

Turned on, tuned in or dropped out? Young children's use of television and transmission of social advantage

5

Michael Bittman

University of New England

Mark Siphthorp

Australian Institute of Family Studies

There has been, and is, much talk about how children today have been born into a world of new, digital media. In contrast to their parents—who have been described as “digital immigrants” because they have had to assimilate to the newly developed electronic environment—these children have been described as “digital natives”. They have never known a world before digital technology. However, despite this breathless talk, it is not until children are well into their teens that their engagement with this new media rivals the time devoted to the older medium—television (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009). Nor is it clear that the era of broadcast television has come to an end (Hartley, 2004) and that television is metaphorically “dead”.

At least one television set is found in 99% of Australian households, and nearly half (48%) of all private dwellings not only have two or more televisions, but all these sets are on standby and ready to use. Access to a DVD player or recorder is also very high, with this device found in 88% of Australian homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008a). Australian adults spend, on average, about 2 hours and 46 minutes per day watching television as a main activity or have it running in the background while they do something else (ABS, 2008b; authors' own calculations). Consequently, television is likely to be an integral part of most Australian children's experiences of growing up.

Since television has, in most countries, been in private homes for more than half a century, there is now a substantial body of research on how its use affects children. In general, society (especially public health authorities) views the prospect of children spending excessive time in front of a television screen with some anxiety. The research literature on the harms of television far outweighs the literature on its benefits (Millwood, Hargrave, & Livingstone, 2006; Pecora, Murray, & Wartella, 2007; Rutherford & Bittman, 2007). Children's consumption of television has been linked in the research literature with concerns about obesity, sleep disruption, delayed language acquisition, poor school performance, aggression, and commercialisation of children.

Some of the literature on the effects of television on young children is primarily concerned with the content in television programs. For example, in the literature on aggression and fright, researchers have argued that violent and traumatic content disturbs children's socio-emotional development. Young children's inability to distinguish between screen action and real life means that threatening or traumatic visual content may lead to fear, fright and nightmares (Cantor, 2001). However, if adults are watching as well and/or respond to the child's distress, the research suggests they can effectively comfort young children and forestall any long-term effects of fright (Cantor, 2001).

Televised drama and movies often involve depictions of violence, and news programs report on violent happenings in the world. Experiments have shown that exposure to violent content increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour by children in the short term. Because the depiction of aggression is often associated with heroism and does not always show pain and suffering, it is argued that long-term exposure to these violent stimuli desensitises children to the suffering of others and promotes resorting to aggression as the first response in any situation (Bjorkqvist, 1985;

Christakis & Zimmerman, 2007). Some authors argue that having parents co-view this content with their children—particularly if they discuss the depictions viewed—plays a vital role in counteracting the “effects” it might otherwise have (Christakis & Zimmerman, 2009).

Children’s programming can be surrounded by advertisements for merchandised products related to the program. Those concerned about the commercialisation of children argue that very young children, who often cannot differentiate advertisements from program material, are thus “groomed” for a life of consumerism in the future (Chakroff, 2007). Marketing to children is an explicit strategy for building brand loyalty. According to Schor (2004), by 18 months of age, US babies can recognise logos, and by 2 years, they ask for products by brand name. During their nursery school years, children will request an average of 25 products a day, and by the time they enter primary school, the average child can identify 200 logos. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 years spend more time shopping than on reading, attending youth groups, playing outdoors or household conversation. Not only has US children’s direct spending mushroomed over the last 15 years (to an estimated US\$30 billion), but it also has another US\$600 billion of influence over parental purchases (Schor, 2004).

In contrast, the literature on the benefits of television focuses on the educational value of some programs (e.g., *Sesame Street*) in increasing vocabulary, literacy and numeracy. Once again, the context created by parents seems more important than the information transmitted by the device. Experiments have shown that children do not learn language by being exposed to television alone; it is only when exposure is accompanied by interaction with adults that learning occurs (Saxton, 2010).

Despite these studies, the bulk of the literature ignores program content and concentrates on children’s raw exposure time to television. Since it is difficult to design surveys that log the content of programs watched and it is much simpler to gather information about the time spent watching, it is hard to avoid the impression that this emphasis on *how long* children watch television rather than *what* they watch is an attempt to make a virtue out of a necessity. Bearing in mind this proviso, it has been commonly argued that, because there can be no more than 24 hours in a day, the time devoted to television steals time away from more healthy pursuits. Some have reasoned, for instance, that television is associated with doing less moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Brown, Bittman, & Nicholson, 2007). Similarly, time spent in consuming television has been shown to be associated with less time spent reading, smaller vocabulary and poorer school performance (Brown et al., 2007). Watching excessive amounts of television at the wrong hours of the day, particularly where there is a television in the child’s bedroom, has been shown to be associated with shorter and poorer quality sleep (Owens et al., 1999).

Based on its interpretation of this research, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2010) advised parents that in the first two years of a child’s life, they:

need positive interaction with other children and adults ... especially ... when learning to talk and play ... The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly discourages television viewing for children ages two years old or younger, and encourages interactive play ... For older children, the Academy advises no more than one to two hours per day of educational, nonviolent programs, which should be supervised by parents or other responsible adults in the home. (para. 1–3)

However, other commentators are far more temperate in moving from the research findings to providing advice to parents. Most of the research findings indicate associations—for example, more television viewing is associated with less time spent reading (Rutherford & Bittman, 2007)—but these kinds of findings should not be mistaken for showing causation, as causation in either direction is plausible. Does the child who finds reading more difficult devote less time to reading and, therefore, has more time for television? Similarly, such “reverse causation” can be argued in relation to obesity—obese children may exercise less because they find it unpleasant, and therefore have more time for television. Also, the “discovery” that what parents do mediates or moderates the likely “effects” of media on their child’s health, educational and socio-emotional developmental outcomes is relatively new. Many of the “findings” in the literature pre-date this discovery and do not adjust for the countervailing effects of having parents present in the context of media use (Hancox, Milne, & Poulton, 2005).

