response bias warrants further investigation. Perhaps parents from middle and upper class homes do underestimate children's viewing. The current data, however, do not suggest this interpretation: there is no evidence that parents bias reports on their own leisure activities, so it seems unlikely they would bias the child reports.

In the meantime, it would seem that the implications of the current study should not be ignored. The role and responsibilities of parents for their children's TV viewing patterns has received considerable discussion in both the popular press and the research literature. These sources commonly assume that the problem of children watching excessive amounts of TV can be solved by educating parents about the potentially pernicious influence of the medium. Certainly the data provide some support for this view. Nevertheless, they also warn that such a campaign will meet with only limited success. Indeed, attitudes toward TV as measured in this investigation cannot account for two of the strongest predictors of individual differences in children's viewing patterns: parental usage and social class. Other aspects of family lifestyle may offer more important targets for promoting changes in children's use of television.

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