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Television and Families: What Do Young Children Watch with Their Parents?

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ST. PETERS, MICHELLE; FITCH, MARGUERITE; HUSTON, ALETHA C.; WRIGHT, JOHN C.; and EAKINS, DARWIN J. *Television and Families: What Do Young Children Watch with Their Parents?* CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1991, 62, 1409–1423. A sample of 271 3- and 5-year-olds and their families participated in a 2-year longitudinal study of television viewing patterns. 5 1-week diaries for all family members were collected at 6-month intervals. Programs were categorized as: (1) child informative, (2) child entertainment, (3) news and informative, (4) sports, (5) comedy, (6) drama, (7) action-adventure, and (8) variety-game. The majority of child programs were viewed without parents, while the majority of adult programs were watched with parents. Coviewing patterns of adult programs were predicted from parents' individual viewing habits, but not from the child's. Coviewing declined with age. Parental encouragement and regulation of viewing were orthogonal. Children whose parents encouraged viewing watched more child informative programming; children of restrictive parents watched less entertainment programming. Encouraging parents covieved more than nonencouraging parents. Results support the assertion that parental viewing preferences, habits, and orientations toward television influence children's viewing, both with and without parents.

In the 1970s, the predominant theories describing children's uses of television shifted from simple "effects" models to those in which children were given an active role in their interactions with the medium. This shift led to investigations of children's cognitive processing of television with an emphasis on individual and developmental differences in attention, comprehension, and interest. It was also manifested in the uses and gratifications approach, an effort to identify the functions that viewing serves for the individual. These approaches are both concerned primarily with the child as an individual viewer.

In the present article, we attempt to place the development of children's television viewing in the larger social context of socialization in the family (Boeckman & Hipfl, 1988; Leichter et al., 1985). Parents may affect children's viewing experiences by watching television with children, by acting as models of TV use and decision makers about what is viewed when, and by actively guiding children's media choices. This study was designed to investigate these socializing functions of parents during the very early years. The first purpose was to describe the amount and types of viewing that

young children do with and without parents, and to examine age changes and sex differences in these patterns.

While much has been written about the advantages (Lemish & Rice, 1986; Lesser, 1974; Messaris & Sarett, 1981; Salomon, 1977; Watkins, Calvert, Huston-Stein, & Wright, 1980) and disadvantages (Maccoby, 1951; Steiner, 1963) of coviewing, little information is available about how frequently it occurs, the types of programs coviewed, or the relations of coviewing to age and sex of the child. The most precise estimates appear in studies using television diaries or direct observation in the home. Field (1987) found that 5-year-old children coviewed with others about 85% of the time: 27% of the time with their mothers, 18% with their fathers, and 62% with older siblings. Studies of elementary school age children using diaries report that nearly half (McDonald, 1986) to two-thirds (Carpenter, Huston, & Spera, 1989) of children's viewing is done with parents. An extensive study of time use indicated that television viewing is the most frequently shared activity among family members, but did not report the actual number of hours coviewed (Timmer, Eccles, & O'Brien, 1985).

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Other investigations based on parents' or children's reports provide varying estimates. Some authors (McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, & Fallis, 1982) suggest that parents overestimate the amount of coviewing. However, in a recent study, parents said they watched popular family programs on the average only a few times a year with their children (Dorr, Kovaric, & Doubleday, 1989). Data on age changes and gender differences in parent-child coviewing are even more scarce. Age and gender differences in the amount and time of day viewed have been described separately for children, adolescents, and adults (Condry, 1989, pp. 38-40). Comparisons of children in second, sixth, and tenth grades showed higher reported levels of coviewing for older children (Dorr et al., 1989). In the time use study, the amount of television viewed by fathers predicted the amount viewed by sons, but not daughters (Timmer et al., 1985).

Television is not homogeneous, so it is important to know what types of programs children watch with and without their parents. Many studies report the time of day when coviewing occurs rather than the types of programs viewed. For example, the most recent Nielsen audience research data on coviewing collected in 1975 indicated that most of it occurs during prime time rather than during hours when programs designed for children are shown (Nielsen, 1975). A similar pattern occurred in parents' reports of coviewing family programs (Dorr et al., 1989). In the present study, programs viewed were classified according to intended audience (child or adult) and program type.

A second purpose of the study was to investigate the relations among family members' viewing choices. Surveys indicate that parental viewing patterns, both amount viewed and reasons for viewing, predict children's viewing patterns (Boeckman & Hipfl, 1988; Brown & Linne, 1976; McLeod et al., 1982; Timmer et al., 1985). Early researchers proposed that young children develop program preferences based on observations of older family members (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). McLeod and Brown (1976) challenged this hypothesis, insisting it was too simplistic and failed to consider socioeconomic correlates of viewing patterns. They and their colleagues have posited that more specific family characteristics, such as communication styles (Chaffee, McLeod, & Atkin, 1971; Chaffee,

McLeod, & Wackman, 1973) and attributes toward the use of television (Boeckman & Hipfl, 1988; Brown & Linne, 1976; Timmer et al., 1985), account for the development of children's viewing patterns.

Others argue for an "independence model" in which children's viewing patterns are the accidental outcome of the interaction of television availability with individual motivations for viewing (Banks & Gupta, 1980). In Field's (1987) investigation of preschool children's coviewing, the data were consistent with a "random" model; the more parents and children watched television individually and the more time they spent at home together, the more apt they were to have overlapping viewing time. There was no indication that family characteristics and attitudes about television contributed to a "conscious effort on the part of parents to watch television with their children" (p. 87).

Family members may also socialize viewing habits by deciding what will be viewed. Self-reports indicate that males and older, more powerful members of the household often control the television set, giving young coviewers little choice over what programs will be watched (Bower, 1973; Gunter & Svennevig, 1987; Lull, 1978). In Lull's (1978) original study, observations and interviews with families indicated that reports of who controls the set did not always match actual behaviors of turning the set on and off or changing the channel. Fathers reported that mothers made most of the decisions about what was viewed, but fathers were twice as likely as mothers to control what was viewed by changing the channel or turning the set on or off. Children had relatively little power over joint program choices.

