The Subversion of Free Play: A Study of the Impacts of Parental Philosophies and Socioeconomic Factors on Television Usage of Children

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Introduction

"Play is so fundamental to children's health and well-being—and so endangered—that the United Nations lists it as a guaranteed right in its Convention on the Rights of the Child" (Linn, 2008, p. 3). As Linn (2004) notes, "preserving and nurturing children's capacity to play is essential to all aspects of their mental, social, and emotional development" (p. 61), so it is imperative to evaluate other activities, namely television, that may take away from time spent engaging in play. Rather than the content of TV programs being the point of concern, this paper will support Marshall McLuhan's (1996) substantive theory, in which he argues that the simple act of watching TV steals time from other activities. Watching television produces the near opposite of the brain stimulation generated from engaging in play, as the brain switches to long, slow alpha waves, indicative of passivity, when the screen is turned on (Krugman, 1971). In order to develop an understanding of the types of home life in which children engage most heavily with media, this research will examine how parents use and regulate TV in their children's lives, circumstances in which TV use is encouraged or discouraged, and implications for free play. To address these topics of inquiry, I will evaluate responses from 100 parents of children under 18 and living at home from an anonymous, ten question online survey.

Method

To collect data, I utilized the online survey service SurveyMonkey.com to collect responses through a web link and a link posted on my personal Facebook account. Along with contacting people I know personally, I also used the snowball method of distribution (Morgan, 2008). Upon opening the link, participants were given a prompt in an attempt to discourage responses outside of the target demographic (see Appendix A). The questions included multiple choice, quantitative responses, and qualitative, short answer responses. Textual analysis was

utilized to categorize short answer responses, which could fall into multiple categories. In order to analyze the results, children were divided into three groups as evenly as possible: light media users (30.6%) are classified as watching 0-4 hours of TV a week; medium users (35.7%) at 5-10 hours; and heavy users (33.6%) at 11-40 hours. Households were also divided into two income groups as evenly as possible: lower income households (47%) are defined as annual earnings $80,000 and below; and higher income households (53%) are defined as $81,000 and above.

Findings

See Appendix A for overall survey results and Appendix B for tables containing results of textual analysis and figures with analyses of correlations.

TV as Reward and Acculturation

A significant number of parents reported using television as an incentive to get their children to complete other tasks, forming an early belief in the value of TV. As Linn (2008) states, "play—so central to health and well-being—was once children's default leisure activity, but we can no longer assume that to be true" (p. 26). Instead of being rewarded with play time, parents are incentivizing television. Of those who provided a rule for limiting TV use, 26% of parents said they allow their child to watch TV as a reward or to relax (Table 1), and almost a third of parents cited rewarding TV time in exchange for completion of homework/chores (Table 2). This has significant ramifications, as rewards are considered inherently good and desirable, on how children understand the importance of TV and how to value time spent watching it.

As Linn (2008) notes, many parents buy into the notion that screens are essential for child care, and some parents "even believe that they are inadequate to the task of raising children without screens" (p. 207). 7% of parents reported allowing their child to watch TV in order to get things done or relax (Table 1), and 44.1% selected 'to get time to myself' when asked what

factors impact their child's TV usage (Appendix A). These findings reveal a largely screen-dependent parental population who believe they need the distraction of TV in order to complete tasks. Ironically, as Linn (2008) observes, by hindering the natural ability of children to play and amuse themselves from an early age, this fear becomes like a "self-fulfilling prophecy. Once children become dependent on electronic media to stave off boredom or calm down, their families are more likely to become dependent on screens for functioning" (p. 207).

