

ASPECTS OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S TELEVISION VIEWING CONTENT PREFERENCES

June Price

Doctoral Dissertation
University of California, Log Angeles, 1985

Abstract

Parent-child conflict and dysfunctional parenting attitudes have been related to heavy television viewing among offspring. However, more specific aspects of viewing behavior remain unaddressed. The relationships of children's television content preferences to parent-child conflict and parents' child-rearing attitudes were examined in two samples. Results indicated that an empathic, harmonious environment was associated with preference for educational and news programming. Parental empathy, sensitivity, and adaptive role expectations was inversely related to exposure to violent, fantasy-oriented content, and children's programming, particularly for males. These results raise concerns regarding potential developmental effects of viewing patterns for children already disadvantaged by virtue of dysfunctional parent-child relationships.

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In an attempt to broaden our understanding of the determinants and effects of children's television viewing behavior, a number of investigators have looked to aspects of the family, and particularly to the nature of parent-child interactions, as possible mediating factors. Thus far, research in this area has primarily been addressed to the relationship between parent-child interactions and overall viewing frequency.

A link between the amount of television viewed by children and certain aspects of family interaction has been reported. Conflict between parent and child is somewhat predictive of heavy viewing by the child (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; Riley & Riley, 1951; Schramm, Lyle & Praker, 1961; Price and Feshbach, 1982b). Parenting styles also appear to be related to children's viewing habits. Parental restrictiveness and the use of restrictive or physical punishment were found to be more common among children who viewed a great deal of television (Maccoby, 1954; McLeod & Brown, 1976). Furthermore, among upper socio-economic families, parental warmth was inversely related to children's viewing frequency (Maccoby, 1954).

Price and Feshbach (1982b) examined the relationship between the amount of television viewed by children and parents' scores on Bavolek's (1978) Adult-Adolescent Parenting inventory (AAPI), an instrument that assesses the degree to which parents have unrealistic expectations of a child's developmental level and the degree to which parents look to their child for support and nurturance. Among the total sample of children, such maladaptive parenting attitudes were strongly related to children's viewing frequency in both years of assessment. When examining this relationship separately by sex and race, the association between children's viewing and dysfunctional parenting attitudes appeared most pronounced among white males and black females.

Taken from: Price, J. (1985). The relationship of television viewing patterns and content preferences to children's emotional, social and cognitive functioning. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Thus, both intra-familial conflict and dysfunctional parenting styles and attitudes have been associated with heavy viewing among offspring. However, apart from indications that parent-child conflict is associated with exposure to violent content (Chaffee & McLeod, 1972), the relationship of more specific aspects of children's viewing behavior to family dynamics remains unexamined. Little is known about the viewing patterns and program preferences of children from various familial environments.

This would appear to be an important area of inquiry in two respects. First, an understanding of the relationships between aspects of the family and levels of exposure to various kinds of television content may provide some insight into the potential influences of television viewing among certain sub-populations of children. Secondly, an understanding of the relative preferences for certain kinds of television fare that might be associated with aspects of the family may provide some clues as to the functions of television viewing in conflicted or demanding family environments.

The present paper draws on the results of a recently completed, in-depth content analysis of television programming in order to examine the viewing patterns and content preferences associated with children's self-report of parent-child conflict and parents' child-rearing attitudes, as assessed by the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1978). The content analysis is described more fully in a doctoral dissertation (Price, 1985) that constituted the final phase of a long-term project that had primarily focused on personality and cognitive correlates of viewing frequency (Price & Feshbach, 1982a, 1982b).

Method

Subjects

Subjects were white students from a recently integrated Los Angeles public elementary school. Data from 181 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students were collected in 1981, and in 1982 the subjects were 148 fifth- and sixth-grade students. There was about a 50% overlap between the subject samples; that is, about 50% of the students in the 1981 example appear in the 1982 sample. Although all social classes were represented in the samples, the distribution in the white population was skewed towards the middle and upper class income range.

Questionnaires accompanied by a letter briefly explaining the focus of the study were sent to parents who provided addresses on their child's permission form. The initial mailing and two follow-up mailings at three-week intervals yielded a response rate of 75% in 1981 and 73% in 1982.

Measures and Procedures

Parents were asked to respond to the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) (Bavolek, 1984). For the present study, parents' responses to individual items were summed to create a full-scale AAPI score. Individual cluster scores representing the four dimensions of interest were very highly correlated, hence only the full-scale was examined. Parents who responded to fewer than 75% of the items were assigned missing values. Total scores of those parents who responded to at least 75% of the relevant items were weighted by the number of valid responses.

Parent-Child Conflict

The children were asked to indicate the frequency of conflict with their parents in five areas, including television viewing, on a four-point scale. An index of general parent-child conflict was created by summing these items.

Television Viewing Questionnaire

The children were presented with a list of all television programs, in a TV Guide format, broadcast by the area's eight major commercial stations and two subscription stations during the seven days previous to testing, excluding those programs aired after 11:30 p.m. and during school hours. The subjects were asked to check the programs they had actually watched during the week – not the programs they usually watched.