5.1 Young children's use of television

So what are Australian children's typical patterns of daily exposure to television? How does this change as they mature? Does television viewing displace reading? What do their parents do about children's television consumption? Are any of these behaviours associated with social advantage or disadvantage?

Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) has an accurate method for estimating children's time spent watching television programs, including material stored on DVDs. Parents completed a time use diary that recorded their child's activities on a designated day(s). This method has been validated against instruments that log people's time and has been shown to be much superior to simply asking parents to estimate the time their children spend watching television (Vandewater & Lee, 2009). The study also asks questions about parents' concerns about their child's use of television and how they attempt to manage it (see also LSAC, 2011).

This chapter uses data from the time use diaries collected for a weekday and a weekend day in Waves 1–3 for both the B and K cohorts. Extra information, especially about parental practices surrounding the child's use of television, is drawn from two between-waves mail-out surveys (at Waves 2.5 and 3.5). Since the time use diaries relied on parents mailing back their completed diaries, the response rate for these was lower than for other data collection methods used in the study (such as face-to-face interviews). There has been a decline in overall response rates for both the main and between-waves data collections over time (see Chapter 1). For the main waves, the response rates have been higher and did not decline much between Waves 2 and 3 (91% to 89%, or 2.1 percentage points, both cohorts combined). However, the between-waves response rate was substantially lower in Wave 1.5 (73%), and declined by about four percentage points between each subsequent between-wave survey—to 69% and 64% in Waves 2.5 and 3.5 respectively. What is important to note, however, is that the effect of this differential non-response on estimates produced from the between-waves surveys has generally been fairly small, meaning that one can still produce reliable estimates from these surveys. Nevertheless, the reader should bear in mind that the statistics reported in this chapter may be subject to more response bias than those reported in other chapters in this report.

As shown in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 (on page 46), the time children spent watching television varied according to whether it was a weekday or a weekend day, especially beyond the age of 6 years. Figure 5.1 shows the amount of time B cohort children spent watching television at each of the first three main waves. Australian children aged 0–1 years spend little time watching television. On any given day, regardless of the day of the week, fewer than 50% watched any television and only a quarter watched for longer than an hour. Two years later, only about a third of the B cohort children watched for less than an hour a day, another third for 1–2 hours per day, and the final third watched for more than the recommended 2 hours per day. By age 4–5 years, the weekday pattern remained unchanged but the pattern of weekend viewing had tipped towards longer exposure times, with fewer than one quarter watching for less than an hour and 45% watching for 2 hours or more.

Figure 5.2 shows how much time K cohort children spent watching television at each of the first three main waves. At 6–9 years old (Waves 2 and 3), television viewing was typically a weekend activity. During the week, around 40% of children watched less than one hour per day, including 18% who watched no television at all. At the other extreme, between a quarter and a third watched television for 2 hours or more a day. For this age group, the most frequent duration of television viewing on a weekday was 1–2 hours, a pattern followed by about one-third of the children.

In contrast, on weekend days, the majority of children aged 6–9 years watched television for more than 2 hours per day, and between a quarter and a third watched for 3 hours or more (Figure 5.2). Only one in ten watched no television on the weekend, a similarly small proportion watched less than one hour a day, and between a quarter and a third watched 1–2 hours a day on the weekend. Children aged 8–9 years were the most likely (32%) to watch television for more than 3 hours on a weekend day.

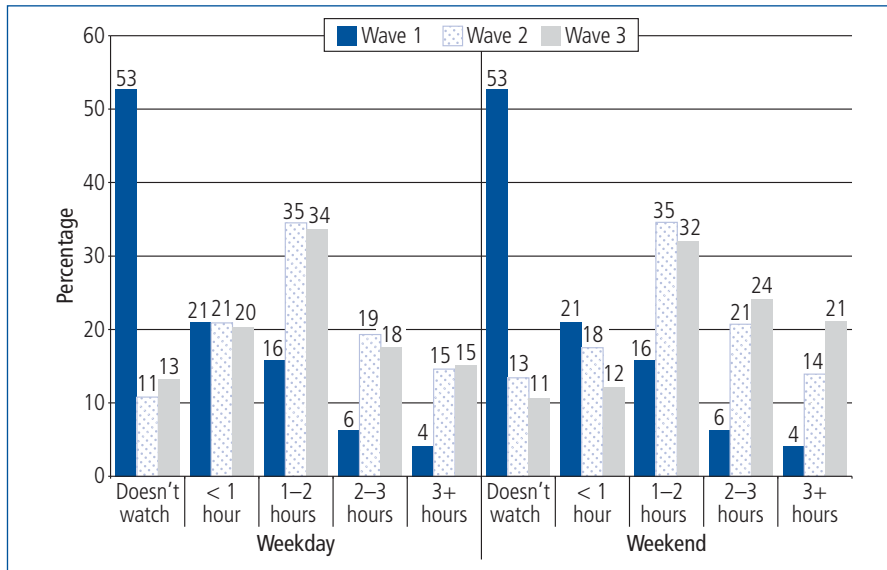


Figure 5.1 Study child's hours of television viewing, weekdays and weekends, B cohort Waves 1-3

