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ABSTRACT

A brief overview is presented of the effect of television viewing on the cognitive and affective learning processes of young learners and on the growth of the social interaction skills of this same viewing audience. The main conclusions of the report are that (1) the effects of television viewing are complex and are both positive and negative; (2) these effects vary from age group to age group, and among the different forms of learning; and (3) the medium offers a unique, attractive opportunity for the education of young children provided that educators, parents, and producers act in a responsible manner, not only in the viewing process and content themselves, but in the development and education of the child in nonviewing time. (MB)

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WHAT EFFECT IS TV HAVING ON THE YOUNG LEARNER?

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What effect is TV having on the young learner? The question can be answered in either a short form or a long form--somewhat similar to our income tax forms. The short form answer can be stated in two ways. One way is suggested by the New York Times review of a new book about television and children called "The Plug-In Drug" in a headline which asks, "A Hole into Hell?" It implies the position that children learn nothing from TV, or that what they learn is all bad. The other short form answer is the exact opposite. It claims that TV children these days are infinitely smarter and more advanced than pre-TV generations, and that schooling takes a back seat in children's learning.

Although it's tempting to use the short form when doing your income tax, the more complex and more aggravating 1040 long form does give a truer picture. And so it is with children and television.

When we look at the growing body of information on the subject from both research and empirical findings, it begins to resemble a cubist landscape. We see different facets in juxtaposition, affecting each other, all in some valid way, yet offering no simple, definitive picture.

The positions of pro-TV and anti-TV forces are both present, locked in intimate, if uneasy embrace. I'm confident that we, as educators, can live with this complexity and try to deal with it. In fact, I expect we would be very suspicious of any simplistic, definitive answer to the question of the effect of TV on young learners. Probably, we immediately edit the question to include a broad range of "effects," (plural) and an even greater diversity of young "learners," (also plural)

In discussing our basic question, there are three facets to be considered. First, the impact of TV on children's cognitive learning. Second, the impact of TV on their affective learning. And third, the socializing effect of TV on young learners.

In considering TV's impact on children in the early and middle years, it is necessary to take into account all television: commercial TV, public TV, and instructional TV; to consider not only children's programs but also the adult programs which they watch; and the inescapable commercials of American television, because they see it all.

Cognitive Learning

Early research efforts were designed to measure rather limited informational items. Scores from TV and non-TV instruction were frequently compared. In summary, the findings indicate that TV learning of this nature is equal to, or slightly superior to, non-TV instruction.

One finds little, if any, controversy about the efficacy of TV for enhancing learning for elementary school children in the middle years. But there is considerable ferment about the role of TV in concept development and cognitive learning by young children from two to seven or eight years of age.

Learning theory emphasizes the centrality of the sensory style of learning in very young children. The seminal work of Piaget makes clear that many diverse and related concrete experiences are required for young children to develop reliable concepts about their world.

Milton Schwebel supports this view saying, "It is absolutely necessary that learners have at their disposal concrete material experiences (and not merely pictures) and that they form their own hypotheses and verify them (or not verify them) themselves, through their own active manipulation. The observed activities of others, including those of the teachers, are not formative of new organizations in the child."

It would be simplistic to place the entire burden of the learning process on direct experience. While the very young child depends primarily on his active structuring in a complex, real environment for building concepts and understanding relationships, some stimulation does come from TV viewing. What we need to pay serious attention to is the nature of the TV stimulation and how the very young child's behavior can be affected by it.

In this connection, Werner Halpern, Director of Children and Youth Division at the Rochester, N.Y. Mental Health Center reports on observations of children under three years of age who were brought to a child guidance clinic with a variety of disturbed behavior symptoms which were directly traceable to the TV program, "Sesame Street."

He asks the question, "Why should toddlers be especially vulnerable to the type of sensory bombardment that emanates from many ads on commercial TV and from portions of "Sesame Street" or other programs?

Accepting the fact that sensory stimulation within reasonable limits has a beneficial effect on muscle tone and alertness of youngsters, he states that "...a sensory assault, however, heightens tension to levels of great discomfort. It interferes with the ability to maintain attention and greatly interferes with perceptual readiness."