An index of overall viewing frequency was created by summing the number of half-hour time periods checked by each child for each year. An examination of the data revealed that several children had responded to this questionnaire idiosyncratically, checking all or nearly all time periods. It was felt that although many children watch a great deal of television, it was unlikely that any watched television continuously for a week. Hence, Chauvanet's criterion was applied to eliminate the few statistical outliers.

Television Content

Specific television programming aired during the two 1-week periods were coded along a variety of dimensions. First, an expansion of the trade-oriented typology most often used by television researchers (e.g., Frank & Greenberg, 1980) was applied to the total domain of television programs included in the Television Viewing Questionnaires. From the specific trade-oriented content categories, aggregate categories were created, and three of these aggregate categories were selected: educational programming, children's programming, and comedy fare. In addition, two individual categories, violent cartoons and news programs, were selected for examination. A number of more psychologically-oriented dimensions were coded on a large subset of programs.

- A “superhero” dimension, inspired by Bailyn’s (1959) early work, included programs that featured a main character that possessed superhuman or unusual powers and abilities. Inter-rater agreement, based on those programs that could conceivably been coded as superhero programs (e.g., not news, variety, non-fiction, sports, nor quiz shows), was quite high (94.6%).
- A “relationship-oriented” category represented programs that featured an emphasis or focus on interpersonal relationships. While fictional programs almost always portray some type of interpersonal relationship, only those programs in which the relationships among people were a main focus were included here. For example, a high-action private detective show was excluded if the relationships between the protagonist and his colleagues or clients received little dramatic development, in favor of the portrayal of action and suspense central to the plot.
- A “loner” category, similar to that of Greenberg & Dominick (1969), included programs which featured a main character who was a loner, someone with no strong attachments, a person of independent emotional means. Most likely, the main character was involved in some sort of relationship, but they were clearly minor and received little development. Fairly high inter-rate agreement was obtained, again based only on those programs that could conceivably been coded as loner programs (89.6%).
- Programs were also coded as violent or non-violent. Here, the definition of violence was restricted to physical aggression, although not necessarily intentional malicious physical aggression. The definition of a “violent program” was one in which violence was central to the role or occupation of a main character (e.g., a police show), one in which violence was central to the plot or one that portrayed more violence than one would normally expect to encounter in day-to-day life (that is, the normal day-to-day life of an urban university student). An a priori decision was made to code news and sports programs as non-violent, unless the sport was attractive by virtue of its potential for injury to participants (e.g. auto-racing and boxing). The percent agreement between two raters for programs that could conceivably have been violent and for which no a priori decision had been made was quite high (87%).
- Finally, programs were rated on Hazard’s (1967) 10-point Fact/Fiction/Fantasy scale. An inter-rater correlation of .91 was obtained for these ratings.

Bivariate correlations were computed between the two family variables and the indices of exposure to a preference for selected television content for the total white sample, and for white males and white females separately. Analyses were conducted separately on the 1981 and 1982 data sets in order to examine the stability of findings.

Results

The results indicate that exposure to any preferences for selected kinds of television content were, in general, negligibly or inconsistently related to the index of parent-child conflict. There were indications in the 1981 sample that, regardless of sex of the child, parent-child conflict was positively related to a preference for violent programs and negatively related to a preference for television news. And there were a number of isolated findings observed for only boys, or for only girls, in the 1981 sample. It should be noted, however, that those viewing correlates of parent-child conflict failed to replicate in the 1982 sample. Thus, conclusions regarding the viewing patterns associated with parent-child conflict would be tentative at best.

The viewing patterns and preferences of children associated with parents' responses to the AAPI appeared much more compelling. Children whose parents reported somewhat dysfunctional parenting attitudes tended to view more fantasy fare, more children's programming, including violent cartoons, more violent programming in general, more super-hero programs and more loner-type programs (see Table I). These findings were especially consistent across the two samples for the male subjects. The amount of time devoted to news and educational programs, in absolute terms, did not appear to be related to parenting attitudes.

Since overall viewing frequency is correlated with AAPI scores (Price & Feshbach, 1982); it is not surprising that exposure to various specific kinds of television programs was related to this parent measure. Thus, analyses involving indicators of children's content preferences would be of special interest. Table II shows correlations of parents' AAPI scores with indices of children's preference for various kinds of television content – that is the proportion of children's total viewing time devoted to specific kinds of television fare.

