

WHAT US PARENTS DON'T KNOW ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION USE

Discrepancies between parents' and children's reports

Brigitte Vittrup

Sixty-eight US children (ages 7–9 and 11–13) and their parents were surveyed on the children's television viewing the preceding day, as well as their television habits in general. Both parents and children reported that the children watched about 3.5 hours of television on the preceding day. However, when reporting about the amount, content, and context of the television exposure, there were big discrepancies between parents' and children's reports. In general, children reported being less aware of television rules and watching more age inappropriate programs. In general, parents reported more frequent use of restrictive mediation compared to active mediation. Lower socioeconomic status (SES) parents reported less effort to actively mediate their children's television exposure compared to higher SES parents. Lower SES parents were also less likely than higher SES parents to acknowledge that their children were influenced by the television content. Implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS children; parental mediation; parent–child communication; parent involvement; socioeconomic differences; television influence; television viewing

Since the beginning of television in the 1950s, researchers have been interested in the influences of television exposure. Much of the research conducted on children's television exposure has centered on the amount and content. An often neglected area of discussion when it comes to children's television use is the role of *context*. The way in which children engage with television, as well as the effects of television exposure, may be mediated by the context within which the exposure takes place. Children's engagement with television generally takes place at home, although there is a lack of research on children's screen media exposure outside the home (for example, at a friend's house). Indeed, it is also becoming increasingly more popular for children of all ages to have a television set in their bedrooms. A large study by Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that one quarter (26%) of American children aged 2 to 4 years have a television in their bedroom, and by the time they get to middle school, that proportion increases to 70% (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). In Europe, the numbers are slightly lower; however, a large proportion of European children have bedroom television access as well. For example, according to statistics from the late 1990s, 50% of UK children aged 6–7 years, 32% of Danish children, and 28% of Israeli children of the same age group had TVs in their

bedrooms (d'Haenens, 2001). By age 15, those numbers increased to 75% (UK), 84% (Denmark), and 40% (Israel).

Of particular interest is the extent to which parents are involved with and attempt to influence their children's television habits. Within the family context, children experience media exposure differently than when they engage in solitary media use. Furthermore, the interpretation of television content is highly dependent on the context in which it is accessed. This, in turn, can influence the level of impact such content may have on children's social development, be it positive or negative.

Television has been an important part of family life since the 1950s, especially in families with children, and although video games and computers have grown in popularity and availability over the past couple of decades, television continues to occupy a large portion of young people's free time. As the media landscape has evolved, children's screen media use has changed as well. These changes have reshaped the family context in which various types of media are used, not only in the United States but worldwide. During the first decades of television, families gathered in unison around the medium, which was usually placed in the living room. Most families had only one television set, and there were a limited number of channels to choose from, so many programs were targeted for the entire family, rather than a certain age group (Maccoby, 1964; Paik, 2001). Thus, television watching was, for the most part, a family event. As the popularity of television increased, and the price of television sets decreased, the average number of television sets per household grew, with many children and parents now having a television in their bedrooms (Li, Jin, & Wu, 2007; Roberts & Foehr, 2004; van Zutphen, Bell, Kremer, & Swinburn, 2007). The number of broadcast and cable channels available has also increased, and more than three-quarters of American and German households subscribe to cable or satellite programming (d'Haenens, 2001; *Mediaweek*, 2005; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). In Denmark, Israel, Sweden, and Switzerland, more than half of the population have cable or satellite access, whereas the numbers are lower for the southern European countries (d'Haenens, 2001). With more channels to choose from and more television sets available, parents and children now have the opportunity to watch their favorite programs by themselves.

Older children are more likely to watch television by themselves, compared to younger children who often watch television with parents or siblings. Diaries kept by American children in a Kaiser Family Foundation study of 2,014 older children and adolescents indicated that children older than 7 years rarely watched television with their parents (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). European research found that children were more likely to watch with their parents, especially their mothers, although a substantial amount of children still watched a lot of television alone (Pasquier, 2001). Having access to their own television sets in their bedrooms undoubtedly encourages many children to watch TV by themselves.

Considering the fact that a large number of children and adolescents have television access in their bedrooms, an important question is to what extent parents are aware of their children's television usage. Several studies have found that much of children's screen media use is unsupervised (see e.g. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003a; Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). Thus, unless parents have explicit conversations with their children regarding how much time they spent with television and other screen media and the content of such, parents have virtually no way of knowing about their children's actual media exposure.

