

TV Research: Let's Get Smarter About What Young Children See, Hear and Experience

Oh, parents. Oh, researchers. What are we going to do with you two?

Those are the collective sighs emanating from several new studies on media and young children that appeared last week. One report [chides parents](#) for not knowing enough about what experts recommend when it comes to TV time. Another [takes researchers to task](#) for not paying enough attention to how children are affected by the actual content on the screen -- the language and actions of characters and how their stories are told.

And a third study -- which, tsk, tsk, yet again didn't attempt to analyze content -- showed that [TV viewing in children's earliest years did not appear to have an effect](#) on their cognitive skills at age 3, at least in doses of an hour or less a day. The researchers held up the report as more evidence that putting young children in front of videos will not make them any smarter.

The hidden threads tying these reports together are engagement and interaction. Research in child development continues to point us to the primacy of nurturing, conversation-rich interactions between children and their care-givers, whether in homes, childcare centers or preschools. These are the interactions that one-way media can't provide. And research on the effects of media continues to suggest that parents have a big role to play in choosing engaging and developmentally appropriate content for their children -- and then elaborating on what they've viewed with them, helping them connect on-screen images to the world around them.

In other forums, [I've boiled this down to "the three C's"](#) - suggesting that parents (and educators) keep in mind the importance of content, context, and child when making decisions about media. As I can tell you from personal experience, parents are desperate for better information about what media does and doesn't do for their children. There's more in my book [Into the Minds of Babes](#) (if you'll excuse the plug), but let's unpack these recent studies to get a sense of how researchers and parents consider media and child development today -- and how far we all still have to go.

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Reading for Healthy Families (RFHF) Oregon:
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The journal [*Pediatrics*](#) published two of the studies last Monday. [The study on TV's effect](#) - or lack thereof - on the cognitive skills of 3-year-olds was conducted by researchers and pediatricians affiliated with Harvard University and the [Center for Media and Child Health](#) in Boston. Using surveys of parents and expert evaluations of 872 children over the course of several years, the researchers expected to find a link between television viewing in infancy and a drop in visual skills or vocabulary test scores. But no connection could be detected once they took into account outside factors - particularly the age, education, vocabulary level, marital status, and income of the mothers.

In other words, [mom mattered more than the TV](#). If a parent's education level is considered a good proxy for how much interaction and conversation a child experiences at home -- and most researchers think it is (see [Hart & Risley here](#)) -- then this is essentially a study about the potency of parent-child interactions.

Psychologists at the University of Toledo conducted [the second *Pediatrics* study](#), culling responses to a questionnaire filled out by a small, self-selecting, non-representative sample of relatively well-educated parents of 94 children. These weaknesses in the study's design might lead one to think that these parents, at least, would know the latest guidance from pediatricians on how to use media with children. (The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends [no screen time for children under age 2 and no more than 2 hours a day for those over age 2](#).) The study found that 7 out of 10 parents scored below a 27 percent in their answers to questions about the AAP recommendations and the meaning of TV, videogame and movie ratings - "well below failing," the authors wrote.

It strikes me, though, that there is something unfair about such a survey. Absolutely, parents need to pay close attention to what their children are watching, but answering these questions correctly is not necessarily a good measure of their ability to make good choices for their children. Their poor showing says more about the dismal design and marketing of recommendations and rating systems than anything else.

The most helpful research this week comes from the [April 2009 *American Behavioral Scientist*](#), which devotes its entire issue to reports on how to better study children and media. (One article zooms right in on preschool children, arguing that [media's impact on the youngest populations warrant special attention](#) by researchers. It was written by Dimitri Christakis and Frederick Zimmerman, two pediatricians affiliated with the University of Washington and UCLA respectively.)

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A dose of good common sense comes in [a report by Daniel R. Anderson and Katharine G. Hanson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#). They write that there is still "a dearth of knowledge" about "the cognitive, social, and emotional processes underlying media use or its short-term or long-term implications." Why? Because too many studies focus on the quantity of media consumed over the content of what is seen.

In a few cases, yes, quantity alone matters -- such as when looking at relationships between obesity and sedentary screen time. But too often, they argue, scientists don't bother to ask what messages children might be getting from the screen. That's no different, they say, than predicting poor health by adding up the pounds of food people eat but forgetting to ask what *kinds* of food were consumed.

"A pound of broccoli has far different short- and long-term health consequences than a pound of doughnuts," Anderson and Hanson write. "We believe that the diet metaphor is appropriate to research on the influence of media."

It's worth considering whether this diet metaphor might work for children's environments of all types. Let's not consider only what children see on TV but what they experience in preschool classrooms and childcare centers and at home. Too often we see studies or policies that lump pre-K, Head Start or childcare centers in one category -- as if every early childhood program offers exactly the same experience.

Instead, the real impact derives from the blending of playtime, instruction, curricula, content, expectations, and personalities that lead to rich engagement and valuable interactions. The more we are able to consider and appreciate these different ingredients, the better the research - and by extension, we hope, the outcomes - will be for the children who take them all in.

Guernsey, Lisa (March 9, 2009). *Early Ed Watch: A Blog from New America's Early Education Initiative*.
<http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogmain>

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