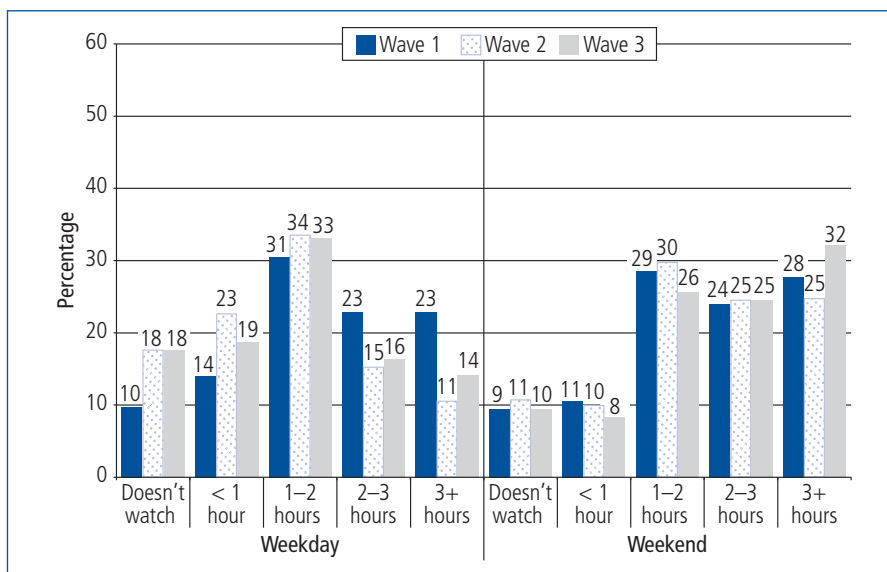
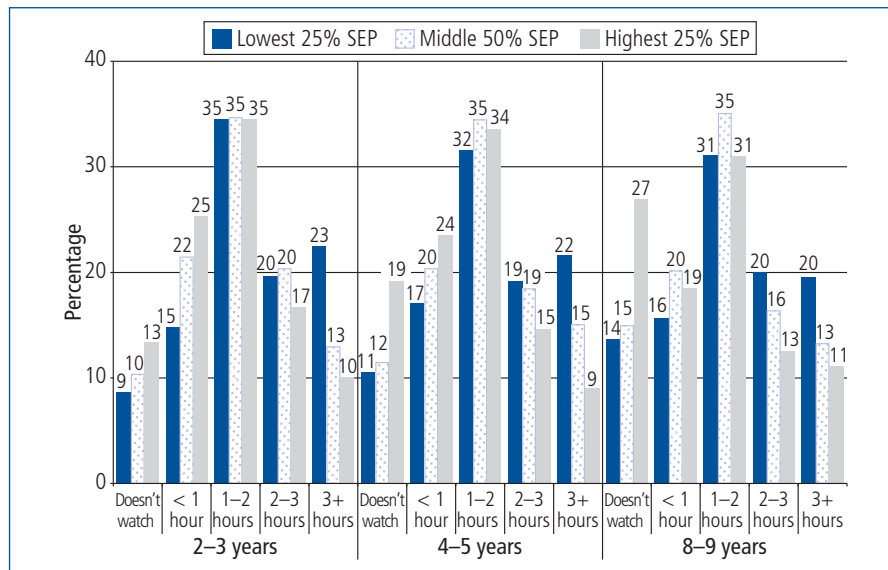


Figure 5.2 Study child's hours of television viewing, weekdays and weekends, K cohort Waves 1-3

5.2 Children's television viewing and family socio-economic position

At critical ages for child development (0-3 years), especially for the acquisition of language (Saxton, 2010), there appears to be a social gradient to children's television viewing. Figure 5.3 shows how time spent watching television varied by a child's family socio-economic position (SEP); that is, it exhibited a social gradient. The figure shows that the more disadvantaged the child's background, the more likely it was that they would watch television for more than 2 hours per day and the less likely that they would watch no television on a given day. By age 4-5, regardless of the cohort being followed, the major difference was that the proportion of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (lowest 25% SEP) watching more than 3 hours per day was more than double that of children from advantaged backgrounds (highest 25% SEP). School-aged children (K cohort aged

8–9 years) exhibited a much more attenuated social gradient in their television viewing, although compared to the lowest 25%, the most advantaged group was still about half as likely to watch television for 3 or more hours a day and more likely to use it for less than one hour or not at all.



Note: This figure includes three selected age groups for a comparison across the early–mid-childhood years.

Figure 5.3 Study child's hours of television viewing, weekdays, by family socio-economic position, B cohort Waves 2–3 and K cohort Wave 3

5.3 Time spent reading and family socio-economic position

In Waves 1, 2 and 3, parents completed a diary of the child's activities on a designated day, including a record of how much time the child spent reading something from a book or being read to. Researchers have proposed that the reason that “excessive” television watching should be avoided is that it displaces more desirable uses of time, such as time spent learning to read (see, for instance, Hancox et al., 2005).