Most parents express at least some apprehension about their children's screen use, mostly with television. In a large study by Kaiser Family Foundation, 65% of parents reported being very concerned with children's exposure to inappropriate television

content (Rideout, 2007). However, parents seem to worry less about actual screen time and more about the content of television programs, such as violence, sexual content, and explicit language (Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003; St Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright, & Eakins, 1991; Woodard & Gridina, 2000). Internationally, a concern has arisen about American television programming permeating the local screens and spreading American popular culture among the local youth. The concern centers mostly on the availability of violent and sexualized programming, as well as trends in popular music, body styles, dress, ornamentation, and cultural values (Fass, 2007; Lemish, 2007).

With a relatively large amount of parents expressing some concern over their children's television use, a necessary question is to what extent the parents supervise, mediate, or restrict this usage. There are several ways in which parents can be involved with their children's media use. Three types of mediation have been identified: restrictive mediation, active (or instructive) mediation, and covieing.

Restrictive mediation involves setting rules about children's media exposure (Nathanson, 2001; Valkenburg, Krmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999; Weaver & Barbour, 1992). In terms of television, this would refer to rules regarding how much, what type, and when children can watch. Parents who are concerned about television content tend to make more rules about TV viewing (Bybee, Robinson, & Turow, 1982; Valkenburg et al., 1999; Warren, Gerke, & Kelly, 2002). Parents also tend to impose more viewing rules on younger children than they do on older children and adolescents (Desmond, Hirsh, Singer, & Singer, 1987; Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Warren et al., 2002). Almost 90% of parents of children under the age of 6 years regulate media content, whereas only 46% of parents of teenagers regulate content (Rideout et al., 2003).

The most highly recommended form of parental involvement is *active mediation*, also referred to as *instructive* mediation, which refers to conversations that parents have with their children about the television content (Nathanson, 2001; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Such conversations include discussing, explaining content, answering questions, and providing critical comments. More specifically, it involves three tasks: categorization (defining whether and how the content reflects reality), validation (endorsing or condemning content and character portrayals), and supplementation (pointing out useful information and providing additional information) (Messaris, 1982; Weintraub Austin, Bolls, Fujioka, & Engelbertson, 1999).

Active mediation is sometimes divided into positive and negative mediation. Positive mediation includes pointing out positive messages, highlighting good things television characters do, and agreeing with television messages (Nathanson, 2001). Essentially, positive mediation is interpreted as parental endorsement of the television content. In contrast, negative mediation includes disagreeing with televised messages, condemning behavior of television characters, and explaining that content or characters are not realistic. Thus, the goal of negative mediation is to make children be skeptical and think critically about what they watch and thereby be less likely to accept television content.

A common way for parents to monitor their children's television time is to watch television with them, a mediation strategy often referred to as *covieing* (Nathanson, 2001), or *social covieing* (Valkenburg et al., 1999). Some researchers have further labeled this "unfocused guidance" (Bybee et al., 1982) or "nonrestrictive guidance" (Atkin, Greenberg, & Baldwin, 1991). Unlike active mediation, covieing does not imply that parents and children discuss television content; merely that they are watching the same program in the same room together. Item analyses of various instruments used to

measure parental involvement indicate that watching television with a child is not necessarily related to active mediation strategies, such as discussions and explanations (e.g. Valkenburg et al., 1999). Furthermore, as Nathanson (2001) pointed out, active mediation does not require that parents coview with their children (parents can discuss television content with children before or after they watch it), and coviewing does not necessarily involve any type of active mediation.

Previous research indicates that parents' socioeconomic status (SES) is related to the amount of television children watch. In general, children from families of higher socioeconomic status (SES) spend less time in front of television (Anand & Krosnick, 2005; Woodard & Gridina, 2000). Low-SES families may be more likely to choose television as entertainment for their children because they do not have the resources necessary to give their children access to other social and recreational activities (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995). It has been found that low SES families watch more television in general and are more likely to provide their children with bedroom access (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Sherman, 1996). However, not much research has been conducted on the influence of socioeconomic status on the level of involvement and mediation. In general, it has been found that high SES parents spend more time talking to their children (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995) and, therefore, they may be more likely than low SES parents to engage their children in discussions about television content. Low SES parents may have fewer resources available to engage in appropriate and necessary levels of mediation to shield children from the negative impacts of television exposure. In addition, research shows that low SES parents emphasize authority and obedience, and therefore they tend to be more controlling and restrictive with their children (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995). This likely influences their mediation strategies, and Warren (2005) confirmed that low SES parents reported more frequent use of restrictive mediation than instructive mediation.

The Present Study

The present study was conducted to investigate American children's television exposure from their own perspective, as well as to compare the reports of parents and children regarding children's television use. Four main hypotheses guided the study. First, it was expected that children watched a lot of television alone or with siblings, rather than with their parents. Based on this, it was further expected that parents would lack knowledge of what content their children were exposed to. The third hypothesis posited that there would be discrepancies in parents' and children's reports of the children's television use. Based on previous research, it was expected that lower SES parents would have fewer rules about television watching, compared to higher SES parents. Fourth, due to the more time consuming nature of active mediation, it was expected that the most common types of mediation among all parents would be restrictive mediation and coviewing. Finally, parents' and children's perceptions about television influences were investigated, although no specific hypotheses were formulated regarding this topic.

