

# TELEVISION AND THE PRESCHOOL CHILD: RELATING VIEWING HABITS TO FAMILY LIFESTYLE, ATTITUDES, AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT.\*

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Television is the most widespread communication system known to modern society: its major functions are to entertain and inform. Recent surveys indicated that 96% of Australian households have at least one TV set, with over 62% having a coloured receiver (Kippax and Murray, 1979). Given this ownership pattern, it is hardly surprising that television is often given the status of a 'family member' or that it monopolizes more of the average child's time than any other single activity apart from sleep (Senate Standing Committee on Education and Arts, 1978). Unquestionably, therefore, TV exerts an influence in the lives of most people; the extent and type of influence is, however, a highly controversial issue.

Early research showed that the average viewing for Australian preschool children was 11.26 hours a week in summer (Holman and Braithwaite, 1982), whereas North American studies have reported average weekly viewing times of up to 23 hours per week. The most striking feature of all these studies is, however, the enormous variation in the amount of television watched by individual children. For example, Holman and Braithwaite reported viewing times ranging from 0 to 45 hours per week. Recently, therefore, research has been directed towards identifying those factors that are *consistently* associated with young children watching more or less TV. For instance, a number of studies have found that boys tend to watch more TV than girls, that older children (at least up to early teens) watch more than young children, that children with poor self-esteem watch more TV and that the lower the family income or socioeconomic status the more children watch TV (Braithwaite and Holman, 1981; Edgar, 1977; Holman and Braithwaite, 1982; Stein and Friedrich, 1975).

This observation regarding socioeconomic status is not particularly useful as it stands. A more complete understanding regarding the lifestyle, attitudes and child rearing policies of different families is essential in order to explain the relationship between family income and TV watching.

The aims of the current study were, therefore:

- 1) to examine how much and what type of TV (commercial or ABC) young children were watching;
- 2) to identify those patterns of family behaviour that were associated with the amount of TV watched; and
- 3) to investigate whether or not children's

behaviour in preschools was in any way related to the amount of TV they were watching.

## METHOD

*Sample.* Nine Sydney preschools, chosen to represent various income levels, were requested to participate. Some were full-time daycare centres (usually mothers worked full or part-time) and some were part-time daycare centres (usually the mothers worked part-time or were not in paid employment). A total of 154 mothers completed the survey which asked for information about their own TV viewing patterns and those of their child attending preschool.

Fifty nine per cent of the preschoolers were boys and 41% girls; most were either four (54%) or three (39%) years old. The majority of children came from one or two child families (45% and 37% respectively) while 28% came from single parent families headed by the mother. Socioeconomic status was indexed by the head of the household's occupation. The sample was fairly evenly distributed with 35% of respondents coming from the high socioeconomic group (professional or managerial occupations), 37% from the medium socioeconomic group (skilled or clerical occupations), and 28% from the low socioeconomic group (unskilled or semi-skilled occupations). Similarly, when the sample was categorised by mother's education, 32% had college or university training, 33% had 4 to 6 years of secondary education, and 35% had less than 4 years secondary schooling.

### Instruments and Procedure

Three questionnaires were used in the survey, two being completed by the mothers and one by the preschool teachers. Teachers distributed and collected all questionnaires which were returned within a fortnight in sealed envelopes to guarantee respondent anonymity.

1) *TV Viewing Habits Questionnaire.* In addition to seeking general demographic information on the family, this questionnaire elicited data concerning: (i) the TV viewing habits of the child, (ii) the TV viewing habits of the mother, (iii) the child's behaviour during and after watching TV, (iv) alternative leisure activities organised by the parent for the child, (v) the mother's own leisure activities, and (vi) the means used by parents to control the child's use of television.

2) *Parental Attitudes to TV.* This questionnaire consisted of 38 items designed to

assess mothers' attitudes towards television on the dimensions of (i) parental responsibility to control TV, (ii) the influence of TV on children, (iii) the entertainment value of TV for children, and (iv) the educational value of TV for children. These scales were developed in earlier research (Braithwaite and Holman, 1981; Holman and Braithwaite, 1982).