A third purpose of this study was to examine how parental regulation and/or encouragement affect children's viewing of particular programs. Although social critics exhort parents to control children's television use, the evidence consistently shows that most parents do little regulating, and what they do may be relatively ineffective. Direct parental control of program selection, such as switching the channel to avoid programs with violent or sexual content, does not occur often (Bower, 1973; Mohr, 1979; Streicher & Bonney, 1974), and children report few viewing rules (Chaffee et al., 1971; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972). Parents express more concern about what programs their children view than about the total amount of time spent viewing (Bower, 1973; Hess &

Goldman, 1962; Holman & Braithwaite, 1982; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; Stein & Friedrich, 1972).

Parent control is usually conceptualized as regulation or prohibition, but parents may also encourage and guide television use. In an investigation of children from 7 to 15, the frequency of coviewing family programs was predicted by parents' positive orientation to television and by parents' beliefs that television could be used for positive socialization of children (Dorr et al., 1989). If parental guidance has important influences on children's viewing habits, positive selection and encouragement may be at least as important as regulation and prohibition, particularly during the preschool years when children have relatively few independent sources of information about what programs are available. Therefore, in the present study, parental encouragement and regulation of viewing were measured as two separate and potentially independent dimensions.

In summary, this study had three major purposes: to describe age and sex differences in the amount of parent-child coviewing for different types of programs during the preschool years, to investigate the relations and possible patterns of influence between parent and child viewing, and to determine the relation of parent encouragement and regulation to children's viewing with and without parents. Three features of this study differentiate its method from the literature to date: (1) viewing for all family members was categorized by program type, (2) very young children were studied (3 to 7 years), and (3) families were followed longitudinally for 2 years in order to study changes and continuities in coviewing patterns over time.

Method

Sample and Subject Retention

The initial sample consisted of 326 children and their families in Topeka, Kansas. The children were within 3 months of their third ($N = 160$) or fifth ($N = 166$) birthdays at the beginning of the study. They were recruited through newspaper birth records, preschools, churches, mass media publicity, and posters placed in large office buildings, laundromats, and grocery stores. The sample was predominantly Caucasian, and all but 18 families had both parents living in the home at the beginning of the study. Educational level of each parent was coded on a scale in which 1 = less than high school, 2 = high

school graduate, 3 = some post-high school training, 4 = Bachelor's degree, 5 = some postgraduate training, and 6 = graduate or professional degree. For fathers, mean = 3.78, SD = 1.40; for mothers, mean = 3.35, SD = 1.23. Most parents were high school graduates (96.6% of the fathers; 98.1% of the mothers). Slightly over half (53%) of the fathers and 41.1% of the mothers had completed Bachelor's degrees.

Occupational status was rated on the Duncan scale, which has a range from 1 to 99 (Duncan, 1961). Although individual occupations receive different ratings on the Duncan, they can be understood from the following average ratings: professional and technical workers = 75; managers, officials, and proprietors = 57; clerical and sales workers = 17-18; laborers = 7. For fathers, the mean = 52.73, SD = 23.90; for mothers, mean = 52.18, SD = 18.52. Using 1980 census data, approximate mean Duncan scores were calculated for adults in Topeka. They were 40.5 for men and 50.6 for women. The sample represented a wide range of educational and occupational levels, but it was a volunteer sample in which white, intact, relatively stable families with husbands above the average occupational status were over-represented. (One necessary criterion for inclusion in the study was the intention to stay in Topeka for at least 2 years.)

Design and Measurement

The design was a combination of cross-sequential and cohort sequential methods (Nesselroade & Baltes, 1979). It is illustrated in Table 1. Two cohorts, aged 3 and 5 at the beginning of the study, were followed for a 2-year period. Within each of these groups, there were two "subcohorts": children with birthdays from February through August began in the spring of 1981; children with birthdays from September through the following February began in the fall of 1981. For clarity, these subcohorts are referred to as spring and fall start times.

The longitudinal nature of the study made it possible to examine age and sex differences and to examine stability and changes of coviewing over time. Diaries have been found to be the most valid method of assessing viewing other than direct observation (Miller, 1987); thus, viewing was measured with diaries maintained by the parents for 1 week in the spring and 1 week in the fall for 2 years (a total of five diaries). Viewing by all members of the household was recorded in 15-min intervals

TABLE 1
DESIGN OF LONGITUDINAL STUDY

COHORT AND START TIME	TIME OF MEASUREMENT					
	1981 Spring	1981 Fall	1982 Spring	1982 Fall	1983 Spring	1983 Fall
	Age of Children					
1978, Spring	3	3½	4	4½	5	...
1978, Fall .....	...	3	3½	4	4½	5
1976, Spring	5	5½ ^a	6	6½ ^b	7	...
1976, Fall .....	...	5	5½	6 ^a	6½	7 ^b

^a Entered kindergarten.

^b Entered first grade.

from 6:00 A.M. to 2:00 A.M. for each day. In addition, if children were in regular day-care, their viewing was recorded by the caregiver. Spring and fall were sampled to avoid the extremes of heavy viewing in winter or light viewing in summer. Although each family kept a diary for only 1 week, each time of measurement lasted approximately 3 weeks, with families spread across them in order to reduce the effects of weather and idiosyncratic events (such as the Sadat assassination) on the viewing measure.

Parents were instructed to record as a "viewer" anyone who was present for more than half of a 15-min interval in which the television was turned on. Because parents recorded all viewing, their attention was not directed specifically to coviewing; hence the likelihood of biased reporting is reduced. While viewing during 15-min intervals was adopted to avoid parental judgments about when the child was "watching," it undoubtedly resulted in a slight overestimate of true viewing. One recent investigation included a comparison of diary measures with videotapes made in the home during viewing (Anderson, Field, Collins, Lorch, & Nathan, 1985). Diaries slightly overestimated children's viewing time, but the correlation between the two methods was .84 for preschoolers, indicating that diaries are a valid method of assessing individual differences.