Due to widespread parental beliefs in the value of television and the dependence on media that children develop in order to function, children are truly inducted from early on in their lives into the screen-based lifestyle promoted by media. Kline (1995), as cited in Hill (2011), argues that television "has become 'the undisputed leader in the production of children's culture'" (p. 349). Children are constantly told by the media how to act, what to wear, and what to buy. 33.3% of parents reported allowing their child to watch TV because of concerns over children not being able to entertain themselves (Appendix A), but this overexposure is teaching children to "learn to look to screens rather than to their environment for stimulation, to expect to be entertained rather than to entertain themselves" (Linn, 2008, p. 56). As Olfman (2003) argues, "our cultural love affair with technology has rapidly transformed children's environments into ones that are dominated by screens" (p. 203). This screen-dependence entails vast ramifications, because as Susan Linn remarks, "we're raising a generation of children who are never going to have the experience of having to amuse themselves or having to calm themselves down. And so they're always going to need a screen. And that's exactly where the marketing industry wants them" (Barbaro, 2008). As Linn (2008) poignantly states, marketers work hard to create this dependence on their products so as to maintain profitable corporations: "Lovable media characters… and well-funded, psychologically savvy marketing strategies combine in

coordinated campaigns to capture the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children—teaching them to value that which can be bought over their own make believe creations" (p. 3).

The Mantra of Edutainment

The most commonly cited (25%) reason parents articulated for letting their children watch TV was the educational value, but what are they really being "taught," and at what cost? The modern emphasis on academic learning has a high price, because "as we acquire knowledge and become adept in the ways of knowing which are currently given high value, the imagination becomes increasingly irrelevant" (Kane & Carpenter, 2003, p. 137). Fantasy is often perceived as an obstacle to learning, and "we are allowed to nourish play only so long as it initiates reading, writing, and computing" (Paley, 2004, p. 32-33). Although many television programs and media products are marketed as combining entertainment and educational content, "everything we know about how our youngest children learn points away from screens to what they do naturally—engage with the people who love them best and explore the world around them with all five of their senses" (Linn, 2008, p. 46). This faith in the ability of media to teach children is severely misplaced: "When children are flooded with stimuli from television… they have fewer opportunities to learn to initiate action or to influence the world they inhabit, and less chance to exercise creativity" (Hill, 2011, p. 352). Even background television that children are not actively watching has been shown to diminish "both the length of children's play episodes and their degree of focused attention during play" (Thomas, 2007, p. 98).

Although play contains immense learning potential for children, time spent engaging in free play is being replaced by screen media. This can be understood in terms of McLuhan's (1964) substantive theory, because as he argues, "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (p. 24). The important component of watching

TV lies within its passive nature and what it is replacing, namely, play. The majority of surveyed parental concerns over TV revolved around content, and when parents did say TV took time away from other activities, this was almost without exception in reference to extra-curricular obligations, homework, and other activities children are also engaging in to the exclusion of unstructured free-time (Table 1). As Winn (2002) states, "it is easy to overlook a deceptively simple fact: one is always *watching television* when one is watching television rather than having any other experience" (p. 3). TV places children in a passive state, and as Winn (2002) notes, there is "no other experience in a child's life that permits quite so much intake while demanding so little outflow" (p. 4). This brings to attention McLuhan's (1964) mantra that "the medium is the message," because as he argues, "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (p. 25), and screen technology has certainly changed the lives of children into highly-paced and structured affairs in which there is progressively less time for play.

As Linn (2008) notes, "research suggests that the more time children have to nurture and develop their own interpretations, the more they are likely to move beyond the script they've viewed" (p. 30). Heavy viewers will thus be more susceptible to the ideologies contained in media because it inhibits original ideas by constantly telling children stories, instead of allowing them to develop their own. As Paley (2011) notes, "the problem arises when the one activity [play] in which the children can and do invent the story loses its legitimacy" (p. 62). This lack of imaginative exercise removes the need for children to invent their own stories, as "ready-made visual images and story lines require less work from viewers" (Linn, 2004, p. 72).

