

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOSEPH LIEBERMAN

On the Introduction of

THE CHILDREN AND MEDIA RESEARCH ADVANCEMENT ACT

Mr. President, I rise to introduce, along with Senators Brownback, Clinton, Santorum and Landrieu, the Children and Media Research Advancement Act, or CAMRA Act. Mr. President, we believe there is an urgent need to establish a federal role for targeting research on the impact of media on children. Almost 5 years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended no television viewing for children under the age of 2. They subsequently recommended limiting all screen time exposure, including television, videos, computer and video games, to 1-2 hours per day for older children. The Academy based these decisions on their best sense of how to facilitate the healthy development of children. However, not enough research had been conducted in this area to know if these particular recommendations were good advice or not. Five years later, we still have very limited information about the role of media, particularly the role of digital media, in very early development. Why not? None of our federal agencies are charged with ensuring an ongoing funding base for a coherent research agenda about the role of media in children's lives.

From the cradle to the grave, we now live and develop in a world of media -- a world that is increasingly digital, and a world where access is at our fingertips. This emerging digital world is well known to our children, but its effects on their development are not well understood. From ages 2-18, children are spending an average of 6 and a half hours with media each day. For those who are under age 6, 2 hours of exposure to screen media each day is common, even for those who are under age 2. That is about as much time as children under age 6 spend playing outdoors, and it is much more time than they spend reading or being read to by their parents. How does this investment of time affect their development? We have all wondered about the answer to this question.

Take the Columbine incident. After two adolescent boys shot and killed some of their teachers, classmates, and then turned their guns on themselves at Columbine High School, we asked ourselves if media played some role in this tragedy. Did these boys learn to kill in part from playing first-person shooter video games like *Doom* where they acted as a killer? Were they rehearsing criminal activities when playing this game? We looked to the research community for an answer. In the violence and media area, we had invested in research more so than in any other area, and as a result, we knew more. Therefore, some answers were forthcoming about how this tragedy could have taken place as well as steps that could be taken, such as media education programs, which could prevent similar events from happening in the future. Even so, there is still a considerable amount of speculation about the more complex questions. Why did these particular boys, for example, pull the trigger in real life while others who played *Doom* confine their aggressive acts to the gaming context?

Consider the national health problem of childhood obesity. Does time spent viewing screens and its accompanying sedentary life styles contribute to childhood obesity? Or is the constant bombardment of advertisements for sugar-coated cereals, snack foods, and candy that pervade children's television advertisements the culprit? What will happen when pop-up advertisements begin to appear on children's cell phones that specifically target them for the junk food that they like best? The answer to the obesity and media question is also complex. We need more answers.

A recent report linked very early television viewing with later symptoms that are common in children who have attention deficit disorders. Does television viewing cause attention deficits, or do children who have attention deficits find television viewing experiences more engaging than kids who don't have attention problems? Or do parents whose children have difficulty sustaining attention let them watch more television to encourage more sitting and less hyperactive behavior? How will Internet experiences, particularly those where children move rapidly across different windows, influence attention patterns and attention problems? Once again, we don't know the answer.

Many of us find that our children are becoming increasingly materialistic. Does exposure to commercial advertising and even the "good life" experienced by media characters partly explain materialistic attitudes? We're not sure. What will happen when our children will be able to click on their television screen and go directly to sites that advertise the products that they see in those favorite programs?

Many of us believe that time spent with computers is good for our children, teaching them the skills that they will need for success in the 21st century. Are we right? How is time spent with computers different from time spent with television? Is the time spent with media the key to success, or is the content?

The questions about how media affect the development of our children are clearly important, abundant, and complex. Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are in short supply. Such gaps in our knowledge base limit our ability to make informed decisions about media policy.

We know that media are important. Over the years, we have held numerous hearings in these chambers about how exposure to media violence affects childhood aggression. We have passed legislation to maximize the documented benefits of exposure to educational media, such as the Children's Television Act which requires broadcasters to provide educational and informational television programs for children. We acted to protect our children from harm by passing the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act which provides safeguards from commercial exploitation for our youth as they explore the Internet, a popular pastime for them. But there are many areas where our understanding is preliminary at best, particularly those that involve the effect of our newer digital media. For example, we have passed numerous laws about sexually explicit content, such as the Communications Decency Act, the Child Online Protection Act, and the Children's Internet Protection Act to shield children from exposure to online

content that is deemed harmful to minors. However, we know very little about how this kind of exposure affects children's development or about how to prevent children from falling prey to adult strangers who approach them online.

In order to ensure that we are doing our very best for our children, the behavioral and health recommendations and public policy decisions we make should be based on objective behavioral, social, and scientific research. Yet no federal research agency has responsibility for overseeing and setting a coherent media research agenda that can guide these policy decisions. Instead, federal agencies fund media research in a piece meal fashion, resulting in a patch work quilt of findings. We can do better than that.

The bill we are introducing today would remedy this problem. The CAMRA Act will provide an overarching view of media effects by establishing a program on Children and Media within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This program of research, to be vetted by the National Academy of Sciences, will fund and energize a coherent program of research that illuminates the role of media in children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and behavioral development. The research will cover all forms of electronic media, including television, movies, DVDs, interactive video games, and the Internet and will encourage research with children of all ages – even babies and toddlers. The bill also calls for a report to Congress about the effectiveness of this research program in filling this void in our knowledge base. In order to accomplish these goals, we are authorizing \$90 million dollars to be phased in

gradually across the next five years. The cost to our budget is minimal. The benefits to our youth and our nation's families are immeasurable.

Mr. President, our children live in the information age. Our nation has one of the most powerful and sophisticated information technology systems in the world. While this system entertains us, it is not harmless entertainment. Media have the potential to facilitate the healthy growth of our children. They also have the potential to harm. We have a stake in finding out exactly what that role is. Access to that knowledge requires us to make an investment: an investment in research, an investment in and for our children, an investment in our collective future.

By passing the Children and Media Research Advancement Act, we can advance knowledge and enhance the constructive effects of media while minimizing the negative ones. We can make future media policies that are grounded in a solid knowledge base. We can be proactive, rather than reactive. In so doing, we build a better nation for our youth, and we create a better foundation to guide future media policies about the digital experiences that pervade our children's daily lives.