



The Medium Is Not the Message

Parents, educators, and policymakers continually express concern over children's exposure to media and the potential negative effects such exposure can have on children's development. In the minds of many adults, media use is often associated with children's increased aggression, inability to focus attention, and potentially risky behavior. Although research suggests that these popular assumptions are in some cases supported, this is not always the case.

In *The Future of Children* volume "Children and Electronic Media," researchers repeatedly emphasize the importance of considering content when assessing how media affects children. Certain media content is educational and can be associated with positive outcomes for children, while other media content is harmful and can be associated with negative outcomes for children. Although the amount of time children spend engaged with media is important, assessing the effects of children's media consumption must go beyond simply calculating the number of hours they consume. At the end of the day, what matters most is the content.

Examples of negative outcomes include:

- In a 2007 study, Frederick Zimmerman and Dimitri Christakis report finding links between high doses of entertainment television before the age of three and attention problems five years later.
- A few experiments using control groups show that repeated exposure to television violence increases people's fear of victimization.
- Some research suggests that extensive viewing of television violence can alter children's views about the acceptability of violence and perhaps even hinder the development of their moral reasoning.
- Longitudinal research has linked heavy exposure to television violence in childhood to increased social aggression in adult females, even after controlling for childhood aggression, childhood IQ, parental education, parental TV habits, and the socioeconomic status of the family.
- Brad Bushman and Craig Anderson compared the effect of television violence on aggression with other well-established connections in the medical field. The television violence-aggression link turns out to be larger than the link between lead exposure and children's IQ. The effect of television violence on aggression is only slightly smaller than the documented effect of smoking on lung cancer.

- To date, only one published study has focused on the long-term effects of playing violent video games on youth. The study revealed that students who played violent video games early in the school year engaged in significantly increased physical aggression and hostile attributions several months later.
- One longitudinal study published in 2003 reported a strong link between exposure to movie smoking and smoking initiation among 2,603 adolescents aged ten to fourteen.

While these negative findings are troubling, media can also have positive effects:

- Empirical evidence strongly supports the notion that high-quality educational programming has benefits for children's academic skills, academic engagement, and attitudes toward learning.
- Research suggests that TV's effects on reading are largely dependent on the content viewed. For instance, Daniel Anderson and his colleagues found that educational TV viewing at age five positively predicted book reading in adolescence in a prospective longitudinal cohort.
- Anderson and several colleagues have demonstrated long term positive effects of viewing *Sesame Street*; children who watched the program at age five received higher grades in the math, English, and science courses they later took in college.
- Several studies also suggest that video game play may enhance spatial reasoning skills in youth. Richard DeLisi and Jennifer Wolford found positive effects on spatial skills of playing the video game Tetris, which requires mental rotation. Similarly, Matthew Dye and Daphne Bevelier found benefits of gaming for visual attention, including greater attentional capacity, quicker attention deployment, and faster processing.
- An analysis of a tobacco countermarketing media campaign in Massachusetts found that adolescents who were aged twelve to thirteen at the study's outset and who reported exposure to television antismoking advertisements were significantly less likely to progress to established smoking than their peers who did not report exposure.

Currently available evidence concerning children and the media, therefore, indicates that content is what matters most. In the future, identifying and encouraging the creation and consumption of educational media, while carefully monitoring and limiting children's exposure to entertainment and violent media, seems imperative in trying to promote optimal outcomes for children.

Prepared by Ann Cami based on information contained in *The Future of Children: Children and Electronic Media*, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Donahue, eds., Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008 www.futureofchildren.org.

Specific Chapters Referenced Include:

Marie Evans Schmidt and Elizabeth A. Vandewater, "Media and Attention, Cognition, and School Achievement," pp. 63-85.

Barbara J. Wilson, "Media and Children's Aggression, Fear, and Altruism," pp. 87-118.

Soledad Liliana Escobar-Chaves and Craig A. Anderson, "Media and Risky Behaviors," pp. 147-180.

W. Douglas Evans, "Social Marketing Campaigns and Children's Media Use," pp. 181-204.

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