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AUTHOR Greenberg, Bradley S.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A generally held hypothesis is that greater family interaction will increase agreement between mother and child on reports of television viewing habits. This initial study sought to determine the extent of such agreement between mother and child, and to analyze the role of frequency of family interaction in their coorientation toward television and toward the use of violence. Interviews were conducted with 85 fourth and fifth grade children and their mothers about the child's exposure to television in general and to violence on television in particular, context of viewing, program selection, perceived reality of television, rules about television watching, perceptions about the amount of violence on television, family interaction, violence justification, and probable behavior in frustrating situations. Results showed that there was relatively strong agreement on only three aspects of the child's television habits--the nonviolent shows he watched and his frequency of watching with either his parents or his friends. Also, there was more viewing of programs considered violent among children who did a significant amount of television watching with one or both of their parents present, and the child more often finds the use of violence justified when the parents watched a substantial frequency of violent programs.
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**MICHIGAN
STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Department of

COMMUNICATION

College of Communication Arts

Project VIM

Violence in the Media

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION BEHAVIORS AS PERCEIVED
BY MOTHER AND CHILD

Bradley S. Greenberg, Philip M. Ericson
and Mantha Vlahos

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CHILDREN'S TELEVISION BEHAVIORS
AS PERCEIVED BY MOTHER AND CHILD

Bradley S. Greenberg, Philip M. Ericson,
and Mantha Vlahos

July, 1971

Department of Communication
Michigan State University

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This study examined the relationship between a child's interaction with his parents, his exposure to violent and non-violent television content, and his attitudes toward the medium. It studied these phenomena from the twin vantage points of the child's description of his own behavior, and a description of that child's behavior by his mother.

A basic methodological concern was to obtain an estimate of the extent of agreement between the two principal sources of information in such research. Some studies rely primarily on data obtained from the child; others on parent data. Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) obtained time exposure estimates from both parties, found them discrepant, and subsequently relied on a combination of parental estimates, aided recall, and whole family interviews. They examined none of their other media variables for possible additional disagreements. Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince (1958) based their classic British study primarily on the responses obtained from questionnaires, diaries and program-recall lists obtained from children. Parental estimates of the child's behavior provided only minimal data. The present study examined extent of agreement across a wide range of television behaviors.

The basic theoretic notion was that extensive family interaction between the parent and the child should result in fewer discrepancies between the estimates made by both about the child's television behaviors. It was posited that if a child and his mother and father interact verbally across a wide range of issues, then the increased awareness of the child's attitudes, interests, etc., should manifest itself in greater awareness of the child's TV habits. In our measure of interaction, we focussed on the child's talking with parents about school matters, about family decision-making situations, and 'just sitting around and talking.'

Here, interaction was considered in terms of its frequency and not in terms of specific content, nor the role of the child in such interaction. In a series of studies at the University of Wisconsin, MacLeod, Chaffee, and Wachman (1967, 1970) have focussed on the kind of family communication which occurs, and have related this to media use and family influence on socialization. For example, in families where the child is exposed to controversial material and is relatively free of social restraints, he is more politically active and more often uses the media for information. This is in contrast to other family typologies they have extracted.

For one of this study's key interests, it was posited that in families where there is extensive interaction between mother and child, the mother and child would have clearer perceptions and/or data on the child's behavior. Thus, if both were asked what the child's favorite programs were, or how realistic television is perceived to be by the child, etc., the answers would be more harmonious than when asked of a parent and child who, by their own reports, interact little. In fact, the latter ought not even agree on the extent to which they interact.

Relating such interaction, regardless of the content of the discussions, to the child's aggressiveness is a more tenuous matter. Basically, we proposed that if a child were exposed to a considerable diet of TV violence, and had attitudes which were supportive of the use of violence in problem-solving situations, then such attitudes would be somewhat ameliorated through extended family interaction. That is, the direction of family interaction would be biased against the learning or reinforcement of pro-violence attitudes.

Finally, this study examined the clustering of television-related behaviors, as estimated by both the child and his mother. It was anticipated that the

watching of more violent programs would be positively related to total television exposure, perceived reality of television, and self-watching, and would be negatively related to such variables as perceived amount of violence on television, and the existence of household rules about television. Rather than a concise conceptual framework for these latter expectations, the study findings were to provide pilot data for subsequent, more precise hypothesis testing.