Figures 5.4 and 5.5 show how time spent being read to or reading varied by family socio-economic position for two selected age groups. Figure 5.4, for the B cohort at Wave 2 (aged 2–3 years), shows an obvious social gradient in this activity—the higher the family's socio-economic position, the higher the chances that the child would be read a story and, moreover, the more likely it was that when stories were read, the activity would last for a longer time. Specialists in the study of how children acquire language talk about a “vocabulary spurt”. This occurs around the ages of 2–6 years, when the rate of adding new words to their vocabulary jumps from 50 words at early stages to 10,000 words or more at the end of the “spurt” (Saxton, 2010). Figure 5.4 shows that among the most disadvantaged families, on a given weekday or a weekend day, 41–47% of children were not read to at all, compared with only 15–22% of children in the most advantaged families. While a quarter of the children with the most advantaged backgrounds were read to for more than an hour on any given day of the week, only 16% of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were read to for this length of time. The 50% of families that fall in middle of the distribution by socio-economic position exhibited patterns of reading to the study child almost perfectly equidistant between the lowest and highest groups. When the data that generated Figure 5.4 are used to calculate the average (mean) time spent reading to children, the time spent reading to children in the third year of life was slightly lower on average than children reading or being read to at later ages.

School-aged children (K cohort Wave 3, aged 8–9 years) exhibited similar patterns of reading print media as for the B cohort Wave 2 children, but the differences in time spent reading for an hour or more by socio-economic status were more attenuated among the older children, as shown in Figure 5.5. This evidence suggests that one way in which parents with higher educational

attainments transmit social advantage to their children is by emphasising the acquisition of print literacy over television viewing.

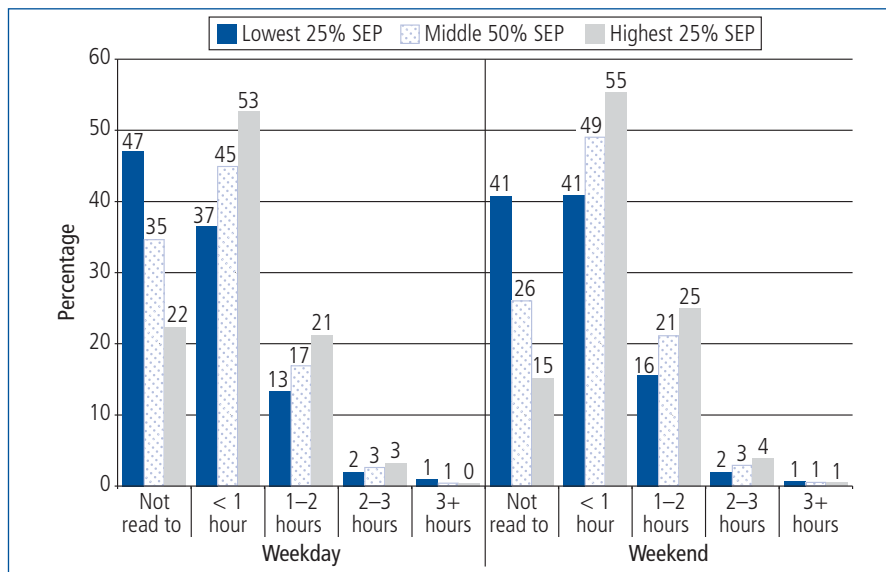


Figure 5.4 Study child's hours of being read to, weekdays and weekends, by family socio-economic position, B cohort Wave 2

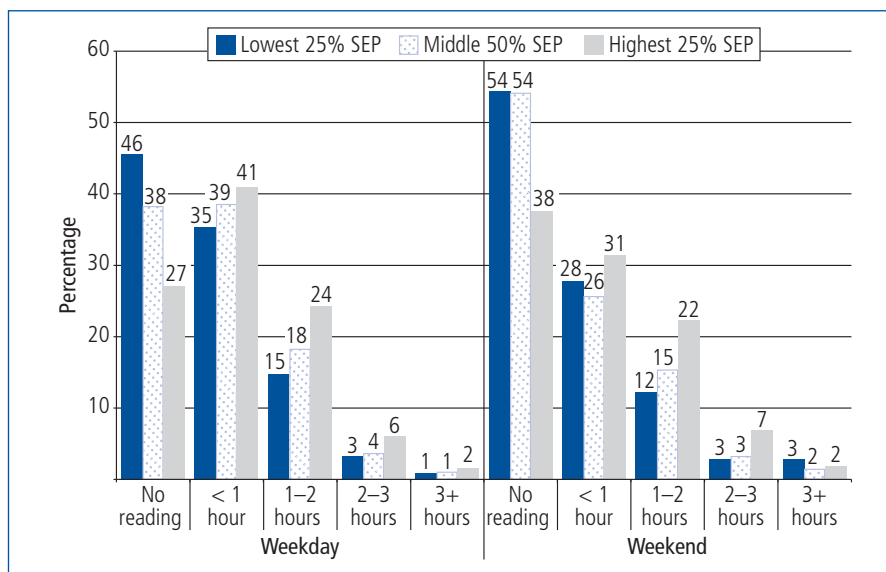


Figure 5.5 Study child's hours of reading, weekdays and weekends, by family socio-economic position, K cohort Wave 3

5.4 Parental concerns about television viewing, and mediation practices

This section examines parental concerns about their child's television viewing, and how this varies by the family's socio-economic position. As shown in Figure 5.6 (on page 49), despite the social gradient evident in relation to supervising a child's access to television, discussed later in this chapter, B cohort parents at Wave 3.5 (children aged 5-6 years) showed similar levels of concern about their child's television viewing, regardless of their socio-economic status. Most parents (87-88%) had no concerns about their child's television and DVD watching. Only one parent in ten

admitted to being even fairly concerned about their child's television viewing and the proportion declaring they were very concerned was negligible (1–3%).

