

1981

Children, television, and school achievement

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Children, television, and school achievement

Abstract

Nearly thirty years have elapsed since television came of age in the United States. A generation of Americans have grown to adulthood who do not recall a time without television in their homes. This first television generation now has families.

CHILDREN, TELEVISION,
AND
SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

A Research Paper

Submitted to

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

University of Northern Iowa

by

Gerald Bluhm

This Research Paper by: Gerald Bluhm

Entitled: CHILDREN, TELEVISION, AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Nearly thirty years have elapsed since television came of age in the United States. A generation of Americans have grown to adulthood who do not recall a time without television in their homes. This first television generation now has families.

The Importance of the Study

Television's effect on the development of children has become an issue of much concern. It is evidenced by the appearance of books, such as Winn's The Plug-In Drug; a nation-wide program for parent awareness, Television Awareness Training, and these interest organizations, the Committee on Children's Television and Action for Children's Television.

Since 1962, children's reading levels and test scores on the mathematics and English sections of the college entrance examinations Scholastic Aptitude Tests have been falling steadily.¹ Although the media-oriented children of today are more knowledgeable than those of previous generations, it is claimed that excessive television watching has prevented or discouraged young people from reading books, carrying on intelligent conversation with family or friends, and developing reasoning power and imagination.²

Many educators report that heavy watchers of television show a low toleration for the frustration of learning. Accustomed to the entertaining thirty-second segments of television commercials and the rapid action

¹ Leslie J. Chamberlain and Norman Chambers, "How Television is Changing Our Children," The Clearinghouse, (October, 1976) p. 54.

² TV-Impact On Children: What Are The Issues?, (Insights Into Consumer Issues No. 85521), New York: J.C. Penny Company Inc., 1979, p. 1.

sequences of animated cartoons, school age children often expect school lessons to be presented with show business techniques and become bored with school work that requires complex thought or sustained concentration.³

While television can be an excellent educational tool when it is used by teachers to stimulate children's curiosity, insight, awareness and understanding, heavy unsupervised television watching can foster intellectual laziness and can weaken communication skills.⁴ Teachers report that children who are habitual television viewers are apathetic, do not tend to ask questions, participate less in class, do not seek independent work, and prefer to learn by rote.⁵

According to the ever-growing body of information on this subject, television's effect on the young learner appears to be a complex issue. Educators can and must live with this complexity and try to deal with it. In fact, they should be very suspicious of any simplistic, definitive answer to the question of what effect television is having on the young learner.⁶

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the involvement of intermediate school children in television viewing. The study sought to

³Harry F. Waters, "What TV Does To Kids," Newsweek, (February 21, 1977), p.18.

⁴Penney's "Insights," op. cit., p.2.

⁵Waters, op. cit., p.18.

⁶Rose Mukerji, "What Effect is TV Having On the Young Learner?" Lutheran Education, (September-October 1977), pp.24-25.

survey these aspects of children's television viewing:

1. Television in the physical environment of the home
2. Extent of children's involvement in television viewing
3. Children's selection of television programs
4. Concerns of children raised by television programs
5. Impact of television commercials on children
6. Children's interests in other activities if television is

not available.

Procedures of the Study

The subjects of this study were the sixty-four students in grades four, five, and six of a parochial school in Iowa. The school population is characterized as lower-middle and middle class. The students were asked to complete a fifteen-item questionnaire, shown in Figure 1, concerning their involvement with television. This questionnaire was read to each student individually by the writer. Results from the questionnaire were tabulated according to the percentages of student responses to a given item.

Summary

This paper is organized into four chapters. Chapter Two of this paper will be a review of the literature concerning children's television viewing and their school achievement. Chapter Three will present the results of the questionnaire surveying children's television viewing. In Chapter Four a summary and conclusions of the survey of students' responses will be presented.

