

“No—You Can’t Watch That”

Parental Rules and Young Children’s Media Use

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This study addresses the relations between parental rules regarding television use (for time and program, respectively) and television use among very young children (ages 0 to 6). Higher education level was related to rules of both types, whereas higher household income was related to having program rules. Parents with time rules reported their children watching less television, but parents with program rules reported their children watching more television. Parents with program rules were more likely to have positive attitudes toward television and more likely to be present when their children were viewing. Parents with both types of rules were more likely to see their children imitating positive behaviors from television, whereas parents with program rules were more likely to see their children imitating negative behaviors. Exploratory path models suggest that the processes by which television time rules and television program rules are related to young children’s viewing differ in important ways.

Keywords: *children; media use; parenting; parental regulation; parental media attitudes*

Parents are often viewed as children’s “first line of defense” against inappropriate media consumption. In large part, the job of parenting involves regulation

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and control of children's behavior and activities. Parents have the difficult job of guiding and regulating children's behavior while also allowing them the freedom to explore their world—exploration necessary for proper socialization and development. Although there is a vast body of research on parenting (see, e.g., the volumes edited by Bornstein, 1995), surprisingly little of this research focuses on parenting regarding children's television use. This scarcity of information is particularly striking with regard to parental regulation of the television use of very young children—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Given the enormous amount of time children spend with television—roughly 3 to 5 hours a day on average (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999, 2003; Wright et al., 2001)—this oversight is striking. It seems reasonable to assert that parents who have not at least given some thought to regulating (either by program or amount) their children's media consumption have abdicated an important part of their role as parent.

What little research exists on parental regulation of children's media use yields rather mixed results (Kotler, 1999). Estimates of the actual percentage of parents who actively regulate their children's media use vary from study to study (Dorr & Rabin, 1995; Stranger, 1998). Evidence regarding predictors of regulation is also mixed. Some studies find that parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to regulate (Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990; Holman & Braithwaite, 1982), whereas other studies find a negative relationship between socioeconomic status and regulation (Kim, Baran, & Massey, 1988; Lin & Atkin, 1989). Moreover, although it has been suggested that parental attitudes toward television and concerns about the influence of television on children are important predictors of parental regulation of children's viewing (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978), few studies empirically assess this notion. Finally, evidence with respect to the relationship between parental rules and the amount of television children watch is similarly equivocal. Some studies find that parental rules are related to the amount of time children spend watching television (Abelman, 1987; Kotler, 1999; St. Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright, & Eakins, 1991), whereas others find no relationship between rules and viewing (Atkin, Greenberg, & Baldwin, 1991; Valkenberg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999).

Studies of parental regulation of children's television use do share one commonality—they focus almost exclusively on children who are school age or older. Although this may have stemmed from an assumption that very young children (infants through kindergarten age) do not use much media, we know from current research that this assumption is far from correct. A recent study of the media use of children aged 0 to 6 finds that these very young children live in a media-saturated environment and spend 2 hours daily in front of a screen on average (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Studies in this area also share a reliance on small, relatively homogeneous, convenience samples. It is possible that the use of such samples, each with its own particular characteristics, has

contributed to the lack of consistent evidence in research on parental regulation of children's television.

Our goal in this article is to begin to address the dearth of information regarding parental regulation of young children's television use employing a nationally representative sample of children aged 6 months to 6 years (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Our exploration of these issues was guided by three overarching aims: (a) to examine demographic differences among parents with and without rules regarding television (related to both time and program), (b) to examine differences in television use and other activities in children in relation to parental rules, and (c) to begin to build an integrative model for examining the relations among parental television rules, other familial and child factors, and television use among very young children.

METHOD

PROCEDURE AND SAMPLE

Participants were 1,065 parents of children aged 6 months to 6 years old who were selected by random-digit telephone dialing. The data were collected through telephone interviews by Princeton Data Source from April 11 to June 9, 2003. Interviewers made up to 10 attempts to contact each sampled telephone number; the response rate was 40%. Calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week. For each household that was eligible, interviewers asked to speak with the parent who spent the most time with the target child. If neither parent spent more time with the child, one was randomly chosen for the interview. As it makes little sense to have rules regarding media that are not present in the home, the sample for this study was limited to 838 families with a television in their household and complete data on the variables of interest.