In the present study, validity was also assessed indirectly by examining errors in the diaries (e.g., wrong program title for time and channel listed). Only two families were eliminated because their diaries contained large numbers of errors.

Sample Retention and Attrition

A total of 271 subjects returned four ($N = 27$) or five ($N = 244$) diaries and were

therefore considered to have sufficient data for analyses of viewing. The retained sample was comparable to the original sample on demographic variables, family composition, and television viewing environments.

Classification of Television Programs and Viewers

An extensive coding system was developed for categorizing available television programs (CRITC, 1983). Programs were classified on four dimensions: (1) *intended audience* (child or adult), (2) *informative purpose* (yes or no), (3) *animation used* (full, partial, none), (4) *program type* (news and information; sports, comedy, drama, action-adventure, or variety-game). All programs in the *TV Guide* and cable guides for viewing weeks were coded on the basis of raters' knowledge of the series and descriptions in the *TV Guide*. Of the 5,007 titles in the list, the proportion that could be coded on each dimension was: audience = 95.7%, purpose = 95.9%, animation = 95.1%, program type = 90.2%. Any programs viewed that did not appear in the *TV Guide* (e.g., videotaped movies) were also coded whenever possible.

Viewing frequencies were calculated as the number of 15-min intervals the child and/or parents viewed for any program category defined by a single dimension or a combination of dimensions. Eight program categories were selected on the basis of intended audience and program type. The eight categories included two types of programs intended for child audiences: (1) informative, (2) noninformative, and six intended for general audiences: (3) news and information, (4) sports, (5) comedy, (6) drama, (7) action-adventure, and (8) variety-game.

Children's viewing was further classi-

fied according to presence or absence of parents: (1) with mother, (2) with father, (3) with both parents, and (4) with neither parent. Parents' viewing without children was classified as: (1) mother without father, (2) father without mother, and (3) parents together. In this classification, siblings or others might or might not be present in any cell.

Distributions of viewing in most categories were positively skewed; therefore, square root transformations were used in the final analyses after determining that they produced more normal distributions than logs or raw scores. For the 27 families with one missing diary, values were estimated using the BMD least-squares program for estimating missing data. Approximately 2% of the values in the final data set were estimated.

Encouragement of Regulation of Viewing

On separate occasions from diary collection, parents were asked about both encouragement and regulation of their children's television viewing during interviews conducted at the beginning and end of the 2-year period. To measure encouragement, the parent was asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale (*a*) whether there were programs the family watched regularly together, and how much he or she encouraged the child (*b*) to watch particular television programs, or (*c*) to watch at particular times of day. They were asked for particulars about what programs and times were encouraged and the reasons for encouraging viewing.

Regulation was measured by responses to 5-point Likert scales indicating (*a*) whether parents allowed the child to turn on the television set alone, (*b*) how much they set limits on the time the child could watch TV, and (*c*) whether there were certain programs they prohibited. Follow-up questions asked for the specific nature of any prohibitions.

Encouragement and regulation of particular types of programs were also assessed in a questionnaire administered in conjunction with the parent interview. Parents were asked, "What policies do you have about your child watching the following types of programs?" They responded using a 5-point scale in which 1 = strongly discourage, 2 = mildly discourage, 3 = neither encourage nor discourage, 4 = mildly encourage, 5 = strongly encourage. The program types were educational shows, children's specials, nature documentaries, horror shows, soap operas, cartoons, superhero shows, situation

comedies, game shows, police shows, sports, movies, musicals, and variety shows.

Results

Frequencies of Parent-Child Coviewing

Viewing frequencies and percentages were calculated for the eight program categories selected on the basis of intended audience and program type. The results appear in Table 2.

Most of children's viewing of child programs occurred without a parent. By contrast, children's viewing of adult programs typically occurred with one or both parents. Analyses of variance were performed on viewing frequencies in each program category using child's sex (2), cohort (2), start time (2), wave (5), and absence/presence of parent coviewer (2) as independent variables. Only those effects involving coviewer are reported in this article. Other effects are reported in Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, and St. Peters (1990). There were significant main effects for coviewer in all eight program categories; F 's(1,263) ranged from 61.75 to 269.07, p 's < .001. Mean differences in coviewing the eight program categories are displayed in Figure 1.

Age differences in coviewing.—There were significant age-related differences in all program categories except variety-game shows. On the whole, younger children coviewed programs more with parents than did older children.

Patterns of coviewing and viewing without parents also changed over the 2-year period. For *child informative* programs, the interaction of cohort \times coviewer \times wave was significant, $F(4,260) = 8.84$, $p < .001$. Coviewing declined steadily from age 3 to age 7. By contrast, children watched child informative programs without parents with increasing frequency from age 3 to 4; then frequencies began to decline.

For *child entertainment* programs, the interactions of cohort \times coviewer, $F(4,263) = 11.78$, $p < .001$, and cohort \times wave \times coviewer, $F(4,260) = 3.08$, $p < .05$, were significant. Coviewing children's entertainment programs declined slightly with age. The frequency of viewing children's entertainment programs without parents increased rapidly from age 3 to 5, then leveled off.