Method

Participants

Sixty-eight children (forty girls) and one accompanying parent participated in this study. Participants were recruited from a database of birth records kept at a university

laboratory, as well as from local after-school programs. The age division of the children was as follows: seventeen 7-year-olds (25%), fifteen 8-year-olds (22%), three 9-year-olds (4%), twelve 11-year-olds (18%), twelve 12-year-olds (18%), and nine 13-year-olds (13%). For purposes of age comparisons, the 7-, 8-, and 9-year-olds were categorized as *younger* children, and the 11-, 12-, and 13-year-olds were categorized as *older* children.

Of the participating parents, 58 (85%) were mothers. Forty-four percent of the parents did not hold a college degree and had a total household income of less than \$40,000 ($M=\$25,000$). These families were categorized as being of lower socioeconomic status (SES), based on an adapted version of the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1979). The remaining 56% who were college graduates and made above \$45,000 ($M=\$70,000$) were categorized as higher SES. Fifty-one percent of the families were White, 39% were Black, 9% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian. All participants resided in or around a metropolitan city in the southwestern United States.

Materials

Child interview. Children were interviewed with a questionnaire asking them about their television viewing on the preceding day. Previous research indicates that children of the age used in this study are able to reliably report on past events (Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Kemp, 1998). Children were asked when, what, and how long they watched, whether they watched alone or with others, and whether they discussed the content with anybody. They were also asked about their knowledge of television rules in their home and whether they had ever defied the rules.

Parent questionnaire. The parent questionnaire had two parts. The first part was a 25-item questionnaire, asking them to report on the amount and content of their children's television exposure the previous day. They were also asked whether they had watched television with their children and whether they discussed the content. Finally, they were asked questions about the existence of television rules in their home. The second part was a parent mediation questionnaire, which is a 15-item Likert-type questionnaire developed by Abelman and Pettey (1989) to measure parents' level of restrictive and active mediation. On the questionnaire, parents were asked to indicate how often they engaged in various television mediation strategies, such as restricting content, setting specific viewing hours, switching channels on objectionable programs, and explaining the reality behind TV programs and characters.

Procedure

Letters were mailed to prospective participants from the university database, inviting them to participate in the study. The database randomly selected prospective participants that matched the age criteria for the children. The parents then received phone calls several days later, asking if they would like to participate. Children who were in local after-school programs were given information letters to take home to their parents, inviting them to participate. Approximately 45% of the parents recruited from the database participated. Participation rate in the after-school programs ranged from 15% to 30%, depending on the site.

Participants recruited via the database came to the university laboratory to participate. When families arrived to the laboratory, parents were given a consent form, and children were given an assent form. Afterwards, parents were given the Parent Questionnaire and a basic demographic survey to fill out while their children were being interviewed. The children were interviewed in a separate room with the Child Interview form.

Children in the after-school programs participated at the local sites. Parents who indicated they were interested in participating were given an envelope containing a consent form and the Parent Questionnaire for them to fill out at home. Children whose parents completed the forms were given their assent forms and interviewed at the local sites.

Results

Results are presented in the order according to the aforementioned hypotheses, including the amount, context, content, rules, and parental involvement. The final section covers results related to the reported influences of television exposure. An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses.

H1: Children were expected to watch a lot of television alone or with siblings, rather than with their parents.

Amount

On average, both parents and children reported that the child watched about three hours of television on the preceding day (range=1–10; $M_s=3.46$ and 3.25 , respectively). The difference between the reports was not significant, $t(58)=0.58$, $p>.05$.

Context

Forty-eight percent of children and parents reported the presence of a television set in the child's bedroom. Thirty-one percent of younger children reported having a television in their bedroom, compared to 59% of older children. This difference was statistically significant, $t(63)= -2.45$, $p<.05$. According to parent reports, the average age of the children when they got the television set in their bedroom was 6 years ($M=5.9$). A one-way ANOVA revealed that children with TVs in their bedrooms watched significantly more television ($M=2.05$) than children without such private access ($M=1.20$), $F(1, 62)=7.00$, $p<.05$, thus partially confirming the first hypothesis.

Further confirmation of the first hypothesis was obtained from children's reports of solitary television viewing. Only 26% of children reported watching television with their parents on the preceding day. The remainder reported watching alone (34%) or with a sibling (35%).

H2: It was expected that parents would lack knowledge of what content their children were exposed to, evidenced in discrepancies between parents' and children's reports of the children's television use.

