

# For Parents of young children

## Television and the Child

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

Parents frequently raise questions about television and its effects on their children. They ask: "Is television good or bad?" "How much and what kind of control should I exert over what my children view?" "Can I do anything to influence television programming?"

### Television Is Part of Your Child's Environment

Research indicates that the average school-aged child spends some 22 hours per week viewing television. And some preschoolers spend even more time than that. Over a year, then, children spend more time watching television than they do going to school or pursuing any other form of leisure activity. One observer has suggested that no other activity except sleep consumes so much time as watching television.

Studies of children's viewing preferences indicate that they choose programs that entertain rather than educate. This is not to say that children don't learn from television; entertainment programs do educate them in a certain sense. Children's favorite programs are cartoons, westerns, animal and crime dramas, and family situation comedies. A spring 1966 study in a central Minnesota county showed that commercials are a favorite with preschoolers.

Children spend a lot of their viewing time on programs intended primarily for adults. This amount ranges from perhaps 40 percent of a 6-year-old's viewing time to about 80 percent of a 12-year-old's viewing time.

In terms of time spent and probably in terms of influence, television has to be ranked with family, school, and church as one of the powerful forces shaping our children's hopes, fears, tastes, and ambitions.

### What Does Television Do for Your Child?

Of course there are problems and perhaps undesirable results involved with a child viewing television, but there also are some positive points to consider. For example, some mothers in central Minnesota and the Chicago area felt that television:

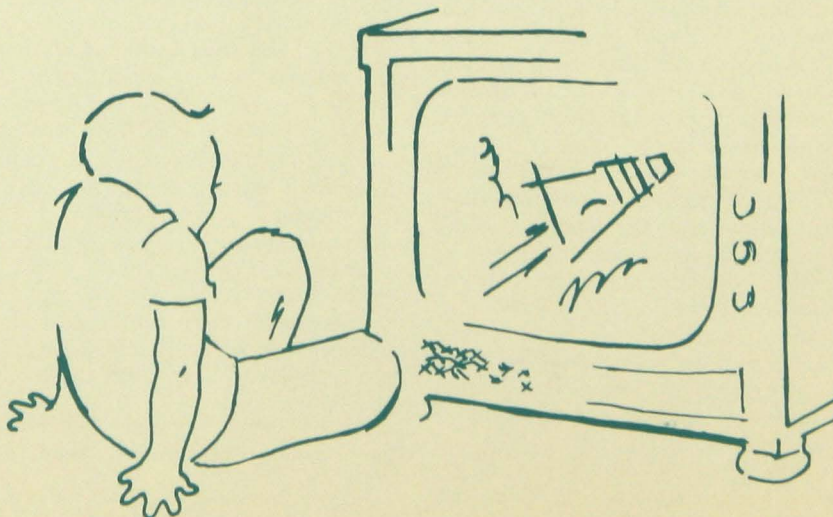
- opens the world to a child.
- is a great educational influence.
- results in better informed children.
- increases children's vocabularies.
- stimulates intellectual and creative activity.
- suggests to children new ways of seeing and understanding life.

What do research studies show and what do professionals in communications, child development, and family life have to say about television as an educational experience? Television appears to enlarge

the vocabulary of preschool children. But any vocabulary differential derived from television soon disappears under the impact of school training, so this language learning does not constitute a long-range advantage. Further, there is some question about the value of the vocabulary a child learns from television. For example, a 5-year-old may ask what "sex appeal" means after seeing the commercial that states, "Beep-beep (toothpaste) gives your mouth sex appeal."

From her study of television viewing and the preschool child, a leading researcher has concluded that never before have preschool children been able to view experience beyond the horizons of those within their own homes. The world they will inherit is brought to them during their early and impressionable years.

As a parent, you should ask yourself: What do I want my children to learn? What beliefs, values, and actions do they learn by watching today's TV programs? Are any changes called for?



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## What Does Television Do To Your Child?

When television began, great hopes and great fears arose concerning what its effects might be. Some believed that it would educate children in the widest possible sense, giving them an opportunity to learn about science and human life in a fascinating way. Others wondered if too much television would damage children's eyesight, if it would keep them from active play, if it would corrupt them with too much crime and violence, and if it would interfere with their studies.