Figure 1

TELEVISION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you have a television set in your home? Yes No
2. Do you have more than one television set in your home Yes No
If yes, how many? _____
3. Where is/are the television(s) located in your home? _____

4. About how many hours of television do you watch on school nights? _____
on weekends? _____
5. When are you allowed to watch television on school nights?
Please check one: before my homework is done.
 while I am doing my homework.
 after my homework is done.
6. What are your favorite television programs?
1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
7. Tell why your first choice is your favorite program. _____

8. Do you worry about things you have see on television? Yes No
Explain if you do _____

9. Do you watch the television commercials? Yes No
10. Why do you think there are commercials on television? _____

11. How accurately do you feel products on commercials are explained? _____

12. Which products, if any, have you bought or used because you saw them
advertised on television? _____

13. Did the products you purchased turn out was well for you as they seemed to on the commercials? Yes _____ No _____ Explain if it did not _____

14. What would you spend your time doing if your television was broken and you would not have it for a month? _____

15. What are you involved in on school nights or weekends if you don't watch television? _____

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature concerning the effect of television on children is divided into television viewing and general achievement in school and television viewing and reading time and achievement.

Television Viewing and General Achievement in School

Himmelweit determined that the ownership of a television set appeared to be neither an advantage nor a disadvantage in relation to a child's performance in school. She found that watching television was neither responsible for children's overachievement or underachievement in the classroom.¹

Schramm and his associates compared the children who grew up in a community with television with those who grew up in a community having no television. He found that children who had watched television appeared to be about a year advanced in vocabulary in school.²

Feeley reported that while younger children can profit from watching television, the actual gains in general knowledge for older children have not yet been clearly demonstrated.³

Ridder examined and compared the grades seventh and eighth grade children received in English, social studies, and mathematics with the total amount of time they spent viewing television. No significant relationship was discovered between children's academic achievement in the classroom and the total number of hours they actually watched television.⁴

¹Hilde Himmelweit, A. N. Oppenheim and Pamela Vince, Television And The Child, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 308.

²Chamberlain and Chambers, op. cit., p. 54.

³Joan T. Feeley, "Television and Children's Reading," Elementary English, (January, 1973), p. 143.

⁴Paul A. Witty, Children and TV-Television's Impact on the Child, Association for Childhood Educational International, Bulletin 21-A, p. 16, 1967.

Wagoner found that relating children's performance in school to the amount of time they watch television is a task often complicated by a lack of recent studies dealing with the topic, questionable research techniques, and the many variables affecting the lives of children. He wrote that more research is urgently needed in this area.⁵ Chamberlain and Chambers concluded that a negative correlation between television viewing and school grades can be artificially produced because children with high IQ's watch less television on the average and achieve higher grades in school. The relationship between grades and television ownership or hours of viewing tends to be small when the factor of intelligence is controlled.⁶

In studying the relationship of television and test scores, Schramm wrote that television viewing patterns belong to a group of strong variables that interact with each other and with school and test performance. He found that if television viewing has anything to do at all with the decline in test scores, it is probably not the cause, but rather a cause, being part of a complex causal system. He concluded that there is not sufficient evidence as yet to connect the decline in test scores with television viewing. However, Schramm stated that television has shifted the balance of a child's practice away from learning from print to learning from pictures. Most elementary school achievement tests depend upon the former not the latter. Television's contribution to a student's academic record, he wrote, is more likely to be on the downward than the upward side.⁷

⁵Gary Wagoner, "The Trouble Is In Your Set," Phi Delta Kappan, (November, 1975), p. 183.

⁶Chamberlain and Chambers, op. cit., p. 54.

⁷Wilbur Schramm, Television and Test Scores, U. S., Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document, ED 148 88, August, 1976.