MEASURES

Means and standard deviations for all variables of interest are presented in Table 1. Values are weighted to yield nationally representative estimates.

Sociodemographic characteristics. Respondents reported on their annual household income using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *less than U.S.\$10,000* to 7 = *U.S.\$100,000 or more*. Parent's education was measured using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *none, or Grades 1 to 8* to 7 = *postgraduate training or professional schooling after college*. Family structure was coded 0 = two-parent family and 1 = single-parent family. Two-parent families included families with two parents who were married and families with two parents who were living together but not married. Single-parent families were families with parents who were divorced, separated, widowed, or single. Parent's minority

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations for All Measures

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Sociodemographic characteristic		
Household income	4.10	1.71
Parent's education	4.35	1.62
Family structure ^a	.25	.43
Parent's minority status ^b	.38	.49
Child age	3.20	1.82
Child gender ^c	.50	.50
Parental television rules and attitude		
Television time rules ^d	.64	.48
Television program rules ^d	.84	.37
Parental negative attitude toward TV ^e	-.17	.85
Parental presence during viewing	3.34	1.47
Imitation of behavior seen on television		
Child imitates aggressive behavior ^d	.36	.48
Child imitates positive behavior ^d	.75	.43
Time spent watching television, reading, and playing outdoors		
Frequency watching television	2.97	.99
Minutes watching television	108.02	104.52
Minutes reading	40.51	45.34
Minutes playing outside	132.09	108.09

a. 0 = one parent, 1 = two parents.

b. 0 = Non-Hispanic White background, 1 = non-White.

c. 0 = girl, 1 = boy.

d. 0 = no, 1 = yes.

e. -1 = mostly helps, 0 = not much effect, +1 = mostly hurts.

status was coded 0 = nonminority (non-Hispanic White) and 1 = minority (non-White). Parents reported on child's age, which ranged from 6 months to 6 years (coded 0 if the child was younger than 12 months old). Child gender was coded 0 = girls and 1 = boys.

Parental television rules. Parents were asked whether they had any rules regarding the amount of time children could spend with television (0 = no, 1 = yes), as well as whether they had any rules about the programs their child could watch on television (0 = no, 1 = yes). Sixty-seven percent of parents reported having rules about television time, whereas 88% reported having rules about television program.

Parental negative attitudes toward television. Based on existing theory (Comstock et al., 1978), we reasoned that parental attitudes toward television might be related to whether they had rules regarding their children's television use. Parents were asked, with respect to its effect on children's learning, whether they viewed television as mostly hurts (coded +1), not much effect (coded 0), or mostly helps (coded -1).

Parental presence during children's television use. Along similar lines, we reasoned that parental television rules would be related to parental presence during children's television use. Parents reported how often they were in the room when their child was watching television on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 5 = *the whole time*.

Children's imitation of behavior seen on television. Parents were asked whether they had ever noticed their child imitating aggressive (e.g., hitting, kicking) or positive (e.g., sharing, helping) behavior from a television show. Both imitation of aggressive behavior from television and imitation of positive behavior from television were coded 1 = *has imitated* or 0 = *has not imitated*.

Frequency of children's television viewing. Parents were asked to indicate how frequently their children watched television or videos/DVDs (combined) on a scale including the following response categories: every day (coded 4), several times a week (coded 3), several times a month (coded 2), less often (coded 1), and never/child too young/child not allowed (coded 0).

Children's time spent using television, reading, and playing outdoors. Parents reported the amount of time children spent watching television or watching videos/DVDs (combined), reading and being read to, and playing outdoors on the previous day. If the previous day was not typical of child's routine, the parents was asked to report on the last day that they could think about that was typical of the child's life. Response categories were 5 minutes, 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, and 1 hour and up in half-hour increments. The time-use variables were analyzed in minutes. Total minutes of television watching combined television programs with watching videos and DVDs.

ANALYSIS PLAN

Sociodemographic differences between parents with and without rules for their children's television use were assessed using *t* tests. We examined differences between parents with and without rules with respect to parental attitudes toward television, children's imitation of behaviors from television, and time spent watching television, reading, and playing outside, treating sociodemographic variables as covariates (via ANCOVAs).

