

# TELEVISION AND THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD: AUSTRALIAN DATA ON VIEWING HABITS AND PARENT ATTITUDES<sup>1</sup>

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Television clearly has a pervasive — some would argue pernicious — effect on the lives of most people. Despite the fact that considerable research has been conducted in this area,

the nature and strength of the medium's influence remains a highly contentious issue. The greatest opportunity to control the medium's influence in terms of the amount of TV viewed and the program preferences of young children is probably possessed by parents (Leifer, Gordon and Graves, 1974). Hence, on the assumption that at least some aspects of television may encourage undesirable developmental outcomes, researchers have argued that parents should accept greater responsibility for using the medium in ways that will promote the optimal development of their children (Schiller, 1979; Singer and Singer, 1976). To some extent these academic urgings have filtered through to the popular press — particularly since the establishment of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal in 1977. But how much influence has all this publicity actually had on parents' opinions and behaviour in relation to their children's usage of television? Notwithstanding the recommendations of the Children's Film and Television Seminar (1977), this question largely remains unexamined in the Australian context.

The available research literature generally suggests that parents exert little control over the amount of TV viewed or the programmes watched by their children (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Report, 1977; Hess and Goldman, 1962; Lyle and Hoffman, 1972; and Tindall, Reid and Goodwin, 1977). Yet much of this research examining parent perceptions and behaviours is either non-Australian or relates to older children. Schiller (1979) has noted the absence of studies regarding the viewing habits and preferences of Australian pre-schoolers and has argued that generalisations from overseas investigations may be misleading. The current studies, therefore sought: (1) to provide information regarding the viewing patterns of young Australians; and (2) to assess the knowledge, concern and control shown by parents in relation to the impact of television on the lives of their children.

## METHOD

**Study 1. Respondents.** The Australia-wide sample was comprised of 282 parents, mainly mothers, who had at least one child attending a Lady Gowrie Child Centre located in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide or Perth. Questionnaires were administered to 85% of parents: 64% returned completed questionnaires, giving a sample of 289 respondents. Seven participants who did not

have television at home were subsequently excluded from the analysis.

The age breakdown for children (58% male and 42% female) of these respondents, was 26% in the 3 to 4 year age bracket, 52% in the 4 to 5 year age bracket and 22% in the 5 to 6 year age bracket. Socioeconomic status was indexed by the head of the household's occupation as classified by Broom, Jones and Jubrzycki (1965). The sample was unevenly distributed with 54% of respondents coming from the high socioeconomic group (professional or managerial occupations), 29% from the medium socioeconomic group (skilled or clerical occupations) and 17% from the low socioeconomic group (unskilled or semi-skilled) occupations.

**Study 2. Respondents.** This sample was comprised of 154 parents who had a child attending one of nine pre-schools within the Sydney metropolitan area. There were 59% boys and 41% girls and most (94%) of the children were aged between 3 and 5 years. In terms of socioeconomic status, 35% were from the high, 37% from the medium and 28% from the low group.

#### **INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE**

Included in the questionnaire were measures designed to elicit the following information. Parents were requested to estimate how much their pre-school child watched television, to report their child's favourite programmes, to describe their child's behaviour while watching TV, and to comment on delayed effects of viewing. Additionally, parents were invited to express their attitudes toward television and more specifically, report on the use of television in their own homes.

For studies 1 and 2 the staff of the Centres distributed the questionnaire to parents when they came to the centre to collect their children. One parent of each child, usually the mother, was asked to respond anonymously to the questionnaire and return it to the centre on completion.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION<sup>2</sup>**

##### **Viewing patterns and behaviour of pre-schoolers**

Studies 1 and 2 were both generally concerned with the use of television during early childhood and with parental attitudes toward the medium. Study 2, however, incorporated additional teacher evaluations of child subjects and attempted to focus on specific control strategies employed by parents to regulate television usage. Since the data collected from both studies are extensive it is not possible to report all the findings within

this paper.