Some of the beliefs of the Chicago and central Minnesota mothers in several studies and the reactions of professional authorities are presented in the following section.

Most of the mothers in the studies thought television had resulted in less book reading. But, according to the authorities, television has not interfered in any substantial way with book reading. However, it has clearly reduced the amount of time children spend listening to the radio and reading comic books.

Many Minnesota mothers believed television interfered with school performance. However, studies in both England and the United States have shown that television has had little effect on school performance. Another common belief of mothers—that television causes eyestrain—is unsupported by research.

Only a few Minnesota mothers thought television taught aggressive behavior to children, though a large number of mothers regarded television as too violent for children. Many writers agree with this latter belief. It is reasonable to expect that a steady diet of fights, gun battles, crime, and violence could teach aggressive behavior to children. Yet it is difficult to separate this influence from others in a child's life. For example, research has shown that the more hours a child spends watching TV, the more likely he is to display aggressive impulses and hostile feelings. But one question remains: Does television make these viewers more aggressive or do those who are already aggressive seek out and enjoy televised crime and violence?

Some recent experiments and studies have suggested rather strongly that viewing aggressive or violent action on television results in aggressive behavior by children. This effect has been found to apply whether the televised behavior is performed by a human or by a cartoon character. And aggressive impulses have been found to occur with girls as well as boys and with teenagers and adults as well as children.

Pertinent questions to ask yourself include: Do I use television as a babysitting device or as an instrument of disci-



pline rather than considering what is best for my child? Do I avoid communicating with my child (or husband) by substituting television? Does my child substitute television to avoid communication with his family or others? Does my child use television as an excuse for not reading, not becoming involved in outdoor activities, or not doing household chores?

## What Does Your Child Do with Television?

We've seen that parents tend to attribute certain evils to television that research does not confirm. Likewise, some of the effects of TV are underestimated, and some of its assumed virtues cannot be supported by scientific investigation. Perhaps in the final analysis we would have to agree with the conclusion of Schramm, Lyle, and Parker's nationwide study, *Television in the Lives of Our Children*: "For **some** children, under **some** conditions, **some** television is harmful. For **other** conditions, it may be beneficial. For **most** children, under **most** conditions, **most** television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial."

The conclusion in the above study and the one agreed upon by most social scientists is that a child is not merely acted upon by television, but that he actively selects from TV that which fits his interests and needs best. So the question is: "What do children do with television?"

What children do with television is determined to a considerable extent by the standards parents provide for their children. Do you discuss the story or meaning of a program with your child? Studies show that in areas where a child does not know his parents' point of view and has little knowledge or experience to use as guidelines, television can clearly

influence his beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Children appear to use television as one of the sources from which they draw material for organizing and interpreting their experiences. They also use it to prepare themselves for their future lives as students, marriage partners, and citizens. In other words, television is part of the total environment that we, as adults, provide for children, and it provides a share of the influence that shapes our children's thoughts and actions. Presumably, then, parents must be concerned about television, take some responsibility for it, and try to evaluate it.

## Suggested Readings

1. Frank, Josette, *Children and TV*, Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 323, 1962.
2. Frank, Josette, *Television: How to Use It Wisely with Children*, Child Study Association Pamphlet, 1965.
3. Orme, Frank (ed.), *Television for the Family: A Comprehensive Guide to Family Viewing*. This booklet is published every year by the National Association for Better Broadcasting and sells for \$1. It contains evaluations of all networks and syndicated programs. Address: 373 North Western Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90004.
4. Pitzer, Ronald L., *Parents, Children, and Television*, University of Minnesota, Agricultural Extension Service Publication FL-29, January 1967. Order from: Bulletin Room, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101.
5. Schramm, Wilbur, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker, *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, Stanford University Press, 1961. (Paperback, \$2.95) Stanford, California 94305.

Parents Newsletter Committee: Sue Fisher, chairman; Ron Pitzer, contributor; Natalie Gallagher; and Caroline Fredrickson.

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