We then drew on these analyses to build and test a path analytic model examining the connections among parental attitudes, children's behaviors, parental rules regarding television, and the time these very young children spend watching television. We constructed latent factors when possible because of multiple observed indicators and used observed factors when this was not possible (due to single-item indicators). We used maximum likelihood estimation to estimate model coefficients and the overall fit of the model to the data using AMOS 5.0.

RESULTS

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS DIFFERENTIATING PARENTS WITH RULES FROM THOSE WITHOUT RULES

Parents with television rules significantly differed from parents without rules (for both time and program) on three sociodemographic factors: household income, parental education level, and child age (see Table 2). Parents with program rules had higher family income levels than those who did not. Parents with time rules and those with program rules had higher levels of education than parents without such rules. Not surprisingly, parents with time or program rules had significantly older children (within the limited range of ages 0 to 6) than those without. There was a trend for minority parents to be more likely to have time rules than nonminority parents.

FAMILIAL AND CHILD FACTORS DIFFERENTIATING PARENTS WITH RULES FROM THOSE WITHOUT RULES

Even controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, there were a number of significant differences between parents with and without television rules on the familial and child factors examined here. Overall, there were more differences between parents with and without program rules than between those with and without time rules (see Table 3).

Parents with program rules reported more positive attitudes toward television and more parental presence during viewing and were more likely to report that their child imitated aggressive behavior from television than parents without program rules. Parents with and without time rules did not differ on these factors. Both parents with time rules and those with program rules were more likely to report that their child imitated positive behavior from television than parents without such rules, respectively.

In terms of time spent with television and reading and playing outdoors, both parents with time rules and those with program rules reported that their child watched television more frequently than parents without such rules, respectively. However, parents with time rules reported their children watching fewer minutes of television on a typical day than parents without time rules. In contrast, parents with program rules reported their children watching more minutes of television on a typical day than parents without program rules. There was a trend for children of parents with program rules to spend more time playing outside than children of parents without program rules. Although none of the differences were significant, this same general direction (more minutes spent reading and playing outdoors) held for parents with both time and program rules.

TABLE 2: Sociodemographic Differences Between Parents Who Have Television Rules and Those Who Do Not

Sociodemographic Characteristic	Parental Television Time Rules			Parental Television Program Rules		
	Parents Who Do Not Have Time Rules M (SD)	Parents Who Have Time Rules M (SD)	t	Parents Who Do Not Have Program Rules M (SD)	Parents Who Have Program Rules M (SD)	t
Household income	4.05 (1.72)	4.12 (1.70)	-.62	3.78 (1.75)	4.16 (1.70)	-2.41**
Parent's education	4.07 (1.69)	4.51 (1.56)	-3.72****	3.92 (1.84)	4.44 (1.56)	-3.05****
Family structure ^a	.27 (.44)	.24 (.43)	.70	.28 (.45)	.25 (.43)	.88
Parent's minority status ^b	.34 (.47)	.40 (.49)	-1.72*	.42 (.50)	.37 (.48)	1.03
Child age	2.71 (1.87)	3.47 (1.73)	-5.85****	1.92 (1.67)	3.45 (1.74)	-9.47****
Child gender ^c	.50 (.50)	.51 (.50)	-.25	.54 (.50)	.50 (.50)	1.02

a. 0 = one parent, 1 = two parents.

b. 0 = non-Hispanic White background, 1 = non-White.

c. 0 = girl, 1 = boy.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3: Mean Parental and Child Differences Between Parents Who Have Television Rules and Those Who Do Not

	Parental Television Time Rules		F(1, 869)	Parental Television Program Rules		F(1, 869)
	Parents Who Do Not Have Time Rules	Parents Who Have Time Rules		Parents Who Do Not Have Program Rules	Parents Who Have Program Rules	
Parental negative attitude toward television ^a	-.22	-.16	.81	-.03	-.22	5.44**
Parental presence during viewing	3.23	3.56	1.47	2.70	3.43	26.60*****
Child imitative aggressive behavior	.35	.36	.04	.27	.37	5.46**
Child imitative positive behavior	.68	.78	11.15*****	.43	.81	107.91*****
Frequency watching television	2.78	3.06	15.38*****	2.07	3.14	155.83*****
Minutes watching television	125.69	95.30	16.62*****	79.48	111.95	10.91*****
Minutes reading	38.07	41.54	1.22	37.88	40.77	.49
Minutes playing outside	119.32	126.67	.90	109.31	127.01	3.03*