There are countless current products lauded as educational, but the introduction of the Leapfrog company in 1995 is widely considered to be "the beginning of the edutainment industry

as we know it today" (Linn, 2008, p. 51). The newly-released 2013 Toy of the Year nominees includes the *LeapPad2*, advertised as "a book-sized all-encompassing child entrancement device. Sure to save many a car ride from an epic meltdown" (Popken, 2012). This statement is tremendously revealing of the screen-dependent mentality cultivated in parents who are made to believe that their children require such an 'entrancement device.' With this dependence, "what's at risk is no less than the development of essential life skills—including the essential capacities to look to themselves for generating amusement, and to soothe themselves when they are stressed" (Linn, 2008, p. 41). The *LeapPad2* speaks to the waning ability of children to self-soothe, prompting tantrums and 'epic meltdowns' without a screen to relax them. Instead of being able to deal with a problem independently, children are acculturated into using media as a crutch when they are bored or upset, essentially crippling their individuality.

Socioeconomics and Viewing Patterns

Overall, two-parent households were more likely to be light-medium viewers than their counterparts in single-parent households (Figure 1). Commonsensically, single-parent households are less likely to have a parent at home with the children because they need to support the family, and as Linn (2008) notes, "working parents without access to adequate, organized child care may rely on television to keep children occupied at home" (p. 14). According to my findings, single-parent households are more likely to be heavy TV viewers (Table 1), presenting a disadvantage to children with only one parent due to previously discussed implications for play and the development of important skills. It is also worth noting that all four households who reported their children watching no TV were two-parent households. 99% of American households choose to have a TV (Winn, 2002), and my findings imply that of the

small percentage able to completely remove this influence, the support of two parents is needed because single parents are more reliant on screens as babysitters.

Children in high-income households were found to be 10% more likely to be heavy viewers than their counterparts in low-income households (Figure 2). While the majority of children in low-income households were classified as medium users, high-income households trended significantly upwards in their TV usage (Figure 2). This implies that with the opportunities wealth allows for increased media use (more TVs, channels, etc.) families are using this money to escalate TV consumption. This inference is also supported by the finding that three out of four of the households which reported no TV use by their children were classified as low-income. Consequently, it seems that children in low-income, two-parent households are likely to watch less TV because the extra parental support lessens the need for its babysitting function, and the lower-income depresses the ability to purchase screen technology.

The Endangerment of Free Play in a Mean World

Research suggests that "more creative play takes place in natural green spaces than traditional playgrounds" (Linn, 2008, p. 205), and commonsensically considerably more than indoors where the 'playground' is even less moldable to a child's imagination. However, as Elkind (2007) notes, "much of the time children once spent playing outdoors is now occupied by sedentary screen play" (p. 37). This phenomenon can be connected to increased media use in terms of Mean World Syndrome. Gerbner et al. (2002) define Mean World Syndrome as how "long-term exposure to television, in which frequent violence is virtually inescapable, tends to cultivate the image of a relatively mean and dangerous world" (p. 52). According to my survey, children whose parents felt safe letting them play outside were more likely to be light viewers, while parents who did not feel safe letting their children play outside were significantly more

likely to be a medium or heavy viewer (Figure 3). The amount of time children spend watching TV is likely to be similar to their parents (11% specified watching TV as family time; Table 1). Therefore, these trends can be understood in terms of Mean World Syndrome, because increased media usage led to an increased feeling of danger. The inverse was also true in that children who watched less TV were progressively less likely to have parents who think the world is a dangerous place. These findings have important implications, because not only are children likely to grow-up with similar fears, but they lose out on opportunities to engage with and learn from nature and play. This issue is compounded by the misconception that kids cannot entertain themselves, and because parents don't want to let them play outside, they turn to screens.

