

THE WIRED WORLD OF FAMILIES: YOUTH, THEIR PARENTS AND THE MEDIA

A SURVEY OF MEDIA, YOUTH, AND THE PARENTS AND RULES THAT GUIDE THEM

by Nicole Whitefield and Kelly Schwartz

Our kids – and parents, too – are exposed to more and more media: Radio, television, games, and the Internet. It’s everywhere: At work, in schools, in our cars, and in our pockets. Our homes are no exception – when’s the last time you recall not turning on the radio, CD player, or TV, to “fill the silence” if nothing else? In the United States, it is estimated that youth aged eight to 18 are spending at least eight hours each day with media.¹ And never forget the ability to multi-task: Your teen may listen to that MP3 player while surfing the Internet, too. This paper chronicles media use and how parents attempt to monitor their kids’ media lives. If the battle appears difficult, take heart: There is evidence that vigilant, intentional efforts on the part of parents do lead to more responsible media use.

Reports show the following approximate usages of different media for kids in the United States between eight and 19 years of age:

Considered separately, the numbers are not that daunting, but when combined the range of media use is somewhere between five and over nine hours daily. And as if that was not enough: At least one report indicates that about one quarter of children and youth wish they could spend more time playing, surfing, and watching.¹⁰ In short, if your teen says he doesn’t have time to do his homework, consider turning off even one of the multiple media sources.

Home wired home

Naturally, kids don’t come to this kind of life all by themselves. In addition to providing their children with an environment that is saturated with media, parents are modelling heavy media consumption; they themselves watch at least two hours of television daily.¹¹ In a 2005 study, half of households surveyed reported that the television was “usually on” and was on during mealtimes in about 60 per cent of family homes.¹² They found further that only one per cent of Americans do not have a television in the home, 83 per cent had one or more video game consoles, and 86 per cent had one or more computers in the home. Sixty-six per cent of youth reported having a television set in their bedroom while 59 per cent said that their bedroom contained a video game console. When the television was “always on” a positive correlation was found with increased overall media use.

The Modern Family and Media

Television viewing	Between 1.5 and 3 hours daily ^{2,3}
Computer time	Between one and 2 hours daily ^{4,5}
Internet use	About one hour daily ⁶
Radio, CDs, general audio media	Between 42 minutes and three ^{7,8} hours daily
Video games (differs greatly by age and gender)	On average, just under one hour daily ⁹

The approximate amount of time spent with various media. Compiled from multiple sources.

Studies show that when youth have access to the mass media in the bedroom, media use increases by about five hours per week.¹³ In spite of the fact that parents probably purchased the additional set for their kids' bedroom, they are troubled both by the amount of time spent as well as the content. A 1999 study looked at Dutch parents' greatest concerns regarding the effects of their children's exposure to television content.¹⁴ They found that parents were most worried about television content that was violent or scary, and further reported feeling concerned that this content could induce aggression and fright in their children. Similarly, a 2007 study revealed that parents in the United States were most concerned over the sexual content of the media that their children were exposed to, but were also concerned about exposure to violence, adult language, and the influence of advertising. In fact, about half said that they were "very concerned" about the inappropriate content of the mass media. Twenty percent of parents felt that their children were exposed to "a lot" of inappropriate content and three quarters said that this exposure was either a big concern or their top concern as a parent.¹⁵

Parents also perceive a causal link between media exposure and their child's behaviour; that is, that media content is singularly contributing to changes in their child's behaviour. For example, between 44 per cent and 53 per cent felt that their child's media exposure contributed "a lot" to their child's sexual and aggressive behaviour. When it came to the Internet, parents were concerned about the sites their children were on, the giving out of personal information, and the sheer volume of time spent online. Similarly, video game content and the amount of time spent playing have been reported as being an issue for parents.¹⁶ Thus, parents appear to feel that there are detrimental effects to media use and a great deal of research suggests that their concerns are justified.