Figure 5.6 also shows the level of concern that K cohort parents at Wave 3.5 (children aged 9–10 years) had about their child's television watching. Here, approximately two in ten parents expressed some level of concern. This increased concern is curious given that children at this age spent less time using televisions and DVDs on weekdays than 5–6 year olds (as illustrated in Figure 5.2 on page 46), so perhaps this concern is about weekend behaviour or the growing time demands of homework for 9–10 year olds.

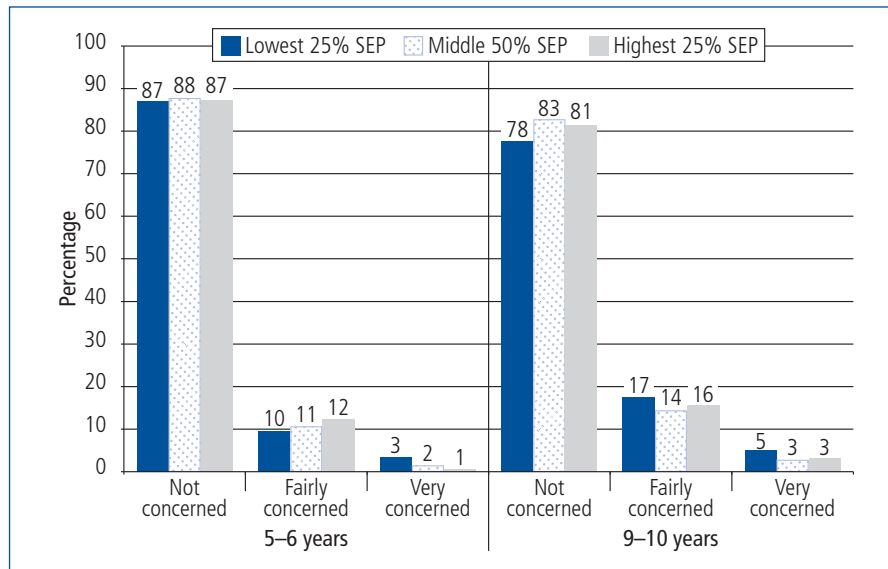


Figure 5.6 Parental concerns about study child's television viewing, by family socio-economic position, B and K cohorts, Wave 3.5

5.5 Supervision of children's use of television and family socio-economic position

Parents were asked to report whether they had rules about which television programs their child could watch and how much, and when their child could watch television or DVDs. Table 5.1 demonstrates that regardless of socio-economic status, the overwhelming majority of parents claimed to have rules governing their children's television watching. The consensus (94–98%) on the presence of family rules about program content is strong and enduring. There is slightly weaker consensus (about 71–81%) reporting that the family had rules governing the quantity of television the child could watch, and 83–94% of parents claimed they had rules about when a child could watch television. There was only a mild variation by socio-economic status.

Family has rules about ...	B cohort (5–6 years)			K cohort (9–10 years)		
	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP
	%			%		
programs that can be watched	93.9	97.2	98.4	93.5	97.8	98.0
quantity of television viewing	73.3	77.4	79.8	70.6	76.9	81.4
when child can watch television	82.5	91.1	93.9	84.1	90.8	92.7
No. of observations	539	1,503	866	567	1,449	854

While parents agreed that they had rules about their child's television watching, they also admitted to there being some inconsistency in the application of these rules, and once again this did not vary greatly by socio-economic status. Figure 5.7 shows that only about 40% of parents of 5–6 year olds claimed that they enforced the rules all of the time, and only about 35% of parents of 9–10 year olds made a similar claim. Around 50% of the parents of children in both cohorts said they enforced the rules most of the time, and a small proportion (3–10%) said they enforced the rules about half of the time or less.

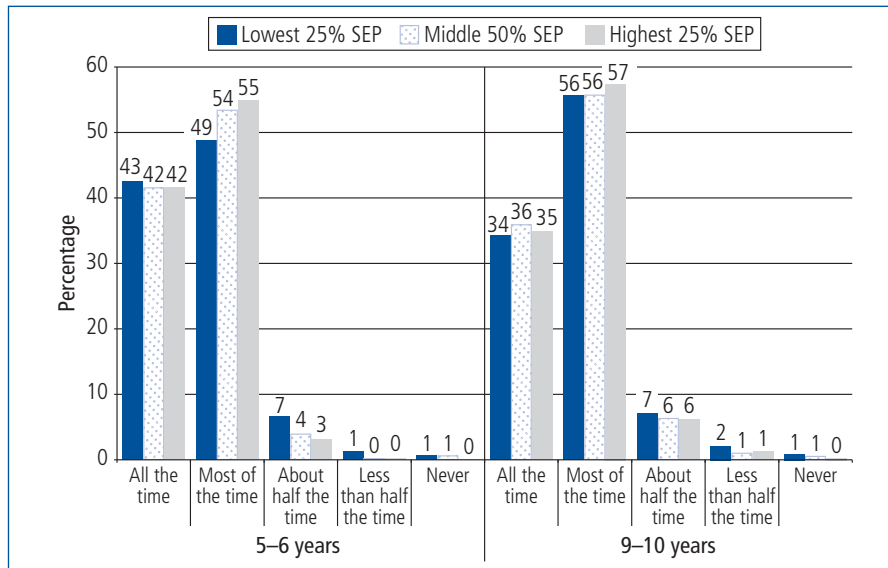


Figure 5.7 Parents' enforcement of rules about study child's television viewing, by family socio-economic position, B and K cohorts, Wave 3.5