3) *Children's Behaviour Questionnaire.* The third questionnaire, designed by Rutter (1967), was completed by the children's teachers. The instrument lists 26 behaviours and the teacher is asked whether each description (i) does not apply, (ii) applies somewhat, or (iii) certainly applies to the particular child. The scale provides an overall measure of behavioural difficulties as well as subscales of aggressive and neurotic tendencies. Two items relating to school attendance were excluded from the scale since they were not appropriate for preschool children.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### TV viewing patterns

Measuring the amount of TV viewed by children and parents is always difficult. Different people define TV watching differently, and the measures themselves are subject to lapses in memory of the parent, variation in lifestyles from week to week because of alternative commitments, etc. Hence, mothers were asked to give two types of assessment of their own and their child's viewing patterns. One measure was an estimate of weekly viewing times and overall channel preference; the other measure was a record of the programs watched on a particular day of the week. On the whole the results from both measures were consistent with each other hence this paper reports data only for the weekly estimate.

This study employed a very broad definition of TV watching ("being in the room with the TV on and at least occasionally looking at the program"). This research which occurred during winter found children to be watching an average of 16.45 hours of TV per week with a range of 0 to 53 hours, while mothers were watching on average some 18 hours per week with viewing times ranging from 0 to 78 hours.

There was a tendency for boys to watch more than girls (17.58 hours per week compared to 14.8). As indicated in previous research (Tindell, Reid and Goodwin, 1977) and presented in Table 1, children from higher socioeconomic level families watched less TV overall.

**Table 1**

Mean TV viewing times for children  
by socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status	N	Children's weekly viewing hours
Professional	36	12.93
Managerial	15	16.53
Clerical, Sales	27	15.09
Skilled	28	14.84
Semi-skilled	16	22.19
Unskilled	11	20.32
Mother - home duties	14	23.07

The relationship between family lifestyle and TV viewing patterns was examined in detail and several factors proved to be important, viz., maternal attitudes to TV, family control of TV, availability of alternative activities for children and maternal lifestyle.

#### Maternal attitudes to television

Parents had been asked to express their beliefs about the need to control TV, beliefs about the influence of TV on children and beliefs about the entertainment and educational value of television. Table 2 summarizes the relationship between these various attitudinal scales and the pattern of TV viewing for children. Although all attitudinal indices were related to amount viewed, the strongest associations occur between mothers' beliefs about the need for control and about the influence of TV on their child and the amount of TV viewed. Thus, mothers who believed that TV viewing should be controlled and/or that TV influenced their child had children who tended to watch less TV overall, and who watched a greater proportion of ABC shows. Mothers who believed in TV's positive educational and entertainment value had children who tended to view more TV.

**Table 2**

Correlation between maternal attitudes and child's TV viewing patterns

Attitude Scale	Child weekly viewing	Child daily viewing	TV Channel preference
Control	-.36***	-.14*	.22**
Influence	-.40***	-.26**	.28***
Educational	.24**	.17*	-.04
Entertainment	.19**	.14*	-.02

Significance levels: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

#### Family control over the use of television

In line with previous research (Bower, 1973) this study examined three different measures of maternal control over children's viewing. The measures assessed control over programs watched; control over time spent viewing; and ability to enforce rules. In each case, mothers were asked to nominate which of a number of statements best described the situation in their home. Table 3 presents the percentages of answers selected by parents regarding control of TV viewing.

The categories claimed by parents were related to the amount of TV viewed by their child. Thus, the extent to which parents claimed to control program type was related to the amount of TV viewed weekly by the child ( $r = -.36, p < .001$ ) with greater control associated with less viewing. This control was also associated with a preference for ABC over commercial channels ( $r = .25, p < .001$ ); and with higher socioeconomic status ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ).

Restriction regarding the amount of time spent viewing was also associated with less child viewing ( $r = -.39, p < .001$ ); with viewing more ABC ( $r = .37, p < .001$ ); and with the family having higher socioeconomic status ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ).