NOTE: Means reported have been adjusted for the following covariates: household income, parent's education, family structure, parent's minority status, child age, and child gender.

a. -1 = mostly helps, 0 = not much effect, +1 = mostly hurts.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

**BUILDING AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING
PARENTAL RULES AND TELEVISION USE**

Bivariate correlations among all variables used in the path models are presented in Table 4. Because time rules and content rules were related to the amount of time children spent watching television in opposite directions, we examined them in separate models. All sociodemographic factors were treated as covariates in the models. The integrative model results for time rules and program rules are presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

Based on the long-standing assumption that parents' negative attitudes toward television would play a role in whether they set rules for their children's television use (Comstock et al., 1978), we began our model with parental attitudes. We reasoned that parents' attitudes toward television would be directly related to their notice of whether their children imitate behaviors seen on television, parental television rules, parental presence during children's television viewing, and the amount of time children spend watching television on a typical day. Hence, parental negative attitudes toward television is the only exogenous factor in the model and directly predicts parental notice of children's imitation of behaviors from television, parental television rules, parental presence during children's viewing, and the time children spend viewing on a typical day. We also reasoned that parents who notice their children imitating television behaviors would be more likely to have rules governing their children's use of television, would be more likely to be present during their children's viewing, and may limit their children's viewing through other mechanisms as well. Hence, children's imitation of television behaviors directly predicts having television rules, parental presence during viewing, and total minutes viewed. In turn, we reasoned that television rules should directly predict parental presence during viewing and time spent viewing television by children, and that parental presence during viewing should also predict children's viewing time.

Figures 1 and 2 show the standardized path coefficients and the variance explained for each endogenous factor in the respective models. The dashed lines in the figures represent nonsignificant path coefficients in the initial models, which were then dropped from the final models. Both of the full models tested (i.e., models including all paths) fit the data extremely well: time rules model, $\chi^2(8) = 31.74, p < .001$, incremental fit index = .98, comparative fit index = .98; program rules model, $\chi^2(8) = 40.72, p < .001$, incremental fit index = .98, comparative fit index = .97.

As shown in Figure 1, the path from television time rules to parental presence was nonsignificant. The fit of the model did not significantly worsen when this path was dropped, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .22, ns$, indicating that the more parsimonious model was a better fit to the data. We also tested three other alternative models in which we dropped the direct paths from (a) parental attitudes to time spent watching television, (b) parental attitudes to time rules, and (c) parental attitudes

TABLE 4: Correlation Coefficients for All Observed Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Household income	.51 *****							
2. Parent's education	-.46 *****	-.15 *****						
3. Family structure ^a	-.31 *****	-.23 *****	.17 *****					
4. Parent's minority status ^b	.10 *****	.04	-.08 **	-.03				
5. Child age	-.01	.00	.02	.02	-.02			
6. Child gender ^c	.02	.13 *****	-.02	.06 *	.20 *****	.01		
7. Television time rules ^d	.08 **	.12 *****	-.03	-.04	.31 *****	-.04	.46 *****	
8. Television program rules ^d	.00	.04	.02	.02	-.07 *	.10 *****	.03	-.08 **
9. Parental negative attitude toward TV ^e	-.06	-.06 *	.04	.04	-.02	-.01	.03	.15 *****
10. Parental presence during viewing	-.02	.04	.00	.10 *****	.30 *****	.16 *****	.08 **	.16 *****
11. Child imitates aggressive behavior ^d	-.02	-.03	-.01	.03	.37 *****	-.07 *	.17 *****	.41 *****
12. Child imitates positive behavior ^d	.02	.07 *	.01	-.05	.27 *****	-.07 **	.17 *****	.44 *****
13. Frequency watching television	-.08 **	-.09 *****	.03	.08 *	.03	.01	-.14 *****	.10 *****
14. Minutes watching television	-.17	.12 *****	-.01	-.03	.06	-.03	.07 **	.04
15. Minutes reading	.00	-.03	.02	-.10 *****	.17 *****	.03	.06	.10 *****
16. Minutes playing outside								

(continued)

TABLE 4 (continued)