He further states," Sesame Street's use of intense visual and auditory patterns to capture attention, its rapid perceptual shifts through the use of zoom lenses and quick dissolves and its studied avoidance of time lags between messages strongly interfere with the emergence of the perceptual readiness state, (and that) the two-year-old's neurologic equipment cannot easily encompass the quick adjustments necessary for dealing with or screening out fast-paced electronic stimulation of some of TV's animated antics."

In summarizing these comments about the impact of TV on children's cognitive learning, it would seem that, while the picture is clear for older children, it is still highly problematical for the youngest viewers, the two- and three-year olds.

Parenthetically, the seapration of cognitive from affective learning is made only as a convenience for emphasis. Of course, all learning is basically entwined and has components of intellectuality and emotionality. With this in

mind, we can examine the second facet of our question about the effect of TV on young learners.

Affective Learning

In the early days of TV for young children, little attention was given to consciously incorporating the subject matter of emotions and feelings either directly or by implication. Yet, in my opinion, one of the most appealing qualities of TV is that it can do an excellent job of revealing feelings of real people, in both verbal and non-verbal terms--feelings of real people living real lives.

Through television, you can "put yourself in another person's skin" and empathize with that other person. This is particularly significant for the younger children who are trying to manage that crucial aspect of their growth--that painful, yet necessary, step of relinquishing some powerfully egocentric behavior in favor of behavior more acceptable to other people.

In addition, television can help children talk about feelings and emotions. On this score, it holds one important advantage. It avoids a head-on confrontation with personal, emotional content, but, at the same time, it opens the door for the child, himself, to make the connection between the TV situation and its personal meaning for him.

In order for TV to serve the interests and needs of children in the affective sphere, it must deal with the whole, broad range of feelings and emotions that young learners are trying to cope with and understnad. Many a child wonders if he, alone, has secret thoughts and feelings of anger and love, of jealousy and fear, feelings about loss and death. Television can show him how natural these anxieties are and how others try to cope with them. It not only can, but it should!

Socializing Factor

The third facet of our question concers television as a socializing factor in children's lives. This is, no doubt, the area which has commanded the most widespread discussion, has generated the most heat, and has engaged most of the research efforts.

In this area, too, a noticeable change is taking place. Until recently, the question of the effect of TV violence on children has been one of the most widely studied and discussed aspects of television.

The massive report of research, popularly known as the Surgeon General's Report, as well as subsequent research, offer relatively consistent findings. The evidence is now sufficiently strong to state that televised violence can, and, to some as yet unknown extent, does, promote aggressive behavior in children and adolescents.

Now researchers seem to be shifting their interest from the subject of TV violence to the study of other potential socializing influences of TV. One interesting study of nursery school children by Lynette Friedrich and colleagues

used "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood" as the pro-social TV content. They found significant gains in pro-social play which followed the viewing. Children showed more persistance in their tasks and greater ability to carry out responsibilities without adult intervention. Cooperative play increased as did their ability to express feelings and to show increased sympathy and help for other children.

Other researchers are studying the same question of the effect of pro-social content from TV on young children. (Liefer) All of them demonstrate some effect of pro-social programming, but they are limited effects. In general, young children remember pro-social content and acquire specific behaviors which they will then perform in situations which are quite similar to those on TV. However, unlike their reactions to aggressive TV material, they do not seem to generalize readily from specific pro-social TV material to pro-social behaviors in situations that are not similar. One might speculate on the reasons for this difference, or one might be curious enough to do some research on this question.

As the focus of research in this country shifts to the positive socializing impact of TV on young children, it's interesting to see how this same interest is reflected in many other countries. At a recent international conference on TV in Munich, there were representatives from Eastern Europe and Western Europe, from Scandinavia, from Britain, Japan, the U.S. and Israel. They summarized research in their countries related to TV, children and the socialization process in the family

There was one recurring theme, expressed in many ways in these voices from many countries. They said that studying the socializing influence of TV on the child in isolation from all other factors that may influence him (such as his family and other primary non-family persons) is a grossly inadequate approach. They stressed the need to give up single-causal explanations in favor of a multi-variant approach. They warned that we must not be trapped into a narrow, "one-to-one" cause and effect relationship between TV and children's socialization. That is an important caution for all of us.