In summary, this initial study sought (1) to determine the extent of agreement between a mother and one of her children as to the child's television habits; and (2) to analyze the role of frequency of family interaction in their coorientation toward television and toward the use of violence.

METHODS

During the fall of 1970, approximately 100 children from fourth and fifth grade classes in a single elementary school in western Michigan were interviewed. Questionnaires were distributed during normal classtime, explained by the investigator, and completed by the children. The school was purposively selected as a middle-class school, and all fourth and fifth grade children present on the testing day were interviewed, except one class.

The parents of all the children interviewed had been notified in advance of the study, and were asked if they would consent to interviews. This resulted in completed interviews with 85 mothers of the children tested. It is this paired grouping of 85 children with their mothers whose data were analyzed. The mothers were interviewed in their homes on the same day as the children were queried. Of the 85 children, 44 were girls, 41 were boys. Four-fifths of the children were white, and the remainder were black.

Variables. A mother's estimates of her child's viewing habits and TV behavior patterns were obtained in order to compare them to the child's own

estimates. The specific variables and their operationalizations were as follows:

(1) Television exposure. We assessed regularity of exposure to violent and nonviolent shows, and the amount of time spent watching TV on an average week day and on Saturday morning. Respondents identified shows they (their child) watched every week from a list of 10 shows previously judged as having violent content (e.g., Mannix, Hawaii Five-O, F.B.I.) and a list of 10 shows previously judged as having non-violent content (e.g., Family Affair, Hee Haw, My Three Sons). These programs were identified in a study by Greenberg and Gordon (1971). The 20 programs were interspersed in a common listing. Both parent and child estimated how much time, in hours, the child spent watching television on an average week day and on Saturday morning.

(2) Context of viewing. This consisted of five items which asked how often the child watched TV with his (a) mother, (b) father, (c) friends, (d) brothers or sisters, or (e) by himself. Respondents indicated for each question, whether it was always, often, sometimes, not very much or never.

(3) Program selection. These variables sought to determine where the child got information about what shows were on TV, which ones he should watch, and who had the most control over what he watched. The first variable was indexed by asking the parent (and the child) the open ended question: "When your child (you) wants to watch TV, how does he (do you) find out what shows are on? Major responses developed were: TV guide, turn channel, newspaper, memory and mother. For the second measure, respondents indicated whether parents and teachers suggested that the child watch certain shows. The third was based on the question:

"Who has the most to say over what your child (you) watches (watch)--child parent, brother or sister or someone else?" In the analysis, this became a dichotomy between self and other.

(4) Perceived reality of TV. Five items formed this index and measured respondents' judgments as to how realistic TV content is in comparison with real life situations and people. Parents and children were asked such statements as:

"Families I see on TV are just like my family."

"The shows I see on TV tell about life the way it really is."

Response categories were agree, disagree, and not sure.

(5) Rules about TV watching. Four items concerned parental regulation of the child's viewing habits. One item asked if there were any rules about how late the child could watch TV. Another asked if there were some shows the child was not allowed to watch. Two items dealt with the loss of viewing privileges as punishment and extended viewing privileges as reward for something special the child did. All items had yes/no response categories.

(6) Amount of violence on TV. Three items were used to determine how much violence respondents perceived on TV in general, and on shows they liked to watch. For this measure the parent did not estimate the child's response, but gave her own perceptions.

(7) Family interaction. Three items assessed how much and in what aspects the child verbally interacted with his parents. They asked how often the child talked about things going on in school, participated in family decisions and just talked about things. Each item had the foils of very often, sometimes, not very often and not at all.

(8) Violence justification. Four items asked respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as:

"It's okay for a teacher to hit one of her students."

"It's all right if a man slaps his wife."

The four items were summed to create a violence justification index.