As with the results involving exposure to television content, the findings involving preference for different kinds of television fare were most consistent among the white male samples. A relative preference for children's programming, and violent cartoons in particular, independent of total viewing frequency, was positively associated with parents' dysfunctional child-rearing attitudes. In contrast, there were some indications that a

preference for television news and educational programming was negatively related to AAPI scores, although in most cases the negative correlations failed to reach a significant level. It is interesting to note, however, that the child from a stressful family environment does not merely tend to watch a great deal of fictional fare in general. He appears to avoid comedy programs and, to a lesser extent, fictional programs that emphasize interpersonal relationships.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that aspects of the family environment, particularly in terms of parents' child-rearing attitudes and skills, can be linked not only to children's viewing frequency, but also to the viewing patterns and content preferences of children. While the degree of parent-child conflict was not found to be consistently related to specific aspects of viewing behavior, there were clear indications that a lack of parental empathy, sensitivity, and adaptive role expectations was related to heavy viewing of violent, fantasy-oriented television content, and children's programming in general, particularly for males. Furthermore, there was some suggestion, together with the viewing correlates of parent-child conflict, that children from warm, supportive and harmonious families tend to view relatively more educational and news programming than children from conflicted, stressful, demanding, and unempathic home environments.

The viewing pattern associated with dysfunctional parenting attitudes, as measured by the AAPI, make a great deal of sense when one considers what life at home with a high AAPI mother would entail. This is a child who very likely has experienced a history of unrealistic expectations of his developmental level. At age six, he may well have been expected to function as a ten-year old; now at ten, he is probably expected to function, in some sense, as an adult – that is, to help take care of mother's emotional needs, rather than vice versa. It is interesting, then, to observe that from the wide range of program options available on television, this child tends to differentially select for fantasy-oriented, escapist fare – often children's programs which are very likely aimed at children below his developmental level. He certainly does not opt for even more environmental demands, which can be found in educational, cognitively-taxing television programs. It appears that the child of a high AAPI mother is more likely than his peers to use his free television time to "take a break" from the demanding aspects of his environment.

It is noteworthy that children of parents who reported dysfunctional child-rearing attitudes appeared to be rather discriminating in their selection of fictional or fantasy television fare. These children, in relative terms, tended to avoid relationship-oriented programs, programs

that likely portray functional interpersonal relationships very different from those of their own experience. They also tended to select relatively fewer situation comedies, many of which focus on family situations, and comedy programs in general. One might guess that life at home is not experienced by these children as particularly funny.

Finally, the link between parents' dysfunctional child-rearing attitudes and children's selection of a variety of violent television programs warrants some comment. High AAPI mothers indicated little ability to express empathy for their children's needs and they indicated a strong belief in the value of punishment. As a consequence, one might expect children of these mothers to experience a good deal of frustration and anger. So it is not surprising that these children tended to select considerably more televised violence, in both relative and absolute terms, than their peers from more functional family environments.

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Table I. Correlations of Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Parenting Attitudes) with Children's Exposure to Selected Television Content Dimensions.

Television Content		Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory		
		White Subjects	White Males	White Females
Relationships	1981	.07	.18	-.03
	1982	.20*	.08	.24
Family-Oriented Relationships	1981	.12	.27*	-.01
	1982	.22*	.08	.27+
Fantasy-Oriented Fare	1981	.29***	.38***	.15
	1982	.25**	.28*	.19
Comedy Fare	1981	.09	.24*	-.05
	1982	.16	.09	.16
Children's Programming	1981	.33***	.41***	.22
	1982	.19*	.26*	.10
Violent Cartoons	1981	.32***	.34**	.28*
	1982	.16	.27*	.04
Violent Programs	1981	.27***	.29*	.25*
	1982	.22*	.34**	.08
Superhero Programs	1981	.28***	.33**	.21
	1982	.06	.20	-.13
Loner Programs	1981	.35***	.42***	.22
	1982	.16	.26*	.08
News	1981	.02	.03	.00
	1982	-.10	-.06	-.15
Educational Programming	1981	.05	.09	-.03
	1982	-.10	-.05	-.17
Ns	1981	148	78	70
	1982	114	63	51

Note: p<.06+ p<.05* p<.01** p<.001***.

Table II. Correlations of Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Parenting Attitudes) with Children's Preference for Selected Television Content Categories.

Television Content		Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory		
		White Subjects	White Males	White Females
Preference for Relationships	1981	-.20*	-.27*	-.13
	1982	.09	-.13	.24
Preference for Family-Oriented Relationships	1981	-.15	-.16	-.16
	1982	.15	-.10	.29*
Preference for Fantasy-Oriented Fare	1981	.09	.13	.03
	1982	.21*	.20	.23
Preference for Comedy Fare	1981	-.24*	-.24*	-.25*
	1982	-.04	-.19	.01
Preference for Children's Programming	1981	.26**	.32**	.19
	1982	.12	.21	.01
Preference for Violent Cartoons	1981	.19*	.17	.23+
	1982	.12	.24	-.07
Preference for Violent Programs	1981	.06	-.01	.15
	1982	.12	.29*	-.06
Preference for Superhero Programs	1981	.13	.15	.11
	1982	-.05	.05	-.21
Preference for Loner Programs	1981	.09	.10	.06
	1982	.11	.18	.11
Preference for News	1981	-.02	-.02	-.02
	1982	-.16	-.15	-.16
Preference for Educational Programming	1981	-.02	.00	-.04
	1982	-.19*	-.18	-.21
Ns	1981	146	77	69
	1982	114	63	51

Note: $p < .06+$ $p < .05^*$ $p < .01^{**}$.