Hence, with the exception of results concerning amount of TV viewed, all reported data are based on the study 1 sample. In the case of amount viewed, a number of identical questions were employed in each study and it is therefore possible to make direct comparisons across the samples. In such cases, the first figure reported refers to study 1 and the second figure reported refers to study 2.

**Amount viewed.** Accurate estimates of the number of hours which children spend watching television are somewhat hard to obtain, partly because individuals find the task difficult, but also because of seasonal and situational variations, e.g., it is likely that children watch more during cold, wet weather. Indeed, parents from study 1, reported that their children watched between 0 and 45 hours per week with the weekly average for the group being 11.26 hours whereas study 2 parents recorded a range of 0 to 53 hours per week and a weekly group average of 16.5 hours. The average viewing time for sample 1 is somewhat lower than figures typically reported in North American studies or for older children (cf. Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, 1978). Seasonal variations in viewing have been reported earlier (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs and Roberts, 1978), and the lower figures obtained in study 1 are probably a function of the fact that the survey was conducted during the summer months. By contrast, the average time reported for study 2 (conducted during winter) is considerably higher.

Some demographic variables were also related to amount viewed, viz., socioeconomic status, sex of child, and family size. As has been reported in studies with older children, socioeconomic status was related to amount viewed in that children from high status homes, on the average, viewed for fewer hours per week (9.47 and 13.99 hours) than children from medium (11.69 and 14.96 hours) or low status (14.06 and 21.99 hours) homes. This finding regarding social class supports earlier research conducted in Australia (Tindall and Reid, 1975) and overseas (Comstock *et al.*, 1978; Stein and Friedrich, 1975).

Sex of child and amount viewed were also found to be related, with boys watching more television (12.06 and 17.58 hours) than girls (10.01 and 14.81 hours) on average. While sex differences have been reported previously in the literature (Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince 1958; Stein and Friedrich, 1975), consistency has not emerged in the direction of the differences. Further research is required

before any significance could be attached to this result.

Finally, single children watched for more hours (14.40 and 17.2) than did children with siblings (10.62 and 16.21). Though this outcome has not previously been noted in the literature, it does seem intuitively reasonable that children without brothers or sisters to play with might spend more time in front of the television set.

**Viewing Preferences.** Children were asked to name their three favourite shows and these were then categorized according to programme type. The types of programmes mentioned, in order of decreasing popularity, were: educational (e.g., *Sesame Street*, *Play-school*) 64%; child-oriented variety shows (e.g., *Humphrey Bear*, *Muppets*) 39%; cartoons 38%; science fiction (e.g., *Dr. Who*) 18%; light family comedy (e.g., *Happy Days*, *Gilligan's Island*) 14%; and family drama (e.g., *The Sullivans*) 11%. Programme preferences did not appear to be related to the amount of television children viewed.

Parents were also asked how much their children watched commercial stations and how much they watched the ABC. Forty-five percent of parents reported a bias toward the ABC, 17% reported a bias toward the commercial stations, and 38% reported equal usage of the two. It is of note that high viewers were more likely to watch commercial television. Children who watched mainly the commercial station viewed on average 15.9 hours per week compared with 8.5 hours for children who watched mainly the national station.

**Behaviour while viewing.** Parents were asked to indicate the extent to which their child displayed the following behaviours while watching television: (a) being quiet and attentive, (b) playing with other children, (c) playing with toys, (d) copying characters on television, (e) running around, not watching much. Responses were made on a three point rating scale: (1) hardly ever, (2) sometimes, (3) most of the time.

The data indicated that the majority of children watched television in a quiet and attentive manner. Fifty-seven percent of parents reported their child to be quiet and attentive for most of the time. Furthermore, most children (55%) had been observed copying the characters they were watching on television at least sometimes. Despite this evidence of purposive viewing in pre-schoolers, the data also indicated that the majority were distracted at least sometimes through playing with other children (67%), playing with toys (66%), and running around (56%).