For *general audience* programs, the interactions of cohort \times coviewer were significant for news and information, sports,

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TABLE 2

HOURS VIEWED PER WEEK AND AVERAGE PERCENTAGES OF CHILDREN'S VIEWING FOR EACH TYPE OF TELEVISION PROGRAM WITH AND WITHOUT PARENTS

VIEWER(S)	PROGRAM TYPE							
	Child Informative		Child Entertainment		News and Information		Sports	
	Hours	%	Hours	%	Hours	%	Hours	%
Child without parent(s).....	2.8	77.8	3.8	74.7	.14	19.1	.08	19.9
Child with parent(s).....	.87	22.2	1.32	25.3	.98	80.9	.56	80.1
Both parents.....	.09	2.6	.30	6.1	.39	30.4	.26	31.5
Mother.....	.66	15.7	.69	12.3	.43	34.3	.08	12.3
Father.....	.12	3.9	.33	6.9	.16	16.2	.22	36.3
	Comedy		Drama		Action Adventure		Variety Game	
	Hours	%	Hours	%	Hours	%	Hours	%
Child without parent(s).....	1.26	39.9	.33	22.9	.41	29.9	.22	27.4
Child with parent(s).....	2.18	60.1	1.50	77.1	1.08	70.1	.68	72.6
Both parents.....	.82	22.9	.49	26.1	.44	28.0	.28	28.8
Mother.....	.99	25.4	.83	41.1	.35	21.1	.27	26.6
Father.....	.37	11.9	.18	9.9	.29	21.1	.13	17.1

comedy, drama, and action-adventure; F 's(4,260) ranged from 4.99, $p < .05$ to 20.56, $p < .001$. For most programs, viewing with parents decreased from age 3 to 7, while viewing without parents remained stable. Exceptions to these patterns were an increase in children's viewing comedies without parents from ages 5 to 7, and an increase in viewing and coviewing of action-adventure programs over time.

Parent and child gender differences.— A second set of analyses of variance separated coviewing with mothers and fathers. Children's viewing frequencies in each program category were analyzed by child's sex (2), cohort (2), and coviewer (both parents, mother, father, or neither parent) (4). Only two of the 16 interactions that included sex of child and coviewer were significant: sex \times coviewer for variety-game, $F(3,265) = 2.80$, $p < .05$, and sex \times cohort \times coviewer for sports, $F(3,265) = 2.67$, $p < .05$. Boys watched more variety-game programs alone, with both parents, or with their mothers than girls; girls watched more variety-game programs with their fathers. Children watched sports programs with both parents or with their fathers; they did little viewing of sports alone or with their mothers exclusively.

Boys viewed more sports with their fathers than girls, and the oldest girls were the least likely to watch sports programs.

Relations among Family Members' Television Viewing Patterns

The second set of analyses addressed the relations among children's and parents' viewing together and apart. Did parents join children in order to share programs suited to the child's tastes and preferences? Or did parents choose programs suited to their own tastes, allowing the child to join them? Did programs viewed jointly influence children's tastes in subsequent viewing without parents? Given the essentially correlational nature of the data, direction of effects cannot be determined with certainty. However, examining the relation between the types of programs that children or parents watch "alone" and the types of programs they watch together provides one source of relevant information. For example, if the amount of comedy viewed by a parent when the child was not present predicted the amount viewed together, one might conclude that the parent's tastes were guiding the selection of programs for coviewing, especially if the child's viewing without parents did *not* predict what they coviewed.

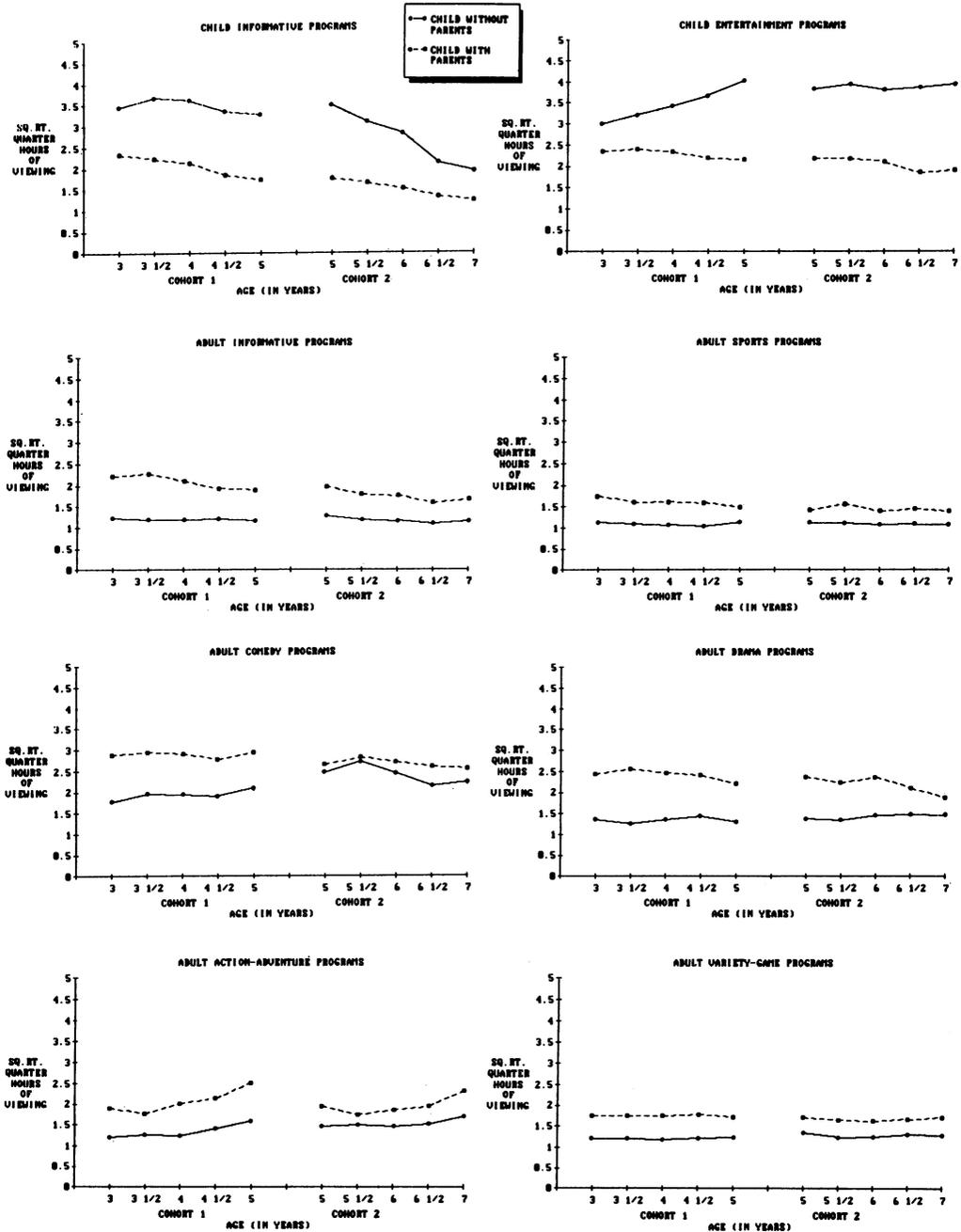


FIG. 1.—Mean viewing frequencies of child viewing without parents and child covieing with parents at each age level for the eight program categories.