Parental fears of the outside world and a desire to keep their children "safe" and entertained indoors further heightens the screen-dependence of children. As Kane and Carpenter (2003) argue, so few modern adults "were encouraged to be alone with nature or to play freely… that we do not understand what is happening… cognitively when children play" (p. 130). This inability to relate positively to children's play has a high cost, because "play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels" (Elkind, 2007, p. 4). The significance of heavy media use is further illuminated by Schor's (2004) seminal study, where she found that this encourages involvement in consumer culture, and that this "involvement is a significant cause of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints" (p. 167). Schor (2004) also notes myriad studies which have documented additional negative effects, "such as the association between television viewing and lower cognitive skills, reading competency, brain development, and academic achievement," as well as correlations with obesity (p. 140). By not being allowed to play outside, children are subjected to all of these risks due to the sedentary, isolated lifestyle TV promotes.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that parental beliefs and socioeconomic factors have significant impacts on the amount of TV children watch, and that increased use limits time spent engaging in free play. However, the findings generated by my survey are limited due to the small sample size, and because while the developmental needs of children vary widely by age, they were only classified as under eighteen years old. However, regardless of age, children's play is important for the development of adult skills: "The ability to play is central to our capacity to take risks, to experiment, to think critically, to act rather than react, to differentiate ourselves from our environment, and to make life meaningful" (Linn, 2004, p. 61). As Hill (2011) argues, due to the proliferation of media and commercialization, "many children are being deprived of a 'full' childhood" (p. 348), and my survey results fit this trend of proliferation as 70% of households had five or more different types of media (Figure 4). As Linn (2008) fears, "one potential consequence of the baby-media industry's success in scamming American parents is that screen-saturated, play-deprived babies will grow into screen-dependent adults, without the will or capacity to question what they're being sold" (p. 202). My survey suggests that parents are using media to entertain their children, fostering this type of screen-dependent culture Linn is concerned about, likely to be shaped from an early age by dominant ideological messages. These findings necessitate a greater understanding by parents of how TV consumption impacts their children in order to facilitate the growth of a more creative and less-afraid world. For, as Winn (2002) advocates, "If parents would recognize the ultimate toll a time-consuming investment in television takes on young children's ways of thinking and behaving, they might change their focus from *what* their children are watching to why and how much time they are spending at this single activity and especially to what they are missing as a result" (p. 298).

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Appendix A

Survey Results

This survey is designed only for participation by a parent of one or more child under 18 years old living at home. The results are anonymous and for undergraduate research purposes associated with the University of Washington.

1. Which of the following best describes your household? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Single-parent household	17.0%	17
Two-parent household	**83.0%**	**83**
answered question		100
skipped question		0

2. Which of the following best describes the employment status of your household? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Single parent, employed	15.0%	15
Single parent, unemployed	3.0%	3
Two parents and only the mother is employed	2.0%	2
Two parents and only the father is employed	26.0%	26
Two parents and both are employed	**53.0%**	**53**
Two parents and neither are employed	1.0%	1
answered question		100
skipped question		0

3. Which of the following best describes your annual household earnings? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Below 20,000	5.0%	5
20,000-40,000	9.0%	9
41,000-60,000	17.0%	17
61,000-80,000	16.0%	16
81,000-100,000	19.0%	19
101,000+	**34.0%**	**34**
answered question		100
skipped question		0

4. Which of the following best describes your property/yard? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
No yard	8.1%	8
Small yard with no space for my children to play	2.0%	2
Small yard with some space for my children to play	34.3%	34
Large yard but not suitable for my children to play in	2.0%	2
Large yard with lots of space for my children to play	53.5%	53
answered question		99
skipped question		1

5. In general, do you feel safe letting your children play outside? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	83.8%	83
No	16.2%	16
answered question		99
skipped question		1

6. What types of media do your children have access to in your home? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Video game consoles (Wii, Xbox, Playstation, etc.)	65.7%	65
Handheld games (Gameboy, Playstation, Nintendo DS, etc.)	47.5%	47
DVD	86.9%	86
Blu-ray	25.3%	25
VHS	47.5%	47
Internet	83.8%	83
Basic Cable Television	46.5%	46
Premium Cable Television	36.4%	36
Radio	67.7%	67
Smart Phone	42.4%	42
iPod (or other music player)	57.6%	57
answered question		99
skipped question		1