(9) Hypothetical situations involving the child's behavior. Respondents were asked to estimate how the child would behave in situations in which (a) another child took something from him, (b) another child started ordering him around, (c) another child his age pushed him down, and (d) he wanted something with which another child his age was playing. Open ended responses were coded as either "verbal," indicating that the child would speak to the other child, or "violent," indicating that the child would react with some physical force toward the other child, or as neither.

RESULTS

Five issues were examined in the data analysis: (1) What is the relationship between the measure of the child's verbal interaction with his (her) parents and the degree of discrepancy between parent and child in estimating the child's television behaviors? (2) To what extent is some particular TV viewing behavior of a child, as reported by a parent, correlated with the behavioral report of the child; (3) What is the magnitude and nature of the differences between the base levels of the behaviors reported by the two sources; (4) Is there some general pattern of discrepancies, i.e., do reported differences in one behavior relate systematically to reported differences in other behaviors?; (5) What television habits are related, according to the child, and then according to the mother?

Family Interaction and Parent-Child Discrepancies

For each of the measures obtained from both the mother and her child, a difference score was calculated. This score was correlated against the family interaction index obtained for both the parent and the child. The general expectation was that the higher the level of family interaction, the smaller the discrepancy between the mother and child in estimating the child's behavior. There was no support for this proposition; across 30 correlations, 15 for the child and 15 for the parent, none achieved statistical significance. Approximately half had positive correlations, and half negative ones. Therefore, the extent to which parents and their child talked about decisions, problems, or anything did not result in a common perception of the child's television habits. Indeed, they did not have very similar perceptions of the extent to which they interacted; the interaction indices correlated only .239 ($p < .05$). The remainder of these analyses then deal with the nature and magnitude of the differences in perceptions between the mother and her child.

Mother-Child Correlations in Reports of Child's Television Behaviors.

Table 1 correlates each of the television behaviors, as described by the mother with the self-description of her fourth or fifth grade youngster.

The general pattern was one of statistical significance, i.e., there was sufficient linearity in the relationships to indicate non-independence. However, the size of the correlations in most instances was small.

In terms of the exposure measures used, the mother and child agreed best on the non-violent television diet of the child ($r = .522$). Indeed that correlation was significantly larger ($p < .05$) than for any other of the exposure measures. Agreement between parent and child on the violent shows watched was

Table 1. Correlations between Mother and Child
in Estimating Child's TV Behaviors
(n=85)

<u>Variable</u>	<u>r¹</u>
1. <u>Exposure</u>	
a. Violent shows watched weekly	.219
b. Non-violent shows watched weekly	.522
c. TV hours/day	.069
d. TV hours/Saturday	.221
2. <u>Context of viewing</u>	
a. Frequency with mother or father	.404
b. Frequency with friends	.382
c. Frequency by himself	.274
3. <u>Program selection</u>	
a. Does mother suggest shows?	.315
b. Who has most to say about what is watched?	.219
4. <u>Perceived reality of TV</u>	.318
5. <u>Rules about TV watching</u>	.190
6. <u>Family interaction index</u>	.239

¹ Pearson product-moment correlations. An r of .213 is significant at the .05 level; an r of .278 is significant at the .01 level.

minimally significant. There was no correlation in terms of how much time the child watched television on an average weekday. Estimates of viewing time on Saturday were marginally correlated.

As to viewing partners, the mother and child agreed best on the frequency with which one or the other parent was present during TV time. Agreement on frequency of viewing with friends was correlated to the same extent. Reliability on self-viewing by the child was substantially smaller than either of these other two viewing contexts.

A positive correlation was obtained between the two data sources as to the extent the child perceived television to be true-to-life, viz a viz the series of reality items.

There existed a moderate correlation as to program suggestions by the mother, but less so for whether the child or others had the most to say about program selection. There was insignificant agreement between the mother and child as to the rules associated with watching television.

As noted in the **last** section, a moderate correlation was found on the family interaction index. There was some, but not very much agreement, as to the role of the child in talking about various issues and problems with the parents.

For non-TV behaviors, there was no correlation between the parent's and child's statements as to the child's perception of the justification of the uses of violence. For hypothetical problem situations, however, mother and child estimates on the frequency of verbal responses correlated .216 and their estimates that the child would make a physically violent response correlated .240.