Correlations were computed between the frequency of covieing and viewing by (1) parents without the child, and (2) child without the parents, within and across each of the five waves for all *general audience* programs combined. Similar correlations

could not be computed for child audience programs because parents rarely viewed them without children. The correlations for concurrent and adjacent waves in each cohort appear in Figure 2. Patterns of correlations demonstrated the stability of viewing

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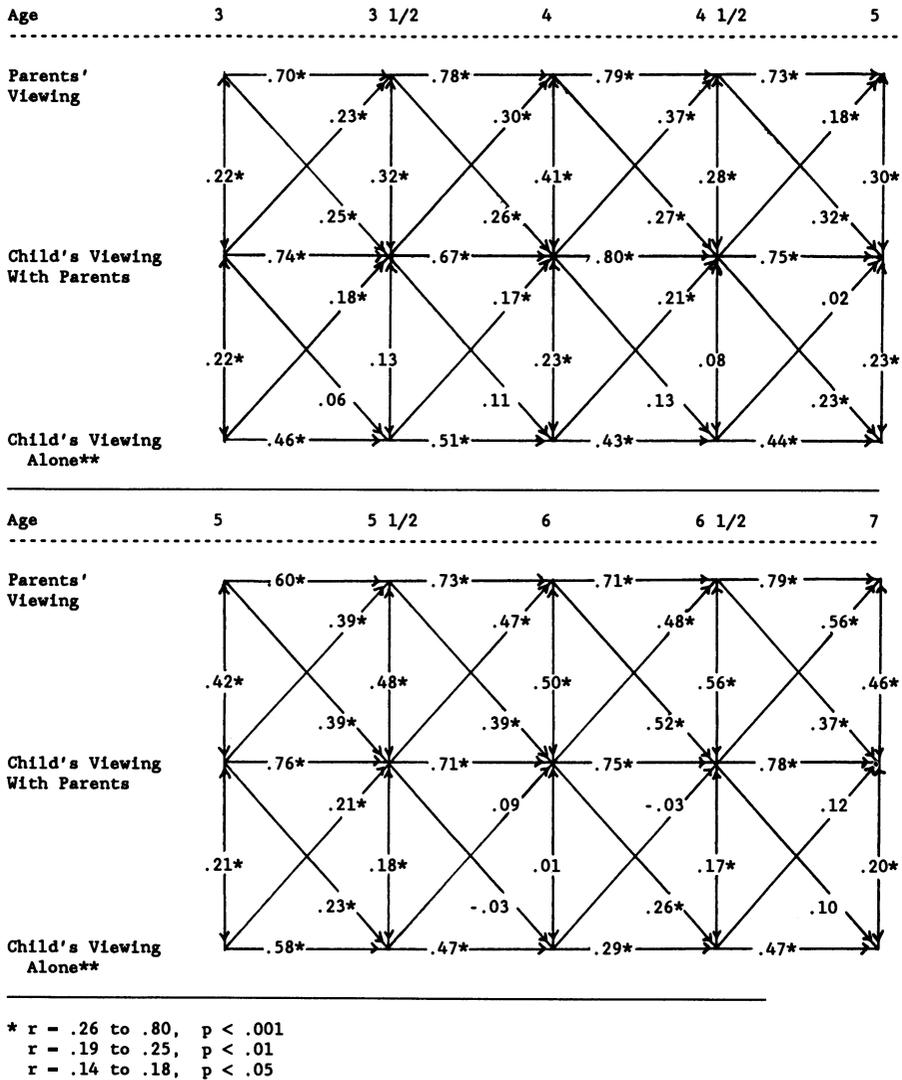


FIG. 2.—Cross-lag correlations between viewing and coviewing adult programs by children and parents.

over time: parents without children, $r = .60$ to $.79$, $p < .05$; children with their parents, $r = .67$ to $.80$, $p < .05$; and children without their parents, $r = .29$ to $.58$, $p < .05$.

The amount of coviewing was significantly related to parents' viewing "alone" both within and across waves (top half of each cross-lag diagram in Fig. 2). For each cohort, 13 correlations of concurrent data (vertical) and adjacent waves (diagonal from individual to coviewing) are reported. For the older cohort, the median correlation was $.47$ (range 0.37 to 0.56); for the younger co-

hort, it was 0.28 (range 0.18 to 0.41). All were significant at $p < .05$.

By contrast, the amount of coviewing was weakly or nonsignificantly related to children's viewing without parents (bottom half of each cross-lag diagram). The median correlations were 0.17 in both age groups; the ranges were 0.02 to 0.23 and $-.03$ to 0.26 in the younger and older groups, respectively. Similarly, there were weak relations between children's viewing without parents and parents' viewing without their children. The median correlations (not shown in Fig.