Several discrepancies were found between parents' and children's reports of the children's television use. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare

parents' and children's reports of whether the children watched television alone or with their parents. The discrepancy between the reports reached significance, $t(64)=1.92$, $p<.05$. Thirty-four percent of children, compared to 20% of the parents, said they watched television alone. Similarly, only 39% of the children reported watching television with their parents on the preceding day, whereas 60% of the parents indicated they had watched with their children.

There was also a significant discrepancy in the parents' and children's reports of whether parents and children discussed the content they were watching, $t(59)=4.52$, $p<.05$. Sixty percent of parents reported that they did talk about the content, whereas only 32% of children reported having such discussions.

Content

When asked to comment specifically on what programs the children watched the day before, there were vast discrepancies in the parents' and children's reports. Only 27% of the parent-child pairs matched on their reports of what programs the child had watched. In one example, a mother reported that she did not know what her child had watched the day before, and her 11-year-old son reported having watched *MTV Spring Break*. In another example, a mother reported her son watched shows on Cartoon Network, whereas the 10-year-old son reported having watched rap videos on Black Entertainment Television (BET) and *MTV's Real World*.

As Figure 1 shows, young children were more likely than their parents to report they watched cartoons (65% vs. 52%). Parents of young children were more likely to report their children watched movies (23%) or educational programs (16%) compared to their children's reports (3% and 10%, respectively). Compared to their parents, older children were more likely to report watching cartoons (42% vs. 31%), adult entertainment (63% vs. 40%), and reality shows (18% vs. 6%), as presented in Figure 2.

H3: Lower SES parents were expected to have fewer rules about television watching, compared to higher SES parents.

Rules

Overall, the majority of parents reported having set rules about television watching in their home. These rules included restricting certain programs, the amount of television their children could watch, and the times of day when children could watch. Most commonly the latter types of rules were related to children doing chores or homework before being allowed to watch TV. Table 1 shows the percentages of parents setting certain rules, based on children's ages.

As expected, higher SES families were more likely to report having television rules in their home. Ninety-seven percent of higher SES families reported having rules, compared to 86% of lower SES families. The difference was close to statistically significant, $F(1, 67)=2.96$, $p=.07$. In terms of the types of rules, higher SES families were more likely to report that they forbade certain programs (55%) and restricted the amount their children could watch (30%), compared to lower SES families (43% and 19%, respectively). Lower and higher SES families were equally likely to have rules for when their children could watch (37% and 36% respectively).

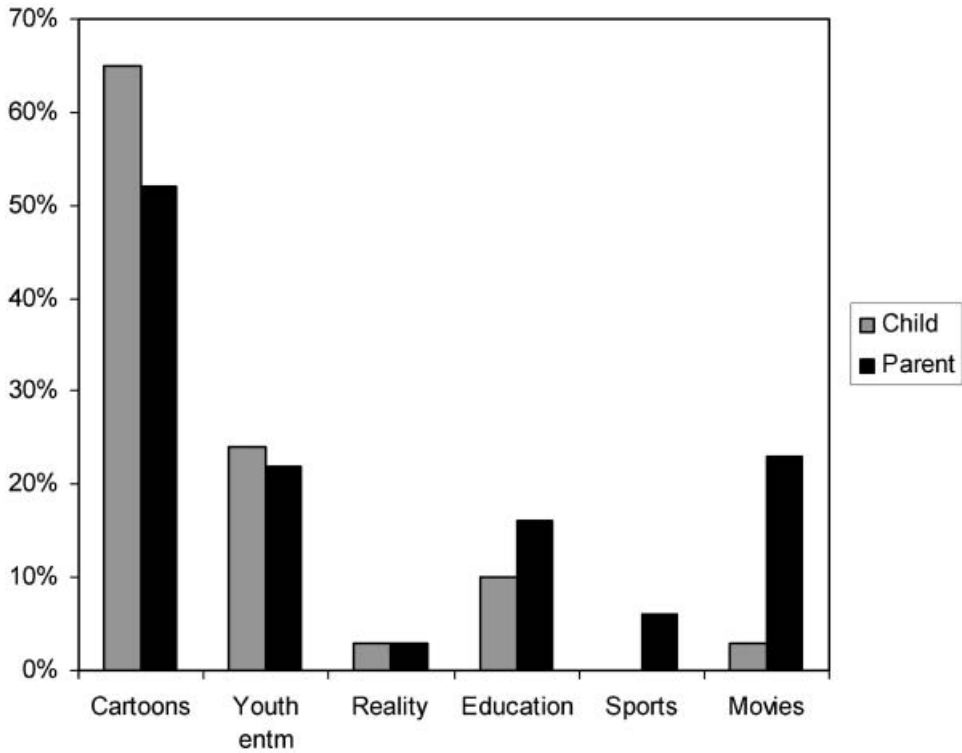


FIGURE 1
Content reports by younger children and their parents.