The media rules

Of course parents regulate their children's media use – at least so they say. One form of regulation is to restrict their children's access to media. This involves having rules in place regarding content, time, and so on. Other parents may discuss the media with their children, while still others watch with their children. One study found that parents will preview some movies prior to allowing their children to view them.¹⁷ A 2002 study found that 15 per cent of parents said they "always" use the television ratings as a guide for their children's viewing content, while 55 per cent reported "always" watching with their children.¹⁸

Parents also report restricting how much time is spent with the media. Fifty-five percent of parents reported having household rules regarding the amount of time spent playing computer or video games, 58 per cent said that they had time limits on television viewing, while rules about when television viewing could take place were reported by 74 per cent of parents.¹⁹ Another study found that 88 per cent of parents said that they had programming rules in place at home for their children.²⁰ Based on parental reports of house media rules, it appears that parents are more concerned over the content of the media than they are about the amount of exposure.

Parental monitoring vigilance, however, might be specific to the sources of media and/or familiarity with third-party rating systems. For example, only a quarter of parents said that they always checked the video game ratings, a similar percentage could name any of the television ratings, while another 21 per cent reported that they had never heard of the rating system.²¹ Even those who use rating systems are not convinced of their utility. Of those who had used video game ratings, only 58 per cent found them "very useful." Movie ratings and music advisories were reported as being useful by 53 per cent and 56 per cent of parents, respectively, while 49 per cent reported television ratings as being useful.²²

Just checking the ratings, however, is not enough – media monitoring requires an active and intentional parental role. For example, in January 2000, U.S. television manufacturers

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were required to install V-Chips, a little bit of technology that allows parents to block programs based on ratings as they see fit, in all new television sets larger than 13 inches. But less than half (46 per cent) of parents who acknowledged their TV was equipped with this device said they had ever used it. Excuses for parents who had not used it included saying there was always an adult nearby (50 per cent), their children would likely find a way around it (20 per cent), or that they felt that their children would make appropriate choices (14 per cent).²³

Watching our children watch

Interestingly, several studies are now finding children's reports of parental restrictions to be much lower than the parents' reports. In one 2006 study of children aged eight or older, 61 per cent said they did not have rules about television viewing. These children kept diaries of their media consumption and also reported that 95 per cent of the time their parents were not watching television with them. Some parents have even reported that they do not have any media rules.²⁴

Parental reports of monitoring differ from children's reports as well. David Walsh and colleagues highlighted the fact that two-thirds of parents reported limiting how much time could be spent playing video games but only one-third of their children reported any such restriction. The use of ratings for video games was also found to differ between parents and their children. Only 30 per cent of children reported that their parents regularly checked the ratings on their video games, but 72 per cent of parents reported doing so. Twenty-five per cent of children reported that their parents never helped them decide which video games to play whereas only one percent of parents said that they never did. This discrepancy was found again when parents and their kids were asked whether they engaged in discussions about video games. Five percent of parents said that they never engaged in these discussions versus 51 per cent of children saying the same.²⁵

SEVERAL STUDIES FIND CHILDREN'S REPORTS OF PARENTAL RESTRICTIONS TO BE MUCH LOWER THAN THEIR PARENTS

Keeping up online

Compared to television, computers and the Internet are relative newcomers on the home media scene. In one study, half of British parents surveyed reported regulating when the computer could be used – only one-third of youth reported the same. Most parents (88 per cent) said that they asked their children what they were doing online, but only 25 per cent of children reported that they were ever monitored. Similarly, reports of parents being in the same room when the Internet is being used were discrepant, 50 per cent of parents versus 22 per cent of youth.²⁶

Monitoring computers and Internet is qualitatively different than any other media source. Parents report checking their children's Internet history, keeping an eye on the screen, having the computer in a public place within the home, filtering systems, and monitoring software. Parents also use Internet filters, especially if they themselves are frequent Internet users. But even these attempts may be thwarted by youth, as they also report still playing video games of which their parents would disapprove and many of them report that they have ways to get around the rules. They hide their Internet activity through renaming files, deleting their computer history, or minimizing windows when parents are present. Thus, even the best intentioned parents may be up against both technological and secretive prowess of their adolescent media consumers.