2) were 0.11 (range $-.01$ to 0.20) for the younger cohort and 0.13 (range -0.05 to 0.25) in the older cohort.¹

These patterns suggest that parent viewing predicted coviewing better than child viewing "alone," and that the difference was greater for older than for younger children. These conclusions were supported by statistical tests of the differences between pairs of analogous correlations. Critical ratios were calculated after normalizing the distributions with r to Z transformations (Walker & Lev, 1953). For the older cohort, all pairs of correlations between parents' viewing "alone" and coviewing, with the exception of the first set of diagonal correlations, were significantly different from their counterparts for children's viewing "alone" and coviewing (Z 's = 2.06 to 4.48 , $p < .05$). Conversely, for the younger cohort, all pairs of correlations between the amount parents viewed "alone" and coviewing, except the last set of diagonal correlations, were not significantly different from their counterparts for children's viewing "alone" and coviewing (Z 's = 0.51 to 1.70 , N.S.). Furthermore, between cohorts, the analogous correlations of parent viewing with parent-child coviewing were consistently but not significantly higher for the older cohort (5 to 7 years old) than for the younger cohort (3 to 5 years old) (Z 's = $.44$ to 1.84 , N.S.), with the exception of Wave 4.²

Encouragement and Regulation of Television Viewing

The third set of analyses was designed to describe parental encouragement and regulation of children's viewing and to determine how these variables were related to viewing. The means for the interview and questionnaire measures of encouragement and regulation appear in Table 3.

Encouragement.—Parents reported regular family viewing of certain programs and encouragement of particular programs fairly frequently (a parent could name up to two programs). For the 5-year-olds, public television programs were encouraged most often; 65% of the parents named "Sesame Street,"

and 32% named other PBS programs. Children's specials such as "Charlie Brown's Christmas" (22%) and nature shows (18%) were the next most commonly named type. For 7-year-olds, fewer parents named "Sesame Street" (28%), but frequently mentioned other public television shows (31%), nature shows (33%), and children's specials (30%).

Parents of 5-year-olds occasionally encouraged viewing at particular times, but parents of 7-year-olds less often did so. The most frequent reason given was parent convenience (e.g., to let the mother cook dinner or rest) (35% for 5-year-olds; 19% for 7-year-olds). Other reasons were to produce behavior change (e.g., to get child to settle down, stop fighting with siblings) (15%), to keep the child busy (e.g., "He needs something to do while he's eating") (9%), or program content (e.g., "when 'Sesame Street' is on") (9%).

Regulation.—The average parent set relatively few time limits on children's viewing. When they did set limits, they often stated a limit on one session of viewing (e.g., no more than 2 hours at a time) (24%). About 20% limited total viewing time per day or per week. The most frequent reasons for time limits were to promote alternative activities (e.g., to get child to play outdoors or find more creative activity) (25%). For older children, parents also imposed limits to get the child to fulfill other responsibilities such as sleeping, doing chores, or homework (23%) or to prevent negative effects of television (e.g., making child passive or restless) (20%).

The average parent prohibited some programs. The most frequently named reasons for prohibitions were violence (70%), sexual content (62%), scary content (36%), adverse reactions by the child (29%), disapproved values and behaviors (e.g., anti-Christian, shows people treating one another rudely) (27%), bad language (19%), and adult content such as suicide or abortion (15%).

¹ Similar patterns appeared in analyses of the relations of coviewing to mothers' viewing alone and to fathers' viewing alone. Therefore, they are not presented here.

² The remaining diagonals in Figure 2 might be interpreted as evidence of the effects of coviewing at time T on individual viewing at time $T + 1$. Given the stability of parental viewing and its high concurrent correlation with coviewing, such an interpretation (that coviewing with children influences subsequent parental viewing without children) would be hard to defend. The diagonals from coviewing to subsequent child "alone" viewing are small and variable relative to the stability coefficients for children's viewing. Thus, there is no evidence for a consistent influence of coviewing on children's gross amount of viewing alone 6 months later.

TABLE 3

MEAN SCORES FOR ENCOURAGEMENT AND REGULATION OF CHILDREN'S VIEWING

ITEM	COHORT			
	Younger		Older	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Encouragement:				
Family watches regular programs	3.10	1.22	3.04	1.29
Encourage particular times	2.23	1.25	1.77	1.08
Encourage particular programs	3.37	1.12	3.21	1.08
Regulation:				
Child may turn on TV (5 = No).....	2.71	1.45	2.04	1.29
Limit time.....	2.29	1.41	2.65	1.52
Prohibit particular programs	3.89	1.27	3.85	1.23
Program types: ^a				
Children's specials.....	4.49	.72	4.27	.66
Educational television.....	4.35	.68	4.08	.77
Documentaries	3.75	.81	3.95	.76
Cartoons	3.12	.68	3.04	.60
Sports	2.98	.52	3.19	.54
Music shows	3.28	.67	3.23	.56
Variety.....	3.04	.47	2.93	.56
Movies.....	2.98	.76	3.02	.73
Situation comedies.....	3.00	.74	2.91	.57
Game shows	2.60	.79	2.69	.70
Police shows.....	2.59	.77	2.55	.81
Soap operas.....	1.96	.89	1.83	.84
Horror shows	1.28	.54	1.43	.75

^a 1 = strongly discourage; 3 = neither discourage nor encourage; 5 = strongly encourage.

Encouragement and Regulation of Particular Program Types

The mean responses to questionnaire items asking whether parents encouraged or discouraged viewing different types of programs are shown in Table 3. On the average, parents said they encouraged educational programs, children's specials, and nature documentaries. They were most likely to discourage horror shows and soap operas. Parents were neutral about most types of shows. More than half of the parents answered "neither encourage nor discourage" for cartoons, superhero shows, situation comedies, game shows, police shows, sports, movies, musicals, or variety shows.

Encouragement and Regulation as Predictors of Children's Viewing

Summary scores for encouragement and regulation were computed by summing the three items listed under each heading in Table 3. Scores on each measure had a potential range of 3 to 15. The two scores were not correlated ($r[269] = .06$), indicating that they measured independent dimensions. In order to determine the relations of each variable and their combinations to children's

viewing, families were divided at the median (equal to 8) on each variable to form four cells. Those who fell exactly at the median on either dimension were eliminated in order to differentiate the cells more clearly.

Parents who did little encouragement or regulation were categorized as *Laissez-Faire* ($N = 45$); parents who regulated and did not encourage were labeled *Restrictive* ($N = 42$); those who encouraged but did not regulate were categorized as *Promotive* ($N = 35$); parents who both regulated and encouraged were labeled *Selective* ($N = 63$).