LSAC also asks respondents about certain parental practices in relation to their children's television viewing. One such practice is co-viewing; that is, parents watching television programs with their children. This practice has been shown to be powerful in reassuring children who are frightened by actions or events displayed on the screen (Cantor, 2001). Co-viewing also has a significant positive effect on the child's acquisition of language. Experiments have shown that simply placing unaccompanied children in front of a television set does not improve their vocabulary (Saxton, 2010). However, children interacting with their parents while watching television not only improves their vocabulary but also helps them to distinguish between fantasy, dramatic representation, and reality, and to distinguish program material from advertising (Pecora et al., 2007). It is interesting to note that disadvantaged groups were more likely to engage in this beneficial practice than more advantaged groups when their children were aged 3–4 years and 9–10 years, as shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Parent and child television co-viewing, by family socio-economic position, B cohort Wave 2.5 and K cohort Wave 3.5

	B cohort (3–4 years)			K cohort (9–10 years)		
	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP
Parental co-viewing	%			%		
All the time	7.9	2.2	4.0	7.2	2.3	2.6
Most of the time	41.6	34.2	26.5	44.2	39.4	34.4
About half of the time	34.5	39.3	36.2	31.1	38.5	37.4
Less than half of the time/Never	16.0	24.3	33.4	17.4	19.8	25.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	553	1,521	870	580	1,462	864

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

However, parents' answers to other questions about the family's management of the child's television watching indicate that there may be lower levels of supervision than generally claimed about the existence and enforcement of rules, especially at the critical age of 3–4 years.

Parents of children aged 3–4 years were asked how often the child turned on the television set by themselves. According to their parents' reports, 37% of children from the least advantaged families turned on the television by themselves often, a further 29% sometimes, 18% only rarely, and the remaining 17% never. Proportions were roughly reversed among children from the most advantaged families; only 16% often turned on the set by themselves, 25% sometimes did, another 25% did so rarely, and 34% never did. Children from the large subgroup of families in the middle of distribution of socio-economic status fell neatly in between these extremes, as shown in Figure 5.8.

There is also an apparent, though less pronounced, social gradient in answers about the study child's control over changing channels with the remote control. This was most evident in the finding that more than half (52%) of 3–4 year olds from the most advantaged families never used the remote control to change channels, compared to fewer than a third (32%) of those from the least advantaged families. At the other extreme, only 11% of children from the highest socio-economic group often changed channels using the remote, compared to nearly a quarter of the children (23%) from families in the lowest socio-economic group. Once again, the proportion of children from families in the middle distribution of socio-economic advantage who never or often used the remote to select programs was intermediate and equidistant from those of the subgroups at the extremes of the distribution. There was no clear patterning by socio-economic advantage for the categories of children who sometimes or rarely used the remote to change channels, as shown in Figure 5.8.

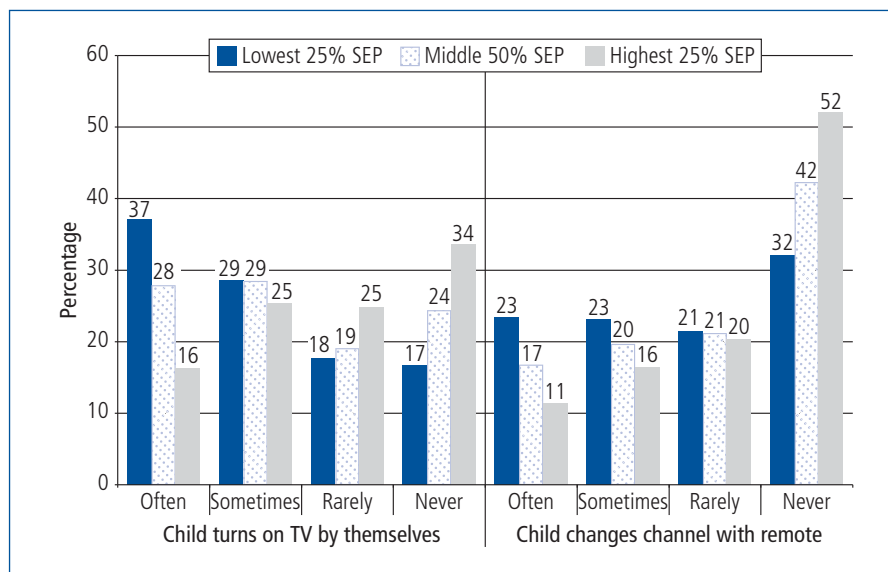


Figure 5.8 Study child's independent use of television, by family socio-economic position, B cohort Wave 2.5

Of course, encouraging children to self-regulate according to a set of family rules is a genuine step that parents can take as part of normal child development. Children's independent use of the television at age 3–4 years is not in itself undesirable. So this information about practices needs to be interpreted with some caution. More information about what happens as a result of the child's independent use of the television is needed before we can determine whether the child has internalised parental norms about use of the television. For example, if the child voluntarily watches recommended programming or uses the remote control to limit the time spent watching television, then the child's use of the television is not harmful. If, on the other hand, parents are not monitoring program content or the quantity of television use, then there are no effective parental norms guiding behaviour.

A proportion of the 3–4 year old study children's use of television is unsupervised. We can obtain a picture of how this looks by considering how the child's independent use of the television

varies with the frequency with which parents watch television with their child (Tables 5.3 and 5.4). If, for example, parents say they always co-view, then the child’s use of the remote is effectively supervised play with the remote device, regardless of how frequently the child uses the remote. If the parents claim that they often watch television with the child, then even if the child uses the remote often (or less frequently), this is also likely to be supervised play. However, if the parents claim that they sometimes co-view, but the child uses the remote often, then logic suggests that some portion of the child’s use of the television remote is unsupervised.