PARENTS REPORT CHECKING THEIR CHILDREN'S INTERNET HISTORY, KEEPING AN EYE ON THE SCREEN, HAVING THE COMPUTER IN A PUBLIC PLACE WITHIN THE HOME, FILTERING SYSTEMS, MONITORING SOFTWARE AND USING INTERNET FILTERS. BUT EVEN THESE ATTEMPTS MAY BE THWARTED BY YOUTH, WHO REPORT PLAYING VIDEO GAMES OF WHICH THEIR PARENTS WOULD DISAPPROVE

Parental monitoring: Who, what, and how well?

Many factors influence media monitoring by parents. Homes are more likely to have program rules when children personally own fewer media sources, when parents earn more, when there is a higher level of education among parents and where there are older children in the house.²⁷ Parents who have positive attitudes towards television are also more likely to make rules than parents who report that their children have imitated aggressive behaviour previously seen on television. Additionally, parents who have program rules are more likely to co-view with their children.²⁸ Co-viewing tends to be more common than both restrictive and evaluative mediation. In homes where the families are altogether more careful about electronic and print media use, the tendency to monitor children's media use carefully is more common. These parents are also more knowledgeable about media, more likely to participate in alternative activities, and more likely to be consistent with media rules.

Research suggests responsible parental monitoring leads to responsible media use. For example, youth who self-reported less overall media exposure also indicated that the media rules were highly enforced.²⁹ This is important to consider in relation to the low reports of media rules by youth. In this same study, Donald Roberts and colleagues found that children and adolescents with parents who intentionally and regularly enforced the household rules with respect to media, watched less television, played fewer video games, were on the computer less, and perhaps not surprisingly, engaged in more reading and viewed more movies and DVDs. Television rules, of all other media-related rules, seemed to be the most important predictor of less overall media exposure.

A 2007 study looked at the mediating styles of parents and the relationship to school performance and media use.³⁰ Results showed that the higher achieving students typically had parents who were more likely to use content ratings and who engaged in evaluative mediation regarding media content. That is, these parents were more likely to discuss the media content with their children. These youth consumed less media relative to lower achieving children whose parents used a more restrictive style of mediation. The lower achieving students tended to have rules in place governing the time and content of their media use. Due to the fact that these children were heavier consumers of media, one may question how well the rules were being enforced.

Do we know what we don't know?

While we know a great deal about media use in general, there is very little research detailing how youth feel about their parents' media habits. How do youths' perspectives of their parents' media use influence their own media behaviour, especially if there is media hypocrisy at

work in the home? For example, if youth think their parents are heavy media consumers this may serve as a lifestyle model. Further, if parents are restrictive in their children's media content but are perceived by their children as not following those same content rules, the children may be more likely to seek the restricted content. Finally, we might ask if parents simply assume the rules are being

followed, the consequence of which is either deceit or minimally creative concealment on the part of their adolescents? If so, we should ask how parents are monitoring or regulating their children's media use.

The discrepancy found between reports on the amount of time children spend using media and home regulations surrounding this use also requires further study. In particular, self-reporting may mean parents say what they think they should do rather than what really is happening. And since there's been a great deal of discussion surrounding the negative impact that media use can have, especially on youth, parents may feel pressure to restrict and monitor their children's media use. This may lead to less accurate reports of youth media use and parental regulation.

VIGILANT, INTENTIONAL EFFORTS ON THE PART OF PARENTS DO LEAD TO MORE RESPONSIBLE MEDIA USE

Ultimately, however, it's clear that vigilant, intentional efforts on the part of parents do lead to more responsible media use. More reciprocal media engagement – parents monitoring youth and youth holding parents accountable for their media use – on the part of the whole family may serve to reduce both the effects of that media and the overall tenor of media management within a household. Families today are stressed for time, to be sure. But maybe turning off the television, the radio, the computer and the iPod might bring back a culture of family communication – even if only for one or two of those nine media hours per day.

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endnotes

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