Finally, with respect to enforcement of TV rules, most parents (79%) report no difficulty — either because the children nearly always obey or because there is no particular problem and therefore no rules are promulgated. Only 21% of parents report any difficulty in this area. Just why 34% of parents report that no rules are necessary remains unclear. Perhaps children's TV programming is so predictable from week to week and so well known to parent and child that active daily censorship is unnecessary. Alternatively, this group of parents may simply be avoiding confrontation with their children by not formalizing particular regulations.

#### Alternative leisure activities available to the child

Many attempts have been made to explain high TV viewing by children and some of these explanations have suggested that perhaps the children simply have little else to do with their time. The current study sought to examine this possibility by exploring the relationship between the extent of a child's TV viewing and the extent to which the family actively arranged alternatives. Such alternative activities included going on outings e.g., to the shops, visiting and receiving visitors,

Table 3  
Percentage of parents choosing categories of answers regarding control of TV

Control over program type	%	Control over amount viewed	%	Ability to enforce TV rules	%
My child may watch any program s/he wants to	16.8	No time limits	12.0	My child nearly always follows my rules on TV viewing	45.3
My child may watch most programs s/he wants to but there are some which are not allowed	33.6	No time limits up to bed time	10.0	My child usually follows my rules but sometimes watches forbidden programs	16.0
Sometimes my child may choose a program but <i>usually</i> I have final say	32.2	Watch as much as s/he wants up to bedtime but I try to encourage other activities	34.0	I find it pretty hard to keep a constant check on whether the rules are followed	4.7
My child may only watch those programs that I select	17.4	Set a time limit on TV watching	14.7	I don't have any rules — it's not really a problem	34.0
		Only watch at certain times of day	23.3		
		Only watch when there is a special program	6.0		

organising outdoor games or indoor activities and formal lessons e.g., swimming, ballet.

Not surprisingly, few preschoolers were involved in formal lessons and such weekly arrangements were not related to TV viewing. The most consistent associations were found between the amount of TV watched and the frequency of organised outdoor games and indoor activities ( $r = -.24, p < .002$ ). These findings suggest therefore that children who have more alternatives readily available spend less time viewing TV overall and are also more likely to prefer ABC programs ( $r = .21, p < .005$ ).

Finally, there was a positive correlation between the total alternative activities available to the child and the family's socioeconomic status. High SES families tended to organise more alternatives for their child. This association was particularly marked for organised indoor activities ( $r = .32, p < .001$ ).

#### Maternal lifestyle

Maternal lifestyle was examined from two aspects: (a) extent and type of her own leisure activities; and (b) the extent of her own TV viewing. One leisure activity of the mother was slightly related to the child's viewing habits and this was the frequency with which she was involved in indoor hobbies ( $r = -.11, p = .002$ ). Further investigation indicated that both mother and child tended

to engage in those hobbies together and hence these activities specifically competed with time spent watching TV by both the child and the mother.

Of all the factors examined in this study, however, the one that bore the highest relationship with children's TV viewing was the TV habits of the mother herself. Mothers who watched relatively more hours of TV per week had children who watched more. Whereas mothers who watched fewer TV hours per week had children who watched less than average ( $r = .63; p < .001$ ).

In summary, it would seem that the amount of TV watched by the child reflected the general lifestyle of the family and the ways parents controlled the child's television viewing. Children who were high TV viewers had parents who believed that TV was educational, entertaining, did not have a negative influence on their children, saw little need to control their child's use of the TV set, and in fact tended to watch TV more frequently themselves. On the other hand, low TV viewing children had parents who believed that TV was a negative influence, needed to be controlled, was not particularly educational or entertaining, tended to exert strict control over the set and to watch less themselves. In addition, such parents tended to organise other activities, particularly indoor games for their children, more actively and to participate in these games themselves.

## Relationship between TV viewing and children's behaviour

Mothers were asked about the typical behaviour of their child both during, and following TV viewing. Additionally, the preschool teachers were requested to describe each child's behaviour at the preschool.