**Delayed effects of viewing.** Information regarding the delayed effects of viewing was obtained through two questions. First, parents were asked whether or not their child idolized any TV characters, and if so which ones. Second, parents were required to indicate whether or not they had observed their children copying things seen or heard on television and to describe such behaviour.

In 48% of cases, instances of idolizing were reported. Children were most likely to idolize supernatural heroes, puppets (including *Muppets*), and cartoon characters. Notably male characters were more frequently idolized than female characters. Furthermore, reports of idolizing were more likely to be associated with heavy viewing. Children who idolized watched television for 13.7 hours on average whereas children who didn't idolize viewed for only 9.0 hours.

Copying things from television was found to be more widespread, with 90% reporting that their child engaged in such behaviour. Respondents' reports were classified for the purposes of data analysis into two groups, gross motor (e.g., eating like *Cookie Monster*, running around like *Superman*), and verbal behaviour (e.g., singing or counting). The latter category proved to be the more popular, though in many cases both were present. Sixty-four percent of cases of copying were of a verbal nature, compared with 49% which were gross motor.

## PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

**Programme preferences.** Parents were asked to describe programmes they felt were suitable and unsuitable for their children to watch and to provide reasons for their choices. Programme types most highly preferred included: educational (91%), child-oriented variety (41%), nature shows (32%), cartoons (22%), and family drama (17%). The most highly reported reasons for their preferences were that the child gained academic knowledge (73%) or more simply that the child gained pleasure (46%). Programmes deemed unsuitable for children included adult programmes (31%), police drama (29%), science fiction (28%), cartoons (20%), and serials and soap operas (10%). Reasons invoked for finding programmes unsuitable included the fact that they were violent (60%), frightening (22%), unrealistic (13%), or just plain rubbish (11%). It is noteworthy that about as many parents found cartoons acceptable as found them unacceptable. Parental preferences were not found to be related to the amount of television pre-schoolers viewed.

**Control of viewing.** An attempt was made to assess just how much parents endeavour to control the TV viewing patterns of their children. Sixty-one percent of parents reported that most of the time they selected the programmes their child watched and only 13% acknowledged that they hardly ever did so. Nevertheless, some 50% of parents also admitted that they sometimes found their child watching programmes which they regarded as unsuitable. Apparently, total control is difficult to achieve in family settings. By asking parents how much time they watched with their children, it was possible to estimate the number of hours pre-schoolers were watching by themselves. These estimates ranged from 0 to 18 hours per week with a mean of 5.65 hours.

Watching TV while eating the evening meals was felt to be some measure of the intrusiveness of the medium's influence into lifestyle and proved to be related to amount viewed. In 33% of cases, family viewing occurred during the evening meal at least some of the time. Where such viewing occurred, children tended to spend more hours watching TV in the average week (15.6 hours compared with 9.3 hours). In 27% of cases, children, at least sometimes, were reported to have eaten their dinner in front of the television without their parents. These children also tended to watch more television than the remaining 73% (13.5 hours compared with 10.4 hours).

**Attitudes to television.** Parents were asked to specify whether they felt that the influence of television on their pre-schooler was mostly good or mostly bad. Forty-three percent of parents reported that the influence was neither good nor bad; 47% believed that it was mostly good; and 10% claimed it was mostly bad. Reasons for thinking the influence to be mostly good supported the reasons given earlier for programme preferences, and included the fact that educational and academic goals were promoted (56%), that TV was entertaining (15%), encouraged imaginative play (15%), provided musical training (10%), was helpful in developing moral and altruistic behaviour (8%) and was a good way of relaxing (5%). Those who felt the influence was mostly bad claimed this to be so because of: exposure to antisocial behaviour (26%) and violence (19%) in programmes; the fact that much programming was unrealistic (26%); and the preponderance of shows which presented a narrow and unrepresentative view of everyday life (7%).

At a more general level, parents were asked to

express the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements concerning the influence of television on Australian pre-schoolers and their families. Basically these items were designed to assess how much TV disrupted family life, or provided family support by assisting in child minding. Additionally, these items tapped how much parents thought watching TV was related to behaviour problems, particularly violence, and just who should be responsible for the extent and quality of programmes to which children are exposed.