In summary, there was relatively strong agreement on but three aspects of the child's TV habits--the non-violent shows he watched and his frequency of watching with either his parents or his friends.

Mother-Child Baseline Differences in Reports of Child's Television Habits.

Table 2 presents the means for each of the measures. In this way, it is possible to examine the baselines obtained for each measure and the magnitude of the differences between the reporting groups.

On the exposure indices, the child reported watching 4 of 10 possible violent shows weekly; the mother said the child watched 1.5 such shows. The child reported watching television for 6 hours on an average day; the mother reported 2.5 hours for the child. The Saturday time estimates were equally discrepant.

There was far more agreement on the frequency of watching non-violent shows, with about one show being the difference in the two estimates. Apparently the mother was more knowledgeable of the child's watching of non-violent programs than of his violent program diet or was prone to report it more accurately.

As might be expected, the mother was best able to estimate how often her child watched television with her, or with the other children in the same family. There was no significant difference between the child and the mother in making these estimates. However, in the same vein as the mother under-estimated or under-stated sheer television exposure, she reported significantly less viewing for the child with the father, with friends, and by himself. The grossest discrepancy was with self-viewing. Half the children said that they often or always watched television alone; less than one-sixth of the mothers had that perception of the child's viewing habits.

In program selection procedures, the children were asked, "Do your parents ever suggest you watch certain shows?" Three-fifths of the youngsters responded

Table 2. Mother-Child Discrepancies
in Child's TV Behaviors
(n=85)

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mother's Description of Child</u>	<u>Child's Self-Estimate</u>	<u>(p)¹</u>
1. <u>Exposure</u>			
a. Violent shows watched weekly	1.54	3.93	<.001
b. Non-violent shows watched weekly	4.32	5.73	<.001
c. TV hours/day	2.55	5.88	<.001
d. TV hours/Saturday	2.56	5.06	<.001
2. <u>Context of viewing²</u>			
a. With mother	36%	41%	n.s.
b. With father	22%	48%	<.01
c. With friends	12%	23%	<.10
d. With siblings	78%	76%	n.s.
e. By himself	14%	51%	<.001
3. <u>Program selection</u>			
a. Uses TV Guide	31%	52%	<.001
b. Mother suggests shows	82%	60%	<.001
c. Teachers suggest shows	47%	41%	n.s.
d. Child has most to say about what he watches	29%	46%	<.05
4. <u>Perceived reality of TV</u>			
a. Index of 5 items	8.06	9.51	<.01

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mother's Description of Child</u>	<u>Child's Self-Estimate</u>	(p)
5. <u>Family Interaction</u> ³			
a. Talk about school	81%	53%	<.001
b. Participate in family decisions	35%	22%	<.001
c. Just talk	53%	28%	<.001
6. <u>Rules about TV watching</u>			
a-d. No difference on 4 items			

¹The probability estimate comes from a Chi-Square analysis of the frequency data for the two groups of respondents for each variable.

²Cell entry is percent who said "often" or "always."

³Cell entry is percent who said "very often."

affirmatively, compared with more than four-fifths of their mothers to a parallel question. In reverse fashion, half the children claimed to have the most to say about what was watched, but less than one-third of their mothers agreed. Nearly half of each group said that teachers made program watching suggestions.

How realistic is television for the child? More so than the mother thinks it is. And far more so than the mother's personal perceptions, which were also obtained. The reality index scores ranged from 5-15 across five items, with three response categories each. The mean for the mothers' personal attitudes was 7.10, a clear statement of disbelief in the reality of television. Her estimate for her child was 8.06, whereas the child's own response, a mean of 9.51, was very near the midpoint on the reality scale. For the child, there was neither belief nor disbelief, but uncertainty.

As to child-parent interaction -- talking about school, family decisions, or just talking -- the child perceived about three-fifths as much a role for himself as his mother indicated he had. The mother said "Oh, yes," the child participated heavily, whereas the child denied majority participation.

The mother and her child did not differ in terms of questions about television rules in the household. All of the parents and 90% of the youngsters said there were rules about how late television could be watched; two-thirds of each group said there were some forbidden shows; one-third said there was punishment of the form of not being allowed to watch TV; one-third of the children and one-fifth of the parents said more television watching was used as a reward for good behavior. Although these distributions are very similar, they do not indicate extensive agreement between a mother and her own child. The low correlation (.190) between the two on this index attests to this.