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Household income								
2. Parent's education								
3. Family structure ^a								
4. Parent's minority status ^b								
5. Child age								
6. Child gender ^c								
7. Television time rules ^d								
8. Television program rules ^d								
9. Parental negative attitude toward TV ^e	-.13***							
10. Parental presence during viewing	.01	.03						
11. Child imitates aggressive behavior ^d	-.21***	.14***	.32***					
12. Child imitates positive behavior ^d	-.23***	.31***	.22***	.43***				
13. Frequency watching television	-.18***	.33***	.12***	.16***	.36***			
14. Minutes watching television	.04	.01	-.04	.02	-.00	-.05		
15. Minutes reading	.02	-.02	.03	.09***	.12***	-.07**		
16. Minutes playing outside								-.00

a. 0 = one parent, 1 = two parents.

b. 0 = Non-Hispanic White background, 1 = non-White.

c. 0 = girl, 1 = boy.

d. 0 = no, 1 = yes.

e. -1 = mostly helps, 0 = not much effect, +1 = mostly hurts.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

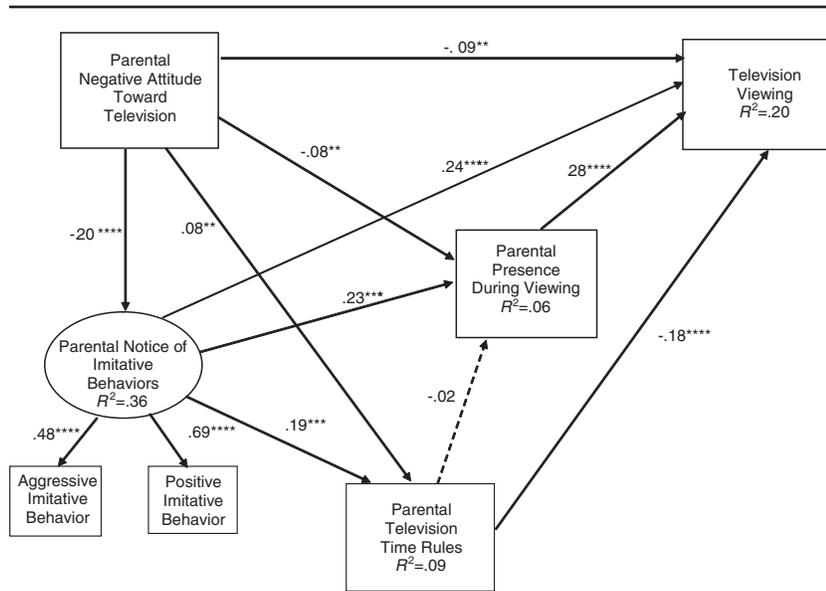


Figure 1: Integrative Model for Predicting Children's Television Viewing From Parental Time Rules

NOTE: Paths' coefficients presented in standardized form. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

to parental presence during viewing. Each of these alternative models fit significantly worse than the final model presented in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 2, the paths from negative attitudes toward television to program rules and from program rules to minutes of viewing were non-significant. This suggested that the relationship between attitudes and program rules is mediated by children's imitation of behaviors seen on television, and that the relationship between program rules and children's viewing is mediated by parental presence during children's viewing. To examine these possibilities, we estimated an alternative model with these two nonsignificant paths deleted from the model. The fit of the model did not significantly worsen when these paths were dropped, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 1.41$, n.s.), indicating that the more parsimonious, mediated model was a better fit to the data.

DISCUSSION

Many parents (67%) had television time rules, but more (88%) had television program rules. American parents seem to be more concerned about what their