7. Today's children live in a media-saturated society. On average, how much time does your child spend watching TV each week? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
No TV	4.1%	4
1-4 hours	26.5%	26
5-10 hours	35.7%	35
11-15 hours	16.3%	16
16-20 hours	7.1%	7
21-25 hours	6.1%	6
26-30 hours	3.1%	3
31-35 hours	0.0%	0
36-40 hours	1.0%	1
41+ hours	0.0%	0
	answered question	98
	skipped question	2

8. Why do you or do you not allow your child to watch TV? Download

	Response Count
Show Responses	90
answered question	90
skipped question	10

9. Are there household rules limiting the amount of TV your child watches? Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	73.7%	73
No	26.3%	26
If yes, please specify. Show Responses		67
answered question		99
skipped question		1

10. What factors impact how much TV your child watches? (Check all that apply) Create Chart Download

	Response Percent	Response Count
It's not safe to play outside	7.5%	7
They get bored without entertainment	16.1%	15
I often don't have time to do other activities to entertain them	17.2%	16
To get time to myself	44.1%	41
Other (please specify) Show Responses	69.9%	65
answered question		93
skipped question		7

Appendix B

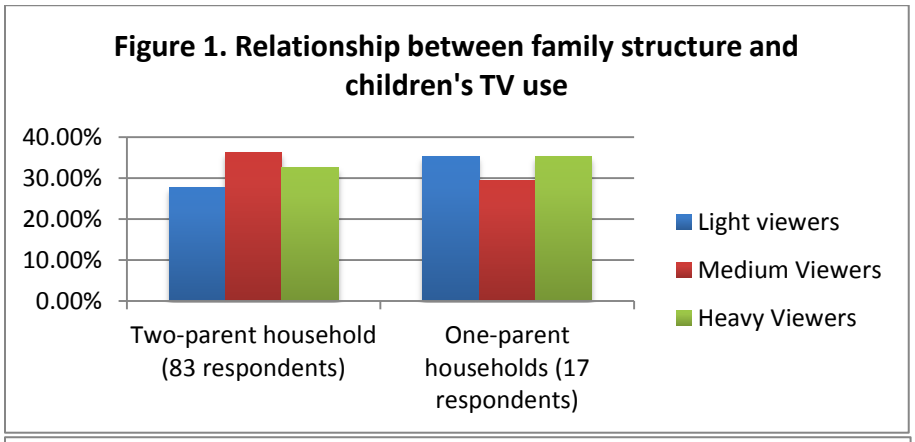
Textual Analysis and Correlations

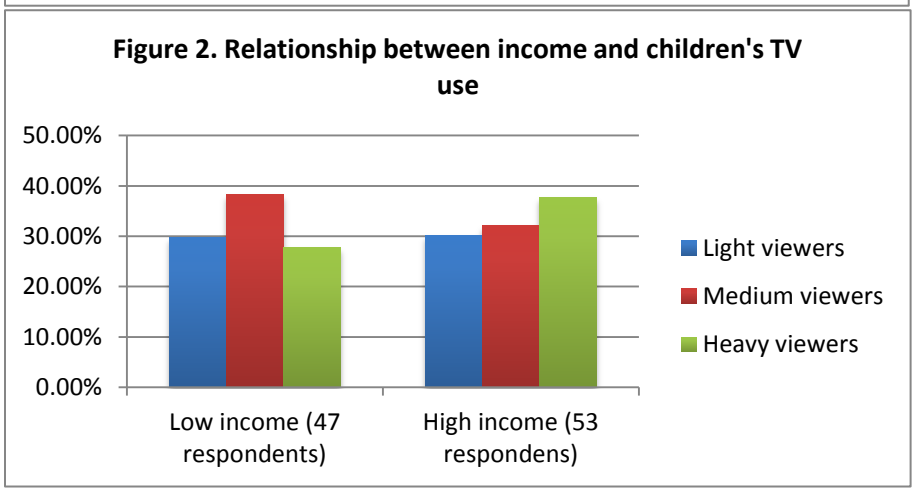
Table 1. Why do you or do you not allow your child to watch TV? Categorized short response.