Television Viewing and Reading Time Achievement

From the beginning of the television-age, parents and educators alike appeared to share a common concern about television's effect on reading. Children who watched television were getting more practice in learning from pictures than in learning from print. Shaynon's research indicated that advertising executives in the television field believed that television viewing cut into children's reading and study time sufficiently to be detrimental to their education.⁸

Witty found on the basis of a survey of teenagers that television did reduce their reading time. Two out of five teenagers believed that television definitely interfered with their schoolwork.⁹

Scott compared the achievement tests scores of two groups of sixth and seventh graders with the amount of time they watched television. A significant difference was found in the area of reading. The group of children who spent fewer hours viewing television had higher test scores. He concluded that the child most devoted to television viewing achieves to a lesser extent in reading than the child who views television in moderation. Scott also related that the relationship between reading and television viewing could be explained by a lack of diligence in completing home work while watching television at home.¹⁰

⁸Robert L. Shaynon, Television And Our Children. New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1951.

⁹Witty, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁰Lloyd F. Scott, "Television and School Achievement," Phi Delta Kappan, (October, 1956), pp. 25-28.

Himmelweit's study found that television influenced children to read less. The loss in book reading was greatest among boys and children of average intelligence. She believed that the average viewer was able to maintain reading ability despite a temporary reduction in reading practice while slower learners could be seriously handicapped by watching television.¹¹

Starkey and Lee also studied the relation between the amount of television viewing and reading scores. A slight relationship was reported between reading ability and the amount of leisure time spent watching television. The better readers were found to watch less television than poorer readers. This relationship begins to appear in the upper elementary grades and grows through the junior and senior high school years. The authors concluded that not all television viewing is a bad influence on the child, and that a child should be taught to be a discriminating viewer.¹²

Fisher and Bruss reported that the time fifth and sixth graders spent watching television was not related to their reading achievement nor to their reading attitude. They did find, however, a slight tendency for heavy television viewers to be lower in achievement in reading.¹³

Winn stated that children do read fewer books when television is available to them. She cites a survey conducted by Feeley in which all 500 fourth and fifth graders showed a preference for watching television rather than reading. She also writes that television does not prevent normal children from acquiring reading skills. Television does seem to compound

¹¹Himmelweit, op. cit., p. 335.

¹²John D. Starkey and Helen Lee Swinford, Reading - Does Viewing Time Affect It? U.S., Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document, ED 090 966, September, 1974.

¹³Richard Fisher and William Bruss, "The Viewing of TV, Perceptual Passivity and Reading," Colorado Journal of Educational Research, (Spring 1976), pp. 33-37.

the problems of children with reading problems because it offers them a pleasurable nonverbal alternative thus reducing their willingness to work at reading.¹⁴

Busch found that 77 per cent of her subjects would rather watch a story on television than read the same story in a book. Only those with high reading ability preferred to read the story themselves. She writes that pre-school and primary students benefit the most from viewing television. At about the age of 12 students' knowledge appears to decrease as their television viewing increases.¹⁵

Summary

In summary, television viewing may contribute as one of the causes of declining achievement scores. It does tend to cut down on reading time of schoolage children. Children stated that they would rather watch television than read. The relationship of heavy television viewing and low achievement seemed to be more apparent in later years in school.

¹⁴ Marie Winn, The Plug-In Drug. New York: The Viking Press, 1977, p. 66.

¹⁵ Jackie S. Busch, "Television's Effect on Reading: A Case Study," Phi Delta Kappan, (June, 1978), pp. 668-671.

Chapter 3

CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN TELEVISION VIEWING

Information about children's involvement with television was gathered from a questionnaire administered to sixty-four intermediate grade students. The areas of discussion presented in this section are as follows:

- (1) Television in the Physical Environment of the Home
- (2) Extent of Children's Involvement with Television Viewing
- (3) Children's Selections of Television Programs
- (4) Concerns of Children Raised by Television Programs
- (5) Impact of Television Commercials on Children
- (6) Children's Interests in Other Activities If Television Is Not Available

Television in the Physical Environment of the Home

Question 1. Do you have a television set in your home?
Yes _____ No _____

All of the students participating in the survey indicated that they had a television set in their home.

Question 2. Do you have more than one television set in your home? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, how many? _____

Fifty-four per cent of the students reported having two television sets in their homes; thirty-seven per cent of the students reported having four television sets at home; and the remaining three per cent of the students reported having five television sets in their home.

Question 3. Where is/are the television(s) located in your home?