The frequencies and percentages of television that children in each group viewed and covieved are shown in Table 4. Analyses of variance were performed on children's total viewing frequencies in each of the eight program categories using cohort (2), encouragement (2), regulation (2), and absence/presence of parent coviewer (2) as independent variables.

Children with parents who encouraged television (Promotive and Selective families) watched more child informative programs, $F(1,177) = 12.87, p < .001$, but not

TABLE 4

MEAN HOURS PER WEEK OF CHILDREN'S VIEWING AND COVIEWING AS A FUNCTION OF PARENTAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND REGULATION

Encourage/Regulate	Child Informative	Child Entertainment	News and Information	Sports
Child total viewing time:				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire)	3.2	5.7	.9	.5
Low/high (Restrictive)	2.7	3.8	.8	.3
High/low (Promotive)	4.6	5.9	1.4	.7
High/high (Selective)	4.4	4.8	1.2	.8
Child viewing with parent(s):				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire) .....	.4 (12)	1.2 (21)	.7 (78)	.4 (80)
Low/high (Restrictive) .....	.5 (10)	.7 (20)	.7 (88)	.3 (87)
High/low (Promotive)	1.3 (29)	1.6 (26)	1.2 (86)	.6 (86)
High/high (Selective)	1.1 (25)	1.3 (27)	1.1 (92)	.7 (88)
Child viewing without parent(s):				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire)	2.8 (88)	4.5 (79)	.2 (22)	.1 (20)
Low/high (Restrictive)	2.2 (81)	3.1 (80)	.1 (12)	.04 (13)
High/low (Promotive)	3.3 (71)	4.3 (74)	.2 (14)	.1 (14)
High/high (Selective)	3.3 (75)	3.5 (73)	.1 (8)	.1 (12)

	Comedy	Drama	Action-Adventure	Variety-Game
Child total viewing time:				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire)	3.5	1.6	1.4	.8
Low/high (Restrictive)	1.9	1.1	.9	.4
High/low (Promotive)	3.9	1.9	1.6	1.1
High/high (Selective)	3.5	1.9	1.5	1.1
Child viewing with parent(s):				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire)	1.9 (54)	1.1 (69)	.9 (64)	.5 (62)
Low/high (Restrictive)	1.0 (53)	.8 (73)	.5 (56)	.2 (50)
High/low (Promotive)	2.4 (62)	1.6 (84)	1.1 (69)	.9 (82)
High/high (Selective)	2.4 (69)	1.7 (89)	1.2 (80)	.9 (82)
Child viewing without parent(s):				
Low/low (Laissez-Faire)	1.6 (46)	.5 (31)	.5 (36)	.3 (38)
Low/high (Restrictive) .....	.9 (47)	.3 (27)	.4 (44)	.2 (50)
High/low (Promotive)	1.5 (38)	.3 (16)	.5 (31)	.2 (18)
High/high (Selective)	1.1 (31)	.2 (11)	.3 (20)	.2 (18)

more child entertainment, $F(1,177) = 2.06$, N.S., than those whose parents did not encourage television (Laissez-Faire and Restrictive families). Children with encouraging parents also watched significantly more of all general audience program categories except drama, F 's(1,177) ranging from 4.16, $p < .05$ to 17.57, $p < .001$.

There were significant main effects of regulation for some categories of programs. Children whose parents regulated viewing watched less *child entertainment*, $F(1,177) = 14.59$, $p < .001$, but not less *child informative* programming, $F(1,177) = 3.73$, N.S., than those with low regulation. They also watched less comedy, $F(1,177) = 11.44$, $p < .001$,

action adventure, $F(1,177) = 7.53$, $p < .01$, and variety-game, $F(1,177) = 5.20$, $p < .05$, than those whose parents did little regulating. In general, as expected, children with Promotive parents watched the most television, while children of Restrictive parents watched the least television.

Although the interactions of encouragement and regulation were not significant for any category except variety-game, $F(1,177) = 3.86$, $p < .05$, inspection of the means in Table 4 indicates that the main effects of regulation were often due to the lower viewing in Restrictive families. Children in Selective families, which were also high on regulation, typically watched about as much as

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those from families with low levels of regulation (i.e., Promotive and Laissez-Faire).

The interactions between encouragement and coviewer were significant for all general audience program categories, F 's(1,177) ranging from 5.92, $p < .05$ to 20.97, $p < .001$. Parents who encouraged television (Promotive and Selective) were more apt to watch television with their children than low encouragement parents. Both the absolute amount and the proportion of viewing that occurred *with parents* were greater in Promotive and Selective families than in Laissez-Faire and Restrictive families. In contrast, when parents were low in encouragement of television (Laissez-Faire and Restrictive), their children were more likely to watch TV without a parent present.

Discussion

This study described the development of children's television viewing by investigating what children watch with and without their parents and how parents contribute to the socialization of media use between the ages of 3 and 7 years. While the sample was a volunteer one, the results seem reasonably generalizable to two-parent white families of lower to upper middle socioeconomic status across a range of educational levels. All measures were based on parent reports; thus subject reactivity and social desirability response bias are of concern. This study used a multimethod research strategy in which data were collected over a 2-year period using different formats (parental observations and interviews) in different settings (home and office). This research methodology is recommended to reduce bias (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Gottman, 1979). Because diaries were examined for errors, and the parents' media practices and values corresponded to children's viewing of particular types of programming, these measures appear to have good convergent validity.

The first purpose of the study was to describe age and sex differences in the amount and type of parent-child coviewing during the preschool years. When young children watch television designed for general audiences, they usually do so with their parents. When they watch programs aimed at a child audience, parents are present only about one-fourth of the time. These findings are consistent with those found in comparable studies of preschool children (e.g., Field, 1987). Coviewing declines from age 3 to 7 for most program categories. For child audi-

ence programs, viewing without parents follows a different developmental pattern (increasing, then leveling off or declining), suggesting that children's interests in such programs do not decline linearly. There were few sex differences in coviewing patterns. Mothers coviewed everything except sports more with their children than did fathers, probably because mothers are home more than fathers. The only hint of a parental effect on sex-typed interests was the fact that older girls' sports coviewing dropped, but boys' did not.

