

**Building Family Strengths
through the Positive Use
of Television**

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Television is typically viewed with a high degree of concern and criticism. Yet, it is a medium of communication, entertainment, and education that will remain an important part of American society for the foreseeable future. A productive approach to the analysis of the impact of television is to consider how it may function as a positive force for building family strengths. This paper is designed as an overview of issues related to television's impact on the family, with an emphasis on recommendations for future research. Rather than providing extensive lists of citations and references to an immense extant literature, the present authors refer the reader to John Murray's (1980) bibliography.

TV AND EXTERNAL VALUES

To begin a discussion of the impact of television on families, it is important to understand the dynamics and motivation behind the viewing process. Postman (1979) provided assistance with his comparison of the viewing experience and the nature of the educational system. Postman argued that:

Television is an attention-centered curriculum. In one sense it has no goal other than keeping the attention of its students. Unlike the school, which selects its subject matter first and then tries to devise methods to attract interest in it, television first selects ways to attract interest and allows content to be shaped accordingly. (p. 164, emphasis in original)

The vehicle of television is the image while the vehicle of education is the written word. These vehicles require

different kinds of mental processing, according to Postman (1979).

Because the *school curriculum's* primary form of information is language, its style of teaching is expository. . . . Concepts, generalizations, verbal knowledge--reasoning itself--are hierarchical in nature. There is a structure to ideas. . . . Because *television's* primary form of information is the image, its style of teaching is narration. And because of that, it is concerned with showing concrete people and situations toward which one responds by either accepting or rejecting them on emotional grounds. Television teaches you through what you see and feel. (p. 165, emphasis added)

The difference between television and traditional education is neither good nor bad. But it is important to understand that the nature of television viewing is different in kind from the process of traditional rational thought.

A second issue of importance is the motivation behind television programming. The central goal of television is not education, nor even entertainment, but the selling to advertisers of mass audiences. The larger the audience that television can deliver, the more money that can be charged for advertising time.

An integration of these two ideas is enlightening. Since television communicates through emotion rather than through rational thought and since the primary goal of programming is to reach large audiences, most television programs are designed to appeal at an emotional level to the general public. "Special-interest" programming is rare because it appeals to small audiences and emphasizes education, acquisition of facts, or the cultural arts rather than emotion. By definition, therefore, the unique needs of individual families are *not* being met by television. The obvious result is widespread criticism and dissatisfaction. In fact, most of the criticism associated with television falls in the area of concern about external values that are brought into the home against the preferences of the family members. A woman volunteered this complaint on the back of a questionnaire collected recently by the authors:

TV has much too great an influence on the American public. As the most widely used medium, it informs us what to wear, eat, how to look, and act. It teaches us how to treat others and ourselves emotionally, socially, spiritually, and moralistically.

TV is no longer an opportunity to enjoy the arts but a guide to live by!

Violence

The first type of external value concerns the frequent charge that excessive or gratuitous violence occurs on prime-time television and in children's cartoons. This issue has received the most extensive research of any area of television analysis. The time will not be taken to re-view it here since it is readily available to the interested reader. Generally, the issue focuses on three main areas. The first area is the alleged effect of television in desensitizing the viewer to violence. The second area is the fear that television violence will be imitated, illustrated by the work of Bandura, Berkowitz, and others (Murray, 1980). The popular press occasionally runs such stories as the boys who poured gasoline on a transient and set him on fire the day after television aired a movie showing the same incident. Research being planned at Oklahoma State University will examine the relationship between viewing television violence and respondents' attitudes regarding child and spouse abuse. The third area is that television violence tends to obscure the distinction between reality and fantasy, especially where perceptions of violence are concerned.

Sexuality

Increasing in frequency in recent years, television sex is more titillation than it is serious sensuality. It represents a salient concern for many viewers and has received an extensive amount of research emphasis. Three general areas are evident when considering the issue of television sexuality. First, many people feel embarrassed by what they see on television programs and commercials. Another woman commented on the back of the authors' questionnaire:

There is too much detail in having babies . . . affairs, etc. As a parent I feel very uncomfortable watching such programs with my child. I also think the commercials on feminine products are embarrassing to most women. (It also embarrasses the males watching with you.)

More research needs to be done to understand how television elicits feelings of discomfort or shame in the viewer, and

whether this discomfort is experienced for self or on behalf of fellow viewers (especially children). Secondly, television may portray a sexual value system that differs from the standards held by the family members. This is the issue that is currently being pursued by conservative groups that see television as a harmful element impacting on the American family. The final concern is imitation of television sexuality. Not only may youth engage in sexual experimentation, but some adults may perceive their marriages as dull in comparison with marriages portrayed on television dramas and soap operas. These important areas have received little systematic investigation.

Commercialism

Concern with television commercialism is usually manifested in one of four areas. First, television commercials may express values related to consumption that are in conflict with parental values, basic principles of nutrition and diet, and basic hygiene practices. One example is the current concern over television's portrayal of highly-sugared cereals as desirable. Secondly, some research has focused on the expectations, assumed to be internalized by certain segments of the population, as to what constitutes an appropriate or normal life style. It is believed that some groups perceive themselves as "relatively deprived" when contrasting themselves