Forty per cent of all television sets were located in the living room of a home; twenty-two per cent of the students reported having a television set in their own bedroom; twenty-two per cent of the students indicated having a television set in the basement of their home; eleven per cent of the students reported having a television set in their parents'

bedroom or in the family room of their home; and five per cent of the students reported having a television set in the kitchen at home.

Extent of Children's Involvement in Television Viewing

Question 4. About how many hours of television do you watch on schoolnights _____ on weekends _____

Approximately one half of the student body spent from four to six hours viewing television on schoolnights. Few sixth graders watched television from seven to nine hours; fifty per cent of them watched only one to three hours. Figure 2 presents the amount of television watched by students in grades 4, 5, and 6 and the total student body.

Figure 2

Number of Hours of Television
Viewed by Students on Schoolnights

Number of Hours Viewed	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
1-3	20	19	50	30
4-6	60	61	44	56
7-9	20	20	6	14

The sixth graders watched much less television on the weekends than the fourth and fifth graders. From the percentages given in Figure 2a, grades 4 and 5 spent much of their time watching television. The writer questions this response on the part of these children because many of them have home work, church related activities, and recreational ex-

periences on the weekends.

Figure 2a

Number of Hours of Television
Viewed by Students on Weekends

Number of Hours Viewed	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
5	20	23	44	25
10	35	34	27	33
10+	45	43	29	42

Question 5. When are you allowed to watch television on school nights? Please check one:
 before my homework is done.
 while I am doing my homework.
 after my homework is done.

Over half of the intermediate grade children were not allowed to watch television until after their homework was completed. Most of the fourth graders had to have their homework completed before they were allowed television viewing. Figure 3 presents the times for watching television and doing homework.

Figure 3

When Students View Television on Schoolnights

Relation to Homework	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
Before homework is done	1	20	7	14
While doing homework	19	46	27	31
After homework is done	80	34	66	55

Children's Selections of Television Programs

Question 6. What are your favorite television programs?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Sixty per cent of the students reported that their favorite television programs were comedy shows. Adventure programs were favored by twenty-one per cent. Figure 4 gives further information about the children's responses by grade level.

Figure 4

Television Programs Favored by Students

Type of Program	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
Comedy	35	40	29	60
Adventure	30	20	23	21
Sports	29	20	14	7
Movies-Specials	3	14	24	7
Cartoons	3	6	10	5

Question 7. Tell why your first choice is your favorite program.

Children indicated a preference for television programs because of the character on the program and the elements of humor and excitement in the story line. Figure 5 presents more information about the responses of the students to the question.

Figure 5

Why Children Selected Favorite Television Programs

Reason Given	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
Character, Humor, and Excitement	60	76	83	57
Personal interest in subject matter	40	24	17	43

Concerns of Children Raised by Television Programs

Question 8. Do you worry about things you have seen on television?
Yes _____ No _____ Explain if you do.

Many fifth and sixth graders said that ideas viewed on television caused them to worry, while fourth graders seemed to be less concerned. Figure 6 presents the reactions of the students to the question.

Figure 6

Children's Concerns Caused by Television Viewing

Nature of Concern	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
Do Worry	25	73	72	57
Do not Worry	75	27	28	43

Impact of Television Commercials on Children

Question 9. Do you watch the television commercials?
Yes _____ No _____

Ninety per cent of the students indicated that they watched the television commercials. There were few differences in the viewing habits

of television commercials among the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students.

Question 10. Why do you think there are commercials on television?

Eighty-five per cent of the students said that commercials were on television for business reasons alone. The remaining fifteen per cent of the students believed there were commercials on television for other than business reasons. There were few differences in the opinions of the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students as to why there were commercials on television.

Question 11. How accurately do you feel products on commercials are explained?

Ninety-five per cent of the students believed that the television commercials did not accurately explain the product. Five per cent of the students believed that the products shown to them on television were accurately explained. The responses of the three grade levels were similar.

Question 12. Which products, if any, have you bought or used because you saw them advertised on television?