In Table 5.3, the shaded cells indicate where the child was likely to have turned on the television by themselves unsupervised. Using the same reasoning in Table 5.4, the shaded cells show where the parents’ answers indicated that the child used the remote control unsupervised. It is worth noting that the absolute numbers of children in these “most likely unsupervised” cells was a small proportion of all the 3–4 year old children in the B cohort with data for these items—439 cases out of a possible 3,143 (14%) turned on the television by themselves, and 254 cases out of a possible 3,136 (8%) changed channels using the remote (not shown in tables).

Parental co-viewing	Turned TV on by themselves	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total	No. of observations
		%					
Always		38.5	22.4	15.1	24.0	100.0	124
Often		33.5	25.4	18.2	22.9	100.0	1,175
Sometimes		22.1 ^a	30.6	22.4	24.9	100.0	1,589
Rarely		19.5 ^a	26.4 ^a	21.9	32.2	100.0	218
Never		8.4 ^a	11.6 ^a	5.7 ^a	74.3	100.0	37

Notes: ^a The shaded area indicates where the frequency with which the child turned the television on by themselves is greater than the frequency of parental co-viewing, suggesting the child turned the television on by themselves unsupervised.

Parental co-viewing	Changed channel with remote	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total	No. of observations
		%					
Always		26.0	21.4	12.6	40.0	100.0	123
Often		21.1	20.3	20.5	38.2	100.0	1,174
Sometimes		13.9 ^a	20.1	22.8	43.1	100.0	1,583
Rarely		9.4 ^a	13.5 ^a	18.7	58.5	100.0	217
Never		7.9 ^a	2.2 ^a	5.1 ^a	84.9	100.0	39

Notes: ^a The shaded area indicates where the frequency with which the child used the television remote by themselves is greater than frequency of parental co-viewing, suggesting unsupervised use of the television remote. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

The family practice of having the television running even when no one is watching may be considered to be an indicator of whether or not the family is implementing rules about television use—both in terms of content and quantity. Table 5.5 (on page 53) shows that a small proportion of families with 3–4 year olds and 9–10 year olds reported that the television was “always” on, even when no one was watching. A substantial proportion (one-quarter to a half, depending on socio-economic status) reported that the set was “often” or “sometimes” running even when no one was watching. Among the remaining families, the television was “rarely” or “never” on when no one was watching. The proportion of families who had the television on “rarely” or “never” when no one was watching increased with the age of the child. Socio-economic status affected how likely it was that the television would be running while there was no one viewing. This was most evident in households with a child aged 9–10 years, in which a high proportion (75%) of socio-economically

advantaged families “rarely/never” had the television on when no one was watching, compared to only 46% of the most disadvantaged families, and this difference was also evident in the younger age group. Similarly, a third of 3–4 year old children from families in the lowest socio-economic subgroup were more likely to be in a household where the television was running “always” or “often”, compared to only 10% of children from the most advantaged backgrounds.

TV on when no one watching	B cohort (3–4 years)			K cohort (9–10 years)		
	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP
	%			%		
Always	9.8	2.9	0.6	8.4	4.6	0.9
Often	21.3	15.2	9.2	18.8	14.3	6.7
Sometimes	29.2	31.1	25.0	27.2	25.5	17.3
Rarely/never	39.7	50.8	65.1	45.6	55.6	75.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	588	1,656	927	563	1,430	849

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Television watching during meal times can be a form of family co-viewing, but the research literature suggests this is a less desirable form of parents and children watching television together. Firstly, it has been suggested that it reduces the opportunities for verbal interaction, which is undesirable from the point of view of language development. Secondly, it divides attention, and many psychologists believe this delays children’s cognitive development. Finally, nutritionists believe that only by concentrating on eating is the body able to recognise when it has had enough to eat (Pecora et al., 2007; Richards, 2010).

Table 5.6 shows that LSAC families with young children frequently combined meals and television viewing; more than half of 3–4 year old and 9–10 year old children ate their meals while the television was on at least some of the time. There was also a social gradient in this practice. One in five of the children in both age groups from the most disadvantaged backgrounds “always” had meals while the television was on, whereas only 5–7% of children in the most advantaged families “always” had their meals under these conditions. Similarly, half of the children in the most advantaged families “rarely” or “never” ate a meal when the television was also running, while only a quarter of the children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds predominantly experienced mealtimes without television. The experience of children from families in the middle socio-economic subgroup was midway between the most and least advantaged groups, with one-third “rarely” or “never” eating meals while the television was on and 12–15% “always” eating their meals with the television running.

TV on at mealtimes	B cohort (3–4 years)			K cohort (9–10 years)		
	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP
	%			%		
Always	20.1	12.0	4.8	21.9	14.5	6.5
Often/sometimes	52.2	50.3	41.2	55.0	55.0	43.5
Rarely/never	27.7	37.7	54.0	23.1	30.5	50.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	587	1,684	925	580	1,451	858

5.6 Summary

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the demise of broadcast television (Hartley, 2004) are greatly exaggerated. This older medium is currently the dominant form of media used by young children in Australia. Children's television watching is low in the first year of life, but by age 2–3 years, television occupies a significant proportion of the child's time, a proportion that remains fairly constant thereafter. A substantial proportion of children above the age of 2 years spend more than the American Academy of Pediatrics' (2010) recommended limit of 2 hours per day watching television, especially on weekends.