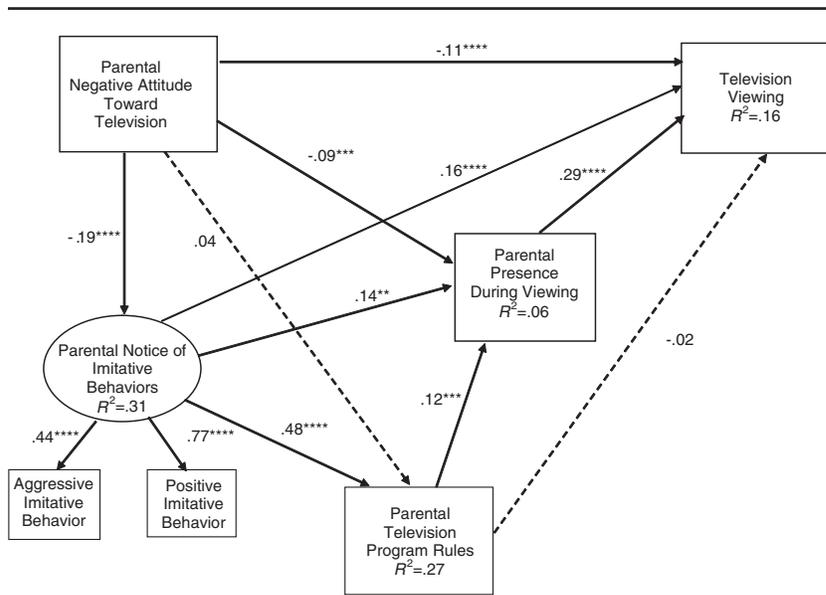


Figure 2: Integrative Model for Predicting Children's Television Viewing From Parental Program Rules

NOTE: Paths' coefficients presented in standardized form. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

children watch on television than about how much time they spend watching television. Overall, socioeconomic status (as measured by household income and parental education level) seems to be the most important source of demographic differences between parents with and without rules—especially program rules. Parents with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to have rules. These findings are commensurate with those of others (Brown et al., 1990; Holman & Braithwaite, 1982). However, they are significant in that they are based on population level data and, thus, generalizable to the American public. Not surprisingly, parents with older children were also more likely to have both time and program rules. This is most likely a function of the fact that older children begin to develop both preferences for spending time watching television as well as preferences for particular programs.

It seems reasonable to assume that program rules are really a subset of rules about time. If this were true, the two should be highly related. In fact, they are correlated only moderately with one another ($r = .45$). Thus, although there is some overlap, they are certainly not capturing quite the same phenomenon. This notion is bolstered by the findings indicating that they are differently related to familial and child factors—program rules seem to matter more. Parents with

program rules were more likely to have a positive attitude toward television, more likely to be present during their child's viewing, and more likely to report that this child imitated aggressive behavior from television. Parents with time rules did not differ from one another on these factors. With respect to time spent watching television, they were actually related in opposite directions—children of parents with time rules watched less television, but children of parents with program rules watched more television. Thus, although one might assume that having rules with respect to either time or program would be associated with overall decreased minutes of viewing, this was true only for time rules. These findings highlight the dual importance of differentiating among different types of rules regarding children's television use, as well as not assuming that having rules is necessarily related to less use.

The path models shed additional light on differences between rules regarding time and rules regarding programs. As one might expect, parents' negative attitudes toward television predicted having television time rules and having time rules predicted less television viewing. Moreover, time rules were unrelated to parental presence during viewing. In contrast, parents' negative attitudes toward television did not predict having television program rules, nor was having program rules directly related to television viewing. Rather, parents were more likely to have program rules if they noticed their child imitating behaviors they saw on television. In turn, program rules predicted parental presence during viewing, which in turn predicted children's television viewing.

Thus, although there is a direct relationship between time rules and children's television viewing, the relationship between program rules and television viewing is indirect—mediated by parental presence during viewing. Having program rules did not predict less viewing by children. Moreover, although there was a direct link between parents' negative attitudes toward television and having television time rules (as previous theory suggests, e.g., Comstock et al., 1978), there was no such link between negative attitudes and program rules. Rather, parents' negative attitudes toward television predicted parental notice of children's imitation of behaviors seen on television—which in turn predicted television program rules. Thus, for program rules, it seems that the important factor is parental notice of the influence television is having on their child, rather than their attitudes toward television per se.

Taken together, our findings indicate that parental rules can indeed have an impact on both the amount and the nature of young children's television use. Television time rules were indeed related to lower levels of viewing. But television program rules predicted more parental presence during viewing. Moreover, rules regarding television use can have an impact on the other activities that children participate in. Children of parents with program rules tended to spend more time playing outdoors, even controlling for a variety of sociodemographic characteristics.

The findings highlight the importance of assessing the different qualities of parental rules in research examining young children's television use. In future

research, it is important to address the question of whether these relationships are unique to young children. It is possible, for example, that parental rules have a particularly important influence on the television use of very young children. It seems equally plausible that as children grow older, parental rules may be less enforceable and, thus, have less impact. It is also possible that there is some sort of cumulative effect of parental rules, such that rules in place early in a child's life become internalized at later ages. These important questions await further study.

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