Some non-tabled findings are of interest. In terms of perceived violence, where the parent was giving personal responses, not projective ones, the mothers

said there was significantly more violence ($p < .05$), on television overall, than did their children. In reverse fashion, the children said there was significantly more violence ($p < .01$), on the programs they liked to watch than did their mothers.

As to the measures of when violence is justified, there was counterbalancing differences between mother and child. The child was more likely than the mother to say that it was okay for a man to slap his wife ($p < .001$), and for a mother to hit her child ($p < .001$). The mothers said it was okay for a teacher to hit one of her students ($p < .05$), and for two boys to fight ($p < .01$), more so than did the children.

Relationships among the Mother-Child Discrepancies.

For each variable, the difference between the mother and the child was computed. These differences were inter-correlated to determine if there were any general pattern of discrepancies. The general expectation was that such discrepancies would be non-independent. A mother and a child who disagree on one aspect of the child's television behavior should more likely be in disagreement on other aspects. This was not the case. Across a 16×16 correlation matrix, with 120 possible comparisons, only 12 yielded significant correlations, and eight of those were negative. Although it is of some interest to note that discrepancy in estimating number of non-violent shows watched was positively correlated ($p < .01$), with discrepancy in estimating number of violent shows watched, and with total amount of TV exposure time, ($p < .05$), the more general finding here was one of inconsistency. Mother and child tended to disagree sharply on whatever television behavior was being analyzed, but there was no systematic relationship among the discrepancies across the measures.

Relationships among behaviors.

Here, we shall attempt to summarize our analysis of the inter-correlations among these variables separately for the mother and her child. This will be done primarily in a descriptive fashion, indicating what sets of variables appear to cluster.¹

In terms of the original concern of this project for the anticipated, but unsupported, role of family interaction, one finding is critical: It might well be the capstone for interpreting the perceptions of the mother which are correlated, and the relationships among the child's reported behaviors. For the child, family interaction was positively correlated (.226) with watching TV with his parents; in turn, such watching was significantly related to watching more total television, more of the violent shows, etc. For the parent, extensive interaction with the child was negatively related (-.251) to reported watching of television with the child and with the child's total television exposure. So, the child has said if we talk a lot, we watch a lot together, and the mother perceived the situation to be just the opposite.

Child's reported behaviors. The range of correlations reported here is from .226 to .365.

As the child's weekday TV time increased, his exposure to violent shows increased, as did his exposure to Saturday television, and the frequency of his watching with his parents. With more watching time, there was more perceived reality to what he viewed.

With Saturday viewing, there was more self-watching and an absence of parental suggestions as to what to watch.

¹The full correlation matrix from which these findings were extracted is available from the author.

Another subset of correlations indicates that if the child perceived strong family interaction, he was less likely to give violent responses to hypothetical aggression situations, he perceived less violence on television, was more likely to choose a response of verbal aggression, and was less likely to perceive violence as a justified means of problem solving.

Mother's reports of children's behaviors. Here, one can cluster the major behaviors of the child, as perceived by the mother, around the concept of total TV time, either weekday or Saturday. Positively and significantly related to total exposure was the frequency of watching violent and non-violent shows, watching with parents, the perceived existence of rules about watching, and the reality of the television content.

If the child reported he watched a large number of non-violent shows, the mother said she watched a large number of such shows ($r=.656$), and reported that the child perceived a lesser amount of violence on television.

If the child watched a large number of violent programs, so did the parent in her own viewing ($r=.312$), and the child purportedly perceived more general television violence. This watching of more violent shows was done in the context of more watching with a parent, according to the mother.

When the mother watched a substantial frequency of violent programs, she stated that the child would more often find the use of violence justified and would make more violent responses to specified problem situations.