Lower hours of children's television watching and higher hours spent using print media (either being read to or reading for themselves) are associated with increases in socio-economic advantage. Since competency with print media is important for school achievement, this may be one of the mechanisms through which social advantage is transmitted across generations.

Practically all parents, regardless of socio-economic position, claimed to have rules about television watching, governing suitable program material, when the television could be watched and for how long. However, the data suggest that many of these rules were applied inconsistently. In some households, the television was often running when no one was watching, or meals were consumed while it was on. Similarly, the child may have turned on the television or changed channels using the remote, at least in some instances, without parental supervision. The context for children's use of television varied by the families' socio-economic position, with less consistent supervision being evident among the more disadvantaged families. This was offset to some extent, however, because families from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds engaged more frequently in watching television with their children. In previous research, co-viewing with adults has been shown to reduce children's trauma and fright, and improve cognition, vocabulary and media literacy.

Early studies of new media—games consoles, computers, the Internet and mobile phones—assumed that the effect of these digital technologies would be very similar to those of the older medium of television. Although there have been some findings that suggest that an increase in time spent by children in front of “screens” is a contributor to the growing problem of obesity/overweight among children (Hardy, Dobbins, Denney-Wilson, Okely, & Booth, 2009), there are unexpected findings that suggest new media affect children's development in different ways than television, especially in their educational, social and emotional development (Bittman, Rutherford, Brown, & Unsworth, 2010).

5.7 Further reading

Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2009). *Use of electronic media and communications: Early childhood to teenage years*. Canberra: ACMA.

Brown, J. E., Nicholson, J. M., Broom, D. H., & Bittman, M. (2010). Television viewing by school-age children: Associations with physical activity, snack food consumption and unhealthy weight. *Social Indicators Research*, *101*, 221–225.

Rutherford, L., Bittman, M., & Biron, D. (2010). *Young children and the media: A discussion paper*. Melbourne: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

5.8 References

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2010). *Where we stand: TV viewing time*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved from <www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/pages/Where-We-Stand-TV-Viewing-Time.aspx>.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008a). *Environmental issues: Energy use and conservation* (Cat. No. 4602.0.55.001). Canberra: ABS.

Australia Bureau of Statistics. (2008b). *Microdata: Time use survey. Basic CURF, Australia 2006* (Cat. No. 4152.0.55.001). Canberra: ABS.

Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2009). *Use of electronic media and communication: Early childhood to teenage years*. Canberra: ACMA.

Bittman, M., Rutherford, L., Brown, J. E., & Unsworth, L. (2010, 18–20 November). *Digital natives? New and old media and children's outcomes*. Paper presented at the Current Issues and Prospects of Time-Use Study in East and West conference, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea.

Bjorkqvist, K. (1985). *Violent films, anxiety and aggression*. Helsinki: Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters.

- Brown, J., Bittman, M., & Nicholson, J. (2007). Time or money: The impact of parental employment on time that 4 to 5 year olds spend in language building activities. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 10(3), 149–166.
- Cantor, J. (2001). The media and children's fears, anxieties and perceptions of danger. In D. Singer & J. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children and the media* (pp. 207–221). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chakroff, J. (2007). *Parental mediation of advertising and consumer communication: The effectiveness of parental intervention on young children's materialistic attitudes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Retrieved from <www.ohiolink.edu/etd/send-pdf.cgi/ChakroffJenniferLeigh.pdf?acc_num=osu1190001119>.
- Christakis, D., & Zimmerman, F. (2007). Violent television during pre-school is associated with anti-social behaviour during school age. *Pediatrics*, 120(5), 993–999.
- Christakis, D., & Zimmerman, F. J. (2009). Young children and the media: Limitations of current knowledge and future directions for research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(8), 1177–1185.
- Hancox, R. J., Milne, B. J., & Poulton, R. (2005). Association of television viewing during childhood with poor educational achievement. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 159, 614–618.
- Hardy, L. L., Dobbins, T. A., Denney-Wilson, E., Okely, A. D., & Booth, M. L. (2009). Sedentariness, small-screen recreation, and fitness in youth. *The American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 36(2), 120–125.
- Hartley, J. (2004). From republic of letters to television republic? Citizen readers in the era of broadcast television. In L. Spigel & J. Olsson (Eds.), *Television after TV: Essays on a medium in transition* (pp. 386–417). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. (2011). *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2009–10 Annual Report*. Canberra: FaHCSIA.
- Millwood Hargrave, A., & Livingstone, S. (2006). *Harm and offence in media content: A review of the evidence*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Owens, J., Maxim, R., McGuinn, M., Nobile, C., Msall, M., & Alario, A. (1999). Television-viewing habits and sleep disturbance in school children. *Pediatrics*, 104(3), e27.
- Pecora, M., Murray, J. P., & Wartella, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Children and television: Fifty fears of research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Richards, J. E. (2010). The development of attention to simple and complex visual stimuli in infants: Behavioral and psychophysiological measures. *Developmental Review*, 30, 203–219.
- Rutherford, L., & Bittman, M. (2007). Review of research literature. In Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Media and communication in Australian families 2007: Report of the Media and Society Research Project* (pp. 203–356). Melbourne: ACMA.
- Saxton, M. (2010). *Child language: Acquisition and development*. London: Sage.
- Schor, J. (2004). *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*. New York: Schribner.
- Vandewater, E., & Lee, S. (2009). Measuring children's media use in the digital age: Issues and challenges. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52, 1152.