Interestingly, this study reveals that children who tend to copy the actions of TV characters while the TV is on also tend to talk more to the TV characters ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ). These children seemed to be very *involved* in the television programs: they watched more TV and were less likely to engage in other nonrelated activities while viewing. Such children also tended to play games that involved imitating TV characters or events ( $r = .17, p < .02$ ). Generally, they were not copying antisocial behaviour or bad language, but tended rather to copy songs, games and supernatural cartoon characters that they had seen. On the other hand, children who played with other children or with toys while watching the TV were unlikely to copy events and characters they had seen on the TV ( $r = -.22, p = .004$ ). This group of children also engaged in more alternative organised indoor activities. Finally, children who usually sat watching television quietly tended to watch much less TV overall than other children and to display the lowest levels of imitation of TV characters and events in their general play activities. Perhaps they watched quietly because TV was more novel, or perhaps their parents exerted greater control both over the TV and over the child's behaviour while watching TV. Unfortunately this study does not resolve the issue.

The present study also requested teachers to note whether they had observed the child behaving in certain ways while the child was at preschool. More specifically, they were asked whether they had observed the child displaying neurotic, aggressive or hyperactive behaviours (Rutter, 1967). While all preschools reported some occurrence of these problem behaviours, the relationships found between such behaviours and TV viewing do not concur with earlier research (Harper, Munro and Himmelweit, 1970). For instance, there was no relationship between the amount or type of TV viewing and either aggressive or hyperactive behaviour. The only consistent finding of the study was that children who showed a number of anxiety or neurotic traits (tearful, shy, solitary, etc.) tended to watch considerably less TV on average (approximately 11 hours per week)

than other children. They also tended to watch TV more quietly and engaged in less imitation of TV characters ( $r = -.24, p = .002$ ) and less alternative activities while viewing. Perhaps TV is more frightening or overpowering to such children or perhaps their parents are generally overprotective so that the child is sheltered from both the TV world and the real world and thus copes less well in the preschool situation. Unfortunately, this study does not answer this puzzle. In comparing the group of more neurotic children with the rest of the sample, there did not appear to be any differences in the level of control exercised by the parents over the use of TV. Mothers of the more anxious children, however, did believe that TV had a more negative influence on the child ( $r = .27, p = .02$ ).

Surprisingly perhaps, the amount of TV viewed by the child was not related to the type of preschool the child attended (i.e., part-time care or full-time care). None of the centres reported encouraging children to watch TV on a regular basis at the preschool. Some preschool centres had no TV while the rest indicated that children watched during bad weather or when they were tired at the end of the day.

One further result which is still not explained is the difference in viewing pattern found between those children whose mothers worked full-time, those who worked part-time and those who did not work outside the home. This study found that children of part-time working mothers consistently on average watched the least TV (13.06 hours per week) while those of non-working mothers watched more (19.63 hours per week). Those children whose mothers did not work outside the home, and who were, in addition single parents, watched even more (23.07 hours per week). Note that the mothers' own viewing habits followed a similar pattern, with part-time working mothers watching least and single mothers at home with their children watching most. This finding could not be explained by differences in the mothers' education, family socioeconomic status, age or sex of child, size of family, mothers' attitudes to TV, mothers' or children's other leisure activities, or the type of preschool the child attended. We may speculate that mothers who worked part-time were more involved in other activities than mothers at home all day and depended less on TV for interest. At the same time, the part-time working mothers may have been less ex-

hausted at the end of the day with fewer domestic chores left to do than mothers who worked full-time and were, therefore, able to engage in more indoor activities with their child. Unfortunately, however, a definite answer to this issue cannot be provided by the information gathered.

In summary, this study explored the relationship between children's TV viewing habits, parental attitudes to TV and children's behaviour. Supporting earlier research (Holman and Braithwaite, 1982), parental attitudes and family roles concerning the use of television were shown to be important. Additionally, the findings indicate that where parents were more involved in organizing activities for their children, such children tended to view less TV and were more likely to prefer ABC programs. Finally, this study indicated that (at least for this age group) higher scores on aggression, hyperactivity and neuroticism were not strongly related to viewing greater amounts of TV. This study has attempted to explore a variety of family lifestyle factors, children's behaviour and the ubiquitous television. Further research is needed to answer some of the issues raised in this paper.

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#### Footnote

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