Y: Used as a reward	10
Y: Educational value	25
Y: For children to relax/unwind	16
Y: Family time	11
Y: Insight into American and other cultures	6
Y: So parents can get things done/relax	7
N: Concerns over commercialism	3
N: Concerns over sex/violence	2
N: Distracting from other activities/too busy	16
Other	16

Table 2. Are there household rules limiting the amount of TV your child watches? Categorized short response.

Homework/chores must be completed	19
Time limit	17
Other	31





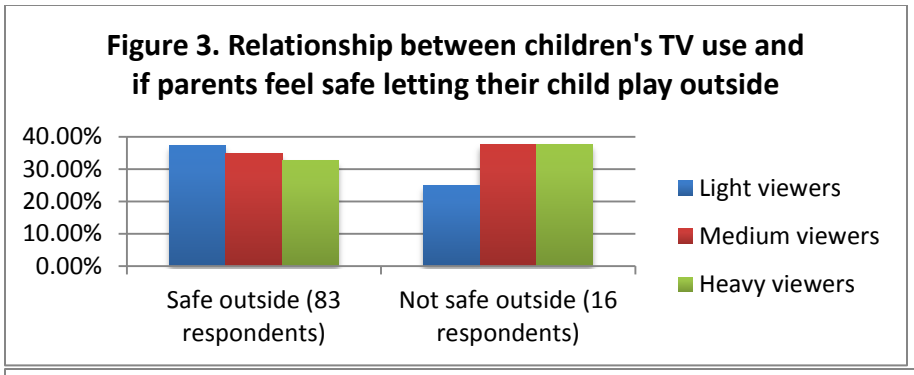


Figure 3. Relationship between children's TV use and if parents feel safe letting their child play outside
40.00%
30.00%
20.00%
10.00%
0.00%
Safe outside (83 respondents)
Not safe outside (16 respondents)
Light viewers
Medium viewers
Heavy viewers

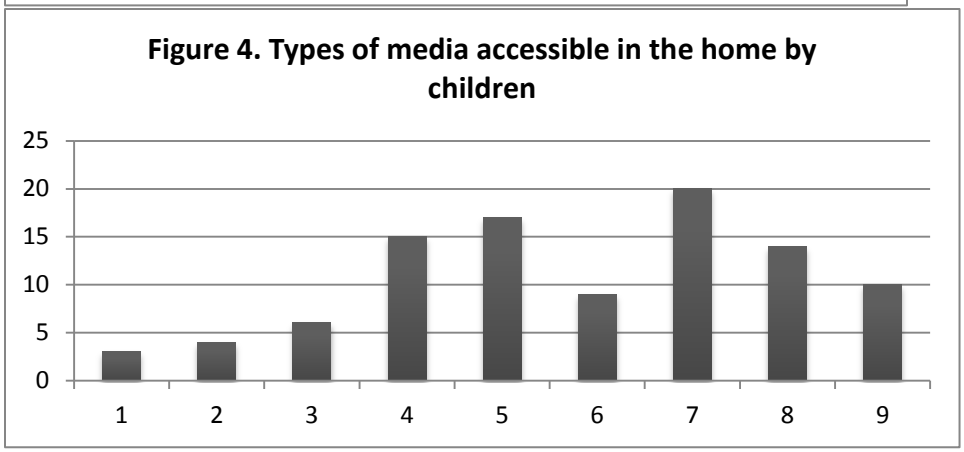


Figure 4. Types of media accessible in the home by children
25
20
15
10
5
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9