Overall, the presence of rules was significantly related to the amount of television children watched. A one-way ANOVA revealed that parents who reported having rules also reported significantly less television watching for their children ($M=3.25$ vs. 5.33), $F(1, 65)=5.52, p<.05$. Children’s reports of rules were also significantly related to their reports of television watching, $F(1, 65)=5.07, p<.05$. Children who reported knowledge of television rules reported watching an average of 3.19 hours the day before, compared to 4.17 hours for the children who reported no rules.

Children were also asked whether they ever watched programs that they thought their parents did not know about or did not approve of them watching. Thirty-six percent

TABLE 1
Parents’ and children’s reports (%) of the types of TV rules in their home.

| | Parents | | Children | |
|-------------------|---------|-------|----------|-------|
| | Younger | Older | Younger | Older |
| Amount | 43 | 7 | 19 | 14 |
| Restrict programs | 57 | 41 | 78 | 67 |
| When | 24 | 56 | 12 | 32 |
| Other | 16 | 7 | 24 | 14 |

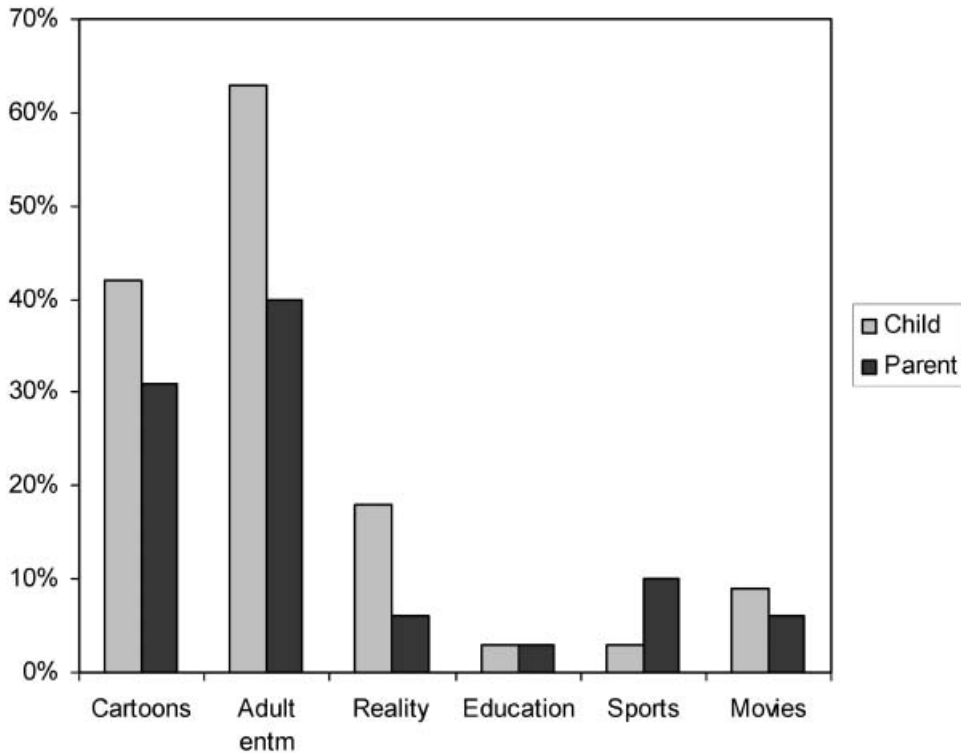


FIGURE 2

Content reports by older children and their parents.

of younger children and 16% of older children reported having done so. The most commonly reported programs in this category were cartoons (54%), movies (23%), reality shows (8%), and youth entertainment programs. Examples of programs included *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Jerry Springer*, *MTV's Real World*, *Big Brother*, and R-rated movies.

H4: It was expected that the most common types of mediation would be restrictive mediation and covieing and that the least common would be active mediation.

A principal components analysis was conducted on the Parental Mediation Questionnaire to determine if the parents' reports of involvement corresponded to the previously identified levels of mediation: active, restrictive, and covieing. The Direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization was used in order to allow for correlated factors. Based on the specification of three types of mediation (Nathanson, 2001; Valkenburg et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2002; Weaver & Barbour, 1992), a forced three-factor solution was chosen. Fourteen of the items loaded significantly on one of the three factors, except for the item related to the use of a program guide, and thus, this item was not included in the factor solution. The factor loadings can be seen in Table 2. The three factors explained 69% of the variance. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the scales were .91 (active), .81 (restrictive), and .64 (covieing). The scale scores were standardized by multiplying each score by a constant to make each of the mediation strategies into a ten-point subscale.