Across these separate sets of correlations, there was an intriguing consistency to contrast with the significant disagreement as to the role of family interaction. It was in terms of the context of watching violent shows. From both vantage points, there was more viewing of programs considered violent among children who did a significant amount of TV watching with one or both of their

parents present. When much time was spent watching television, a goodly share (by necessity) went to more violent programs. Much of this tended to be family viewing time, rather than self-viewing.

DISCUSSION

A discussion of these findings might focus on these three issues:

(1) Why is there so much disagreement between mother and 10-year-old as to what the child's television behaviors and attitudes are? Who is right?

(2) Given the watching that is done with parents, both with greater total TV exposure and particularly exposure to the more violent shows, what occurs in that context?

(3) What is family interaction all about, if for the child, it is concurrent with more TV watching with his parents, and for the parent, it co-occurs with less television watching?

These questions are not answerable directly from this project, but testify to subsequent research needs.

That the mother and child strongly disagree is apparent. Given this non-concurrence between the two, one would predict an even more dismal situation if data were collected from the father. Does the child overstate television watching because within his reference group, it is prestigious to do so? Does the mother under-estimate the child's television preoccupation, because the mother devalues that activity? One requires an independent assessment of the child's behavior to isolate one or both of these plausible explanations.

Certainly prior research data based on parental reports of the child's behaviors and attitudes must remain highly suspect. Biases which may be present in such reports are unlikely to be self-cancelling. One might expect mothers

to be better reporters for children younger than those examined here, and worse as the child approaches and attains puberty.

If the child does engage in as much watching by himself as he indicates--and there is little reason to associate status with that kind of viewing--this may be a major source of certain of the discrepancies. The mother may not know any better how much or what kind of television is consumed in the context of the child's self-watching. Attitudes toward television and toward program content may be mis-perceived if they are not ever discussed, as also would be the case for the child's attitudes toward the use of violence.

This leads directly to the issue of what goes on while viewing television with one's parents. The parallel question of what goes on while viewing with peers, siblings, or anyone for that matter, is also relevant. Is there any discussion of program, of characterization, of plot? If so, what is the content of the discussion? Is it uni-directional? Which direction(s)? Is there any analysis of the role of aggression or violence during those programs which feature such activities? Is there an examination of the general reality levels of TV dramatizations?

It is here that one might propose to develop an educational effort for young people in terms of how to use the medium of television. And a second effort for parents. The books on the raising of children give little space (most give none at all) to the issue of the media. Yet, television occupies a large portion of one's life space, is absorbed without formal training in its use, and offers few criteria for selecting among its offerings. Of course, the research necessary for indicating principles of television viewing remains largely undone.

One begins to surmise that the family get-together for watching television goes largely unaccompanied by any significant interaction directed toward the

medium. Rather than television viewing providing a surrounding context for talking, it may be the master of the situation, not the servant.

This suggests some reasons why the family interaction measure constructed in this study 'washed out' so completely. It failed to explain discrepancies between parent and child as to perceptions of the child's behaviors. It was not a correlate in its own right of what the child does with the television medium. It did not relate to concepts dealing with the use of violence. The measure, it will be recalled, determined the frequency of interaction between parent and child in terms of talking about school, family decisions, or 'sitting around and just talking about things.' It did not deal at all with the content of such discussions, nor with the role of the child in such discussions, e.g., passive receiver, active source.

The empirical evidence indicates that such interaction, for the child, is intimately associated with watching television with one's parents. The mother claims that such interaction is not only not associated with that context, but occurs in a television-free setting. We may begin to suspect that for the child, sitting around and just talking is a television-related phenomenon. In that case, family discussion might be considered a secondary activity, and in practice be just that. The parent may perhaps envision a situation in which such discussion is the focal point of the togetherness, and not ancillary. All these musings require more precise data than are available at this point. These questions may be paramount: Do children interact with their parents over the content of TV programs? How? Does communication about violent content on TV affect the child's perceptions of and attitudes toward violence?

Perhaps the closing speculation of largest import would be that the American family has not seemingly specified a role for television in the process of family

growth and development. It is just there. Always there. And no one has decided what to do about it, or with it. Oh, there are limits on how much it is to be used, but they probably are observed as much in their non-observance. Television's merits, deficits and utility have not been assessed and implemented in the American home. And yet it remains a central feature of family activity.

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