We have been taking a capsule look at TV as a socializing factor in children's behavior. It might be well to shift the angle slightly to bring into focus the people, or models, who are demonstrating the anti- or pro-social behavior that we are talking about. Undoubtedly, the significance of TV for both younger and older children rests, in part, on its ability to provide models for their identification and imitation. Of course, live people who mean something to them have an infinitely greater influence as models, but TV models are not insignificant.

In this connection, an ingenious study was carried out by Baron and Meyer. They posed a morally ambiguous problem and asked children to give their own solutions. Then they asked the children how their favorite TV character would solve the same problem. There was extensive agreement between the two solutions, indicating strong identification with the TV model.

Uri Bronfenbreener has a theory that children are turning more and more to peers and TV characters as behavior models for identification purposes. When you look at some of these popular TV models, it's enough to make your hair curl! Who are they these days: The Six-Million-Dollar-Man? The Bionic Woman? The clever private eye who, to say the least, bends the law and relies on increasing graphic violence to see "justice done?"

And what about the roles of men and women? It's no secret that the TV screen is a sexist screen where men are not only more evident, but also superior. Even a cursory view of the whole spectrum of television shows how TV programs and commercials bombard children with stereotypes of national and ethnic groups.

It is interesting to note an excerpt from a petition to deny the license renewal of a Los Angeles TV station. It zeroes in on this very point. Their reasons were that "The programs deprive all children of the community of opportunities to view any meaningful inter-relationship between Black, Mexican, Oriental, Indian and White children or adults. That is not an unfamiliar picture on TV."

However, it is also important to note that public broadcasters and producers of instructional programs, in partnership with concerned educators, are increasingly alert and sensitive to their responsibility to paint a different picture. Many of them are committed to support the principle of cultural pluralism. They are committed to our common concerns as human beings and to the value we place on the differences which enhance the strength and diversity of the American people.

Can programs based on the value of cultural pluralism have any effect on children? There is an encouraging note from George Comstock, senior social psychologist at the Rand Corporation. He states that "the accumulated evidence suggests that TV not only affects the beliefs and the behavior of young persons, but that TV affects attitudes and information especially when there is no first-hand experience with the people or subjects on the part of the young viewer."

Considering the widespread "ghetto-like" patterns of living space and social contacts in our country, it may well be that TV is the one, easily available channel for cracking some of the pervasive stereotypes and prejudices that soil our human environment. That, in my opinion, is worth spending millions of dollars for!

If we summarize the findings of the effect of TV on the young learner from research and empirical evidence, we can say that TV not only can but does have an effect. It does support cognitive learning, albeit more effectively for the older youngsters. It does have an impact on their affective learning, both positive and negative. And TV does play a part in influencing their socialization process.

The influence of TV violence is rather clear and shows not only that it can stimulate aggressive behavior of certain children, but that those exposed to TV violence are slower to seek adult help when witnessing real violence among other children. In other words, continued exposure to TV violence is teaching children to accept aggression as a way of life in real life.

Information about the impact of pro-social TV is still rather sketchy, but promising. With the growing research interest and concern for pro-social impact, we may have a clearer image in the next five years.

Can we, as educators, working in consort with concerned TV producers, pre-program the effect which a TV event will have on young learners? I hope you won't be disappointed, but the answer is "no." We can stack the cards. We can, with artistry and subtlety and compelling drama provide the raw material for a positive effect. But we cannot assure the effect. It is not like being able to predict accurately that, if you add enough lemon juice to warm milk, it will curdle. It's not that way with children.

Each child screens what he sees on TV through his own prism. He views selectively; he interprets through his own conceptual schema; he projects his own personal meaning onto what he views.

The effect of the program is more the work of the viewer than of the producer. I always think of this aspect of TV as the "Rashoman Effect." You may remember how, in that famous Japanese film, the meaning of the action changed significantly in the eyes of each beholder.

However, the law of possibility is still on the side of the responsible educator, the responsible parent, and the responsible producer. When it's good, the TV medium does offer us a unique and attractive handle for assisting in the education of young children.

I feel strongly that the effect of TV on young learners has only its beginnings with viewing programs. The real impact is what happens afterwards. And that can be greatly influenced by how we, as educators and parents, use TV with young learners.

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