TABLE 2

Factor loadings for the three types of mediation extracted from the Parental Mediation Questionnaire.

| Active mediation | | Restrictive mediation | | Coviewing |
|---------------------------|------|---------------------------|-----|------------------------------------|
| Explain TV commercials | .70 | Forbid programs | .89 | Watch TV with child .80 |
| Discuss character motives | .87 | Restrict TV viewing | .61 | Talk about show while viewing* .64 |
| Point out good things | .89 | Set specific TV hours | .52 | |
| Point out bad things | .78 | Specify what not to watch | .86 | |
| Explain reality behind: | | Switch channels | .71 | |
| character | -.84 | if objectionable content | | |
| programs | -.80 | | | |
| Discuss show before/after | .62 | | | |

*"Talk about show while viewing" was explained to parents as meaning talks about superficial elements, such as plot, character appearance, visual elements, etc. "Use of a program guide" did not load significantly on any of the factors and therefore was excluded from the analysis.

Active mediation scores ranged from 5 to 30 ($M=20.57$, $SD=6.50$), restrictive mediation scores ranged from 6 to 30 ($M=23.97$, $SD=5.87$), and coviewing scores ranged from 9 to 27 ($M=22.06$, $SD=5.57$). Thus, restrictive mediation was reported to be the most common technique.

A 3 (mediation: active, restrictive, coview) \times 2 (SES: low, high) repeated measures ANOVA revealed that SES significantly influenced parental choice of television mediation, $F(2, 65)=7.06$, $p<.05$. The significant differences were found on active mediation, $F(1, 66)=3.24$, $p<.05$, and coviewing, $F(1, 66)=9.70$, $p<.05$. Higher SES parents reported higher levels of active mediation ($M=22.19$) compared to lower SES parents ($M=19.24$), and lower SES parents reported higher levels of coviewing ($M=24.21$) compared to higher SES parents ($M=20.11$). Mediation levels were unrelated to the amount of hours children watched the day before.

A 3 (mediation: active, restrictive, coview) \times 2 (bedroom TV: yes, no) repeated measures ANOVA further revealed a significant difference in parental mediation levels based on whether the children had television sets in their bedrooms, $F(1, 65)=3.09$, $p<.05$. Parents of children with television access in their bedrooms reported lower levels of coviewing ($M=20.82$), compared to parents of children without private access ($M=23.46$). Parents of children with private TV access also reported lower levels of restrictive mediation ($M=22.21$) compared to children without ($M=24.69$), although the difference was not statistically significant. Interestingly, parents of both groups reported similar levels of active mediation ($M_s=20.43$ and 20.57 , respectively).

To investigate child gender and age differences in mediation levels, a 2 (gender: male, female) \times 3 (age: 5, 6, 7) ANOVA was conducted for each of the mediation subscales for both mothers and fathers. None of the analyses were significant. Mediation levels were unrelated to the amount of hours children watched the day before.

Influences from Television

Both parents and children were asked whether they thought the children were influenced by the television content they were exposed to. Seventy-two percent of

parents said they thought their children were influenced. A large proportion of parents (46%) reported that their children would imitate behavior or language seen or heard on television. Some parents also indicated that they thought the children's attitudes were influenced by the TV content (28%), that the children would learn something positive or educational (14%), or that they would be influenced by commercials (12%).

Only 60% of the children indicated that they thought they might be influenced by television. Twenty-seven percent said they learned new words or behaviors from popular characters, and another 32% said they learned something positive or educational.

Younger and older children differed in their thoughts about whether they were influenced. Sixty-six percent of younger children and 51% of older children acknowledged some influence. Many of the younger children (38%) indicated imitation of language or behavior, and 31% said they thought they learned something positive or educational. Only 15% of older children acknowledged imitation of behavior, and 27% indicated that they thought they learned something valuable or educational.

Interesting differences were also found between SES groups. A one-way ANCOVA, with child age as a covariate, revealed a significant effect for SES on parents' reports of whether their children were influenced by television, $F(2, 64)=18.31, p<.05$. Ninety-two percent of higher SES parents acknowledged that their children were influenced, whereas only 48% of lower SES parents thought the same. No SES differences were found in the children's reports of influence.