Thirty per cent of the students listed food items as those they most frequently purchased because they saw them advertised on television commercials. Twenty-six per cent of the students purchased products used at home such as laundry detergents and cleansers after having seen them demonstrated on television. Twenty-one per cent of the students purchased games and toys after having seen them on television. Thirteen per cent of the students said they had purchased personal products such as toothpaste and soap as a result of having seen them advertised on commercials.

Question 13. Did the products you purchased turn out as well for you as they seemed to on the commercials? Yes _____
No _____ Explain if it did not.

Fifty-seven per cent of the students responded that the products

they purchased did turn out as well for them as they had on television. Few differences in the responses from the different grade levels were noted.

Children's Interests in Other Activities If Television Is Not Available

Question 14. What would you spend your time doing if your television was broken and you would not have it for a month?

The students indicated that they would be involved in many activities if television was not available to them at home.

Forty-four per cent of the fourth graders responded that they would play games indoors with friends or family members; forty per cent indicated that they would play outdoors; and the remaining sixteen per cent stated that they would visit with friends or neighbors, listen to the radio, play records or read a book.

Thirty-eight per cent of the fifth grade children responded that they would play outdoors; twenty-six per cent of the students indicated that they would play a game indoors with friends or family members; nineteen per cent of the students stated that they would be involved in some indoor activity; and the remaining seventeen per cent of the students reported that they would visit with friends or listen to the radio, read a book or listen to records.

Fifty-five per cent of the sixth grade students stated that they would play a game indoors; twenty-seven per cent of the students indicated that they would visit with friends or neighbors; and the remaining eighteen per cent of the students responded that they would listen to the radio or read a book, finish their assigned schoolwork, complete an indoor activity or listen to records on the stereo.

Figure 7 presents the total responses of the intermediate children as well as their responses by grade level.

Figure 7

Activities Students Would Participate In
If Television Was Not Available To Them

	Grade 4 %	Grade 5 %	Grade 6 %	Total %
Play inside the home	44	26	55	51
Activity outside the home	40	38	27	36
Various other activities	16	36	18	13

Question 15. What are you involved in on schoolnights or weekends if you don't watch television?

The students indicated that they are involved in many activities on schoolnights or weekends when they are not watching television at home.

On weekends sixty-five per cent of the fourth graders stated that they were involved in indoor activities at home; twenty per cent of the students indicated that they were involved in scouting activities; and the remaining fifteen per cent of the students were involved in gymnastic classes, attending parties, visiting friends, neighbors or relatives, or finishing their schoolwork.

Forty per cent of the students in fifth grade were involved in scouting activities at church or school; twenty-four per cent of the students reported that they visited friends, neighbors or relatives; twenty-two per cent stated that they played outdoors; and the remaining fourteen per cent of the students were involved in various other activities such as bowling, swimming, playing tennis, bicycle riding, church activities,

or completing their schoolwork.

Thirty-eight per cent of the sixth grade students indicated that they were involved with sports activities; thirty-eight per cent of the students stated that they were involved in finishing their schoolwork; and the remaining twenty-four per cent of the students were involved in various other activities such as doing their chores around home, visiting with friends, neighbors or relatives; working with craft projects, scouting activities, church activities, talking with friends on the telephone or listening to the radio.

Figure 8 gives a summary of the students' responses to the question.

Figure 8

Activities Students Participate in
When Not Viewing Television

Activity	Grade 4 %	Activity	Grade 5 %	Activity	Grade 6 %
Indoor Activity	65	School or Church	40	Sports	38
Scouting	20	Visiting	24	Finishing Homework	38
Various other Activities	15	Play Outdoors	22	Various other Activities	24
		Various other Activities	14		

Summary

In summary, the questionnaire revealed the involvement of intermediate school children in television viewing as follows:

1. Television sets were reported to be found in the home of every student and to be located in different areas in these homes.
2. Over fifty per cent of the students reported viewing from four to six hours of television a day. Also, approximately fifty per cent of the students reported that they watched television only after their school-work had been completed. The sixth graders watched less television than the fourth and fifth graders.
3. Comedy programs were the favorite programs because of the characterization portrayed on these programs.
4. The content of television programs causes many fifth and sixth grade children concerns.
5. Most students related that commercials were presented on television solely for business reasons. The students did not believe that commercial products were accurately explained on television although over fifty per cent of them were satisfied with the products they had purchased from viewing commercials.
6. The students reported that they are involved with many worthwhile activities when not watching television, or they would be if television was not available to them at home.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Television viewing may be one of the causes of declining achievement scores. It does tend to cut down on the reading time of schoolage children. In the study, children stated that they would rather watch television than read. The relationship of heavy television viewing and low achievement seemed to be more apparent in the later years in school.

The responses of the children in the study revealed that over fifty per cent of the intermediate school children watched television from four to six hours a day. The children favored comedy programs above all others on television. The content of television programs caused many fifth and sixth graders some concern. The children were doubtful of the advertising techniques used on television commercials.

Parents and educators need to be aware of intermediate-grade children's involvement with television. As Winn states in her book, it is not entirely the type of programs watched by children that should cause concern but the influence of television viewing on their intellectual and language development.¹

Parents are important in determining when and how much television their children watch. They need to assist their children in establishing reasonable limits on television viewing. Then homework can be completed at home and sufficient sleep can be gained.

To guide children to watch television with a purpose, parents can discuss with their children what they have seen on television. Parent's direct involvement with their children's viewing may alleviate some con-

¹Winn, op. cit., p. 7.

cerns children have as a result of watching television programs and also may help them to become more aware of the advertising techniques used on television commercials.

Teachers can find ways to use television experiences in the classroom. Teachers can alert children to programs of high quality that will contribute to children's understanding and intellectual development. The following day these programs can be discussed at school. Teachers can also help their students become more conscious of the advertising techniques used on television commercials.

Parents and educators need to encourage children to seek alternatives to watching television. These alternatives are many and varied for intermediate grade children.

READING: Regular weekly visits to the local public library or bookmobile; family reading time at home in the evening when all family members read together; listening to story records; recording creative stories on tapes to be played at home or school; constructing books for composition activities; telling stories to youngsters; enrollment in the summer reading program at the local public library

MUSIC: Membership in choral groups or handbell programs; instrumental or vocal music lessons; attending local symphony concerts; listening to music on records and tapes.

DRAMA: Participation in dramatics classes at a local recreation center; production of puppet shows at home; production of neighborhood plays and skits; participating in dramatic readings and pantomimes.

SPORTS: Participation in city recreational programs and YMCA or YWCA programs; attending local sports events; participation in gymnastic programs; participation in family initiated physical and sports activities

such as walking, roller skating, ice skating, jumping rope, weightlifting and bicycling.

FAMILY AND HOME ACTIVITIES: Playing games at home; working on puzzles; traveling on weekends to visit museums; working on projects together such as assembling model cars or planes; gardening, crafts, cooking; reading and discussing things together as a family at mealtime and other times; camping and shopping; helping with housework and doing odd jobs around home; seasonal work such as mowing lawns, raking leaves or shoveling snow.

OTHER ACTIVITIES: Involvement in church activities such as choirs, social gatherings, and Bible classes; scouting; participation in craft or ceramic classes at local recreations centers; writing letters to friends, relatives or pen pals; visiting the elderly, making collections of insects, coins, stamps, rocks, sea shells; collecting return deposit bottles and cans for recycling purposes; babysitting; art activities.

If each student on the average upon graduating from high school has viewed some 15,000 hours of television and has spent more time in front of the TV set than in the classroom, parents and educators will need to intervene to insure that children have broader experiences to encourage higher school achievement levels and more personal fulfillment. Parents who are concerned with their children's educational progress at school will balance study and television time at home. They can exert a positive or negative influence on their youngster's television viewing as well as their study habits at home. Then whatever negative influence television does have on children's achievements at school will be reduced to a minimum.

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