The study's second purpose was to examine the relations among parent and child viewing patterns in order to determine which family members influence coviewing choices. Three models have been offered in the literature: parents influence children's viewing, children influence parents' viewing, and no mutual influence occurs. The findings of this study support the first model. For general audience programs, most of children's viewing occurred with parents, and the coviewing of general audience programs was predicted from the parents' individual viewing habits, but not from the child's individual viewing habits.

The age differences also suggest that children are gradually socialized into sharing their parents' program preferences. Although older children watch lower amounts of television with their parents, what they do watch is highly related to their parents' viewing choices. However, what children watch alone does not correspond to parental tastes, so the "effect," if any, of parental preferences does not appear to carry over to children's tastes when they are away from their parents, at least up to age 7.

Children's influence on parents' viewing occurs primarily for child-audience programs, but the effect is weak. Parents coview such programs relatively infrequently, and the rate declines with age, even during times when children's viewing of such programs increases. That finding suggests that the "coviewing" may result more from parental need to supervise very young children than from an effort to share the child's program interests.

The model of no mutual influence, or the "random" model, represents the notion that coviewing is the accidental product of the total amounts of individual viewing. The more two people in a family watch television, the more often they will end up in front

of the set at the same time. Field's (1987) findings suggest that coviewing is largely accounted for by this "random" model; however, she reported that mothers coviewed with their children more than expected by the model, while fathers coviewed less than expected. She suggested that time of day when parents are available to coview and the type of program aired during those times may influence joint viewing. Our data demonstrate that program categories are important determinants of coviewing, especially as they interact with developmental changes. Therefore, the "random" model does not completely account for coviewing patterns.

Parents' viewing choices do appear to play a major role in determining *young* children's exposure to adult programming. These findings counteract the common stereotype that children's exposure to inappropriate programs results from lack of parental involvement. In fact, young children are apt to be exposed to situation comedies, crime shows, soap operas, variety shows, and news because they are with their parents, not because they are left alone. As children get older, of course, they are more likely to watch such programs alone. We have no direct evidence that their tendency to do so by age 7 results from early experience with parental coviewing, but it seems likely that parental modeling and a family climate in which such viewing occupies major parts of people's time will have a long-term influence on the child's media use.

The third purpose of the study was to determine the relation of parental encouragement and regulation to children's viewing with and without parents. Previous studies have emphasized regulation and control of viewing, but the present investigation suggests strongly that encouragement is an important dimension that is orthogonal to regulation. Parents who encourage viewing particular programs at particular times are not simply pro-television; instead, they appear to be thoughtful and careful about their children's viewing. They usually encourage child-appropriate viewing that may be beneficial and they coview general audience programs with their children more than parents who do not encourage television viewing. This finding is consistent with Dorr et al.'s (1989) findings for older children showing that coviewing was predicted by positive parent orientations to television.

Program content is the most frequent

reason for both encouragement and restriction, even for these young children. Parents are more apt to encourage viewing because they see positive value in the content than because of the time of day, and they are more likely to prohibit viewing on the basis of the content than to put time restrictions on children. Parents value educational shows and specials prepared for children. Violence, sexual content, and frightening content are the most frequent reasons for restrictions. Nevertheless, parents seem to consider much of television innocuous—neither good nor bad for children to watch. Despite the fact that they mentioned excessive violence most frequently as a reason for prohibiting viewing, they did not report discouraging many of the program categories that contain high rates of violence, such as cartoons, police shows, and superhero shows. Parents' open-ended comments indicated that they were particularly concerned about explicit violence of the kind shown on cable movie channels. Their stated concern about sexual content and adult issues probably forms the basis for discouraging soap opera viewing.

Parental encouragement and regulation were orthogonal dimensions, both of which were related to children's television viewing habits. Four types of families were identified by crossing encouragement and regulation. Selective families and Promotive families, both high on encouragement, had children who watched child informative programs frequently, but who were not especially heavy viewers of child entertainment programs, which are primarily cartoons. It appears that such parents follow through on their efforts to promote beneficial uses of television. Conversely, parental regulation predicted low viewing of child entertainment programs, but not informative programming.

Children in Laissez-Faire families, which neither encouraged nor regulated, watched entertainment programming for both child and general audiences often, but were more likely to do so without parents. The Restrictive families, who regulated but did not encourage, succeeded in producing low levels of viewing in virtually all program categories. They avoided entertainment programming, but they also did not take advantage of informative programming for their children. Nonetheless, when their children did watch television, a parent was less likely to be present than in Selective and Promotive families.

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A question that remains and was not examined in this study is the effect of coviewing on the family and, specifically, on children's development. Diaries and interviews describe when and what people coview, but they do not resolve the controversy about whether such viewing has beneficial effects or represents low quality time. While experimental studies suggest that adult coviewers can enhance children's comprehension of television messages and the amount they learn from educational programs (Ball & Bogatz, 1970; Collins, 1983; Collins, Sobol, & Westby, 1981; Corder-Bolz, 1980; Salomon, 1977; Watkins et al., 1980), we know little about what occurs naturally during coviewing in the home environment. The types of programs coviewed and the age changes observed suggest, however, that joint viewing time is not often utilized as an occasion for parental attention to children's needs and interests. The highest percents of coviewing occurred for program types that are probably incomprehensible and of little interest to young children—news, sports, and drama. As children get older, they move away from viewing such programs, probably to find more interesting activities. Direct observation of families is obviously needed to confirm or disconfirm these interpretations and to assess possible outcomes of parent-child coviewing.

Whatever the effects of parental coviewing, encouragement, and regulation, it is clear that the family context is central to the socialization of young children's television use. Families determine not only the amount of television available to children, but the types of programs, and the quality of the viewing experience.

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