Summary and Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate discrepancies between parents' and children's reports, as an indicator of how aware parents are of their children's television use. Both parents and children reported that the children watched an average of 3–3.5 hours of television on the preceding weekday. Although many parents reported being involved in their children's television use, results revealed that children in this study were often not monitored by adults when watching television. Almost half of the participating children had access to a television set in their bedrooms, thus making unsupervised screen time more likely. As hypothesized, many children, including the young children, reported watching television alone or with a sibling the preceding day. Interestingly, there were discrepancies between parents' and children's reports, and parents much more likely to report that they watched television with their children and less likely to report that children watched alone. It is important to take notice of this discrepancy and why it exists. Part of the reason for the discrepancy may be due to social desirability. When presented with questions about their involvement with their children's television use, many parents are aware that they should be involved, and they may not want to admit to a lack of involvement, thus choosing to answer in more socially desirable way. There is, in fact, much research documenting the presence of social desirability bias on self-reports (see e.g. Edwards, 1953; Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983). It is also possible that some parents reported watching television with their children if they were present in the same room, whereas the children only reported joint television viewing if their parents were sitting next to them and were engaged with the program.

Children with televisions in their bedrooms watched significantly more TV than those without such private access. This is not surprising, considering that parents of children with television access reported fewer rules, less covieing, and less restrictive mediation. Consequences of solitary viewing are important to recognize when considering

the type of content they may be exposed to and the impact such content may have on their social and cognitive development. If a parent is not around, the children may access inappropriate content. The majority of parents who participated in the Kaiser Family Foundation's *Parents, Children, and Media* survey were convinced that they have "a handle" on what their children are seeing and doing (Rideout, 2007). However, results of this study indicate that this may not have been the case for these parents. Several of the participating children were accessing age inappropriate content, such as *MTV Spring Break*, *MTV's Real World*, *Family Guy*, *Jerry Springer*, and even R-rated movies. Without parental monitoring, there is no opportunity for the children to discuss the content with an adult and receive any explanations or help putting the information into a realistic context. And in fact, only 32% of children reported having had any type of discussions with their parents about the television content. Again, the majority of parents (60%) reported having discussed the content. This discrepancy may also be due to reasons of social desirability on the part of the parents, as discussed above. Additionally one might speculate if the children, particularly the older children, wanted to appear more independent and thus were reluctant to report too much parent involvement. Future research could benefit from investigating these discrepancies further.

Research has shown that when children watch television with older siblings, they often talk about what they are watching; however, the discussions are usually centered on superficial content remarks. Sibling coviewing does not seem to have a positive effect on children's understanding of television content (Haefner & Wartella, 1987; Wilson & Weiss, 1993). Even though older siblings may have a better understanding of the content, they do not voluntarily help their younger siblings interpret the program events. Thus, as indicated by this research, active mediation, either by adults or older siblings, is necessary in order for children to properly process the television content for its intended benefits.

The second hypothesis was related to parents' awareness of what their children were watching. As hypothesized, there were significant discrepancies in parents' and children's reports of what types of television programs the children had watched the day before, indicating that parents lacked sufficient knowledge of the content to which their children were exposed. Only 27% of the parent-child pairs matched on their reports of what programs the child had watched the day before. In some cases, the parents reported knowledge of the channel(s) the children were watching, but not the specific programs. However, in other instances parents reported that their child had watched age appropriate programs, whereas the child reported having watched programs inappropriate for their age group.

Both children and their parents were asked whether they thought the children were influenced by what they watched on television. The majority of parents indicated that they thought their children were influenced, such as imitating behavior or language seen or heard on television. Some parents also indicated that their children's attitudes were influenced by television content, or the children were influenced by the commercials they were exposed to. Only a small portion of parents thought that their children were learning something positive from television. If that is the case, the question remains to be answered as to why parents are not more involved in monitoring and mediating their children's television exposure. Interestingly, the majority of young children stated that they thought they learned something good from television, whereas older children were much less likely to report any positive learning. Young children may view the concept of being influenced by television differently than older children and adults. Whereas older

children and adults may recognize that the influence from television, such as attitudes and imitation of language and behavior, is mostly negative, younger children may see any form of imitation and acquiring new knowledge (whether fact or fiction) as something positive. Much more research is needed on the role of context in determining the outcomes of media exposure.

The majority of both parents and children reported that the family had rules about television watching. Most of these rules were related to programming and content, amount the children could watch, and when they could watch. Many parents required their children to do chores or homework before being allowed to watch. Children in homes with television rules watched significantly less than children from families without such rules.

As hypothesized, higher SES families were more likely to report having television rules compared to lower SES families. In terms of the type of rules, higher SES families were more likely to have rules about programming and content, as well as the amount of TV their children could watch. Similar results were found on parental mediation levels, which was the final hypothesis. Based on previous studies, it was predicted that restrictive mediation and coveiwng would be more common than active mediation. This was the case for the lower SES sample but not for the higher SES families. Lower SES parents reported higher levels of coveiwng, whereas higher SES parents scored highest on active mediation. Similar results were found by Warren (2005). This is not surprising because monitoring children's television viewing and enforcing rules about television exposure takes time. Often, lower SES families are restricted in their amount of time due to long work hours or single parent households. Similarly, they are not as educated as higher SES families, and therefore they may not be aware of the consequences of television exposure, such as the negative impact of violence, promiscuity, and stereotype portrayals that are so common in much of television today (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003b, 2005; *National Television Violence Study*, 1998). This was also evident in the fact that lower SES parents were less likely to acknowledge that their children might be influenced by what they watch on television. Almost all (92%) higher SES parents acknowledged such influence, compared to less than half (48%) of lower SES parents. This difference is possibly due to different education levels, with more educated parents being more knowledgeable about possible effects of media exposure.