Only 18% of parents agreed that TV encouraged family togetherness while 66% felt it discouraged activities as a family. Surprisingly, only 45% of parents felt that TV stopped children from getting bored. Nevertheless, 69% agreed that TV was a great way of keeping children out of trouble.

Some consistently negative attitudes regarding television were noted by parents. A high proportion (87%) felt that TV made children demand things they had seen displayed. Eighty-one percent felt that TV violence made violence seem natural to children and only 18% agreed that the amount of violence shown on television was not excessive. Few parents (28%) believed that children could distinguish what is on TV from what happens in real life.

These negative attitudes may be major reasons why respondents overwhelmingly agreed (96%) that it is important for parents to control what their children watch on TV. Only 50% of parents felt that the television stations should be held responsible for what programmes are shown to children, whereas a high proportion (81%) felt that this should be the total responsibility of parents. Despite this evident concern and verbal acceptance of responsibility, just over half of the parents (52%) were resigned to the view that they couldn't prevent TV from influencing their children.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the survey suggest that television plays an important part in the lives of most Australian pre-schoolers, though there is wide variability in the amount of television children are reported to be viewing. By and large, children find television an attractive medium. Although they may engage in other distracting activities while watching TV, a significant proportion are reported to view in a quiet and attentive manner, sometimes copying characters on television as they watch. Outside viewing times, parents claim

that the vast majority of pre-schoolers copy things seen or heard on television, and a significant proportion are reported to idolize TV characters. Perhaps warranting some concern, was the finding that children who were heavy viewers were more likely to idolize television characters and more likely to be viewing commercial rather than national channels. It seems particularly unfortunate that the heavy viewers favour commercial channels since these provide a rather restricted programme diet concentrating mainly on crime/adventure/western drama and family comedy (Kippax and Murray, 1979).

From data regarding parental attitudes and practices, it appears that most parents are aware of many of the undesirable side effects of television viewing that have gained widespread publicity in recent years. Concern was widely expressed about the violence portrayed on television and the power of the medium to create needs in children and to disrupt family life. The majority of mothers were convinced that pre-schoolers could not differentiate between what they saw on television and what happens in real life. Most preferred their child to watch shows intended for their age group and objected to their child watching violent or frightening programmes. In general, parents seemed to be satisfied with the way in which their children were using television and the majority felt that the impact of TV on their own child was either beneficial or neutral. Additionally, they accepted responsibility for the programmes their children watched and claimed to usually select the programmes themselves. Despite this verbal acceptance of responsibility there was little evidence of widespread control actually being exercised by parents. Half the respondents reported finding their child watching something of which they disapproved and a third reported that their pre-schoolers ate their evening meal in front of the television. Coupled with the finding that a substantial body of children watch television with no parent present, these data suggest that parental control may not serve as an effective panacea for the abuses of television in the home. Television is intrinsically attractive to young children and parents readily acknowledged its value in keeping children out of trouble. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the medium is so intrusive.

These findings raise the question of how much control parents can realistically be expected to have over their pre-schooler's exposure to television in the family setting. Greater control may be desirable, but currently it seems un-

likely that parents will exert further censorship and surveillance. Apparently, awareness and concern by parents regarding the potentially detrimental effects of TV will not necessarily ensure careful monitoring and control by parents. Perhaps, after all, controlled television viewing for pre-schoolers will be achieved only when television stations are **required** to provide programmes which cater more specifically to the needs of young viewers.

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## FOOTNOTE

- (1) The authors wish to express sincere thanks for the co-operation extended by the children, parents, and staff of the Lady Gowrie Child Centres. We also wish to thank Kate M. Aisbett for her invaluable assistance.
- (2) All relationships reported for study 1 were found to be statistically significant at the .01 level; study 2 relationships all reflected the study 1 trends but occasionally lacked statistical significance.