Explaining the reality behind media content is considered the best tool for teaching children media literacy (Brown, 2001). Media literacy refers to reflective and analytical understanding of mass media. Media literacy education teaches children critical viewing skills, and it helps them understand and interpret the media content, as well as be skeptical about the reality and the meaning of such content. Lack of mediation literacy skills can leave children vulnerable to negative content from television, such as violence, aggression, and negative stereotypes (Brown, 2001). If children are unable to critically evaluate the source of the content, as well as the reality of the content, they are likely to believe that what is portrayed on television mirrors real life.

Parental awareness and involvement can help to mediate some of the negative effects associated with children's media exposure (Cantor & Wilson, 1984; Corder-Bolz, 1980; Nathanson, 2001; Wilson & Weiss, 1991). Parental involvement can also strengthen positive effects of educational and informational media (Corder-Bolz, 1980; Fisch, Truglio, & Cole, 1999; Mares & Woodard, 2001). Parents can discuss media options and content with their children and teach them about the difference between the media world and the

real world, thus instructing and encouraging media literacy skills. They can also model good media habits (e.g. by spending less time with screen media and by watching appropriate programming, visiting appropriate websites, and playing nonviolent video games). In addition, parents can control their children's media environment by limiting access to the screen media, restricting bedroom access, and determining amount of viewing time as well as content.

With the increasingly violent and sexual nature of many television programs (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003b, 2005; *National Television Violence Study*, 1998), it is even more important for parents to be involved and be knowledgeable of their children's television exposure. In many countries, very few government regulations are in place to regulate television. For example, in the United States, the only content specific regulation deals with the requirement for all television stations to air at least three hours of educational television each week (Center for Media Education, 1997; Federal Communications Commission, 1996). Member countries in the European Union have regulations specifying the availability of nationally or European produced programs versus programs imported from other countries and continents (de Smaele, 2004; Shein, 2004). However, most countries do not have specific content regulations or recommendations for television programs in general, and children's programs in particular.

This study was not without limitations. First of all, results were based on self-reports. As discussed, self-reports carry with them a risk of social desirability responses. Future research may benefit from the use of daily media diaries with more open ended questions. When parents see a list of mediation strategies, they may be more likely to answer that they have used such strategies, because they perceive that it would be important to do so. On the other hand, with more open ended questions about what rules or strategies they use and enforce, part of the social desirability element may be removed.

Another limitation was the fact that the survey only covered television viewing on the preceding day. A more complete picture of children's television exposure would be obtained by having parents and children fill out the survey for each day in a one- or two-week period. Future research should expand the coverage period of the television use.

Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on some important findings about children's television use and their parents' awareness of such. One of the most significant contributions of this study was revealing the discrepancies in parents' and children's reports of what the children watch on television. Most studies on television exposure, especially those involving preteen children, have relied on parental reports. However, this study shows that these reports may not always be accurate. According to children's reports, parents do not seem to be as involved as they report to be. This raises several questions. Are parents' efforts insufficient? Are parents inconsistent in their monitoring? Or is the discrepancy due to parents indicating that they have and enforce media rules because they perceive this as a more socially acceptable response? These are questions that researchers need to investigate.

Prior research indicates that children do listen to their parents' suggestions and follow their advice, especially younger children. Results of this study showed that children whose parents had rules for television viewing watched significantly less TV than children in homes with no rules. Similarly, almost all children (97%) who participated in Annenberg Public Policy Center's *Media in the Home 2000* study (Woodard & Gridina, 2000) reported that they watched television programs that their parents had recommended. Thus, parents do have the ability to influence their children's media habits, and it is important that they

take on the responsibility of monitoring their children's media use. Children's time in front of the television screen is unlikely to decrease as the media landscape continues to evolve and expand, and therefore media literacy skills are of the utmost importance in order to shield children from negative effects of screen media.

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Brigitte Vittrup received her PhD in Developmental Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. She is originally from Denmark and therefore has an interest in internationally relevant research topics. Dr Vittrup conducts research on children's media use, parental involvement with children's media use, and the socialization of children's racial attitudes via media exposure. Previous research also includes parents' and children's perceptions of corporal punishment and the role of children's reactions to discipline in internalization processes. E-mail: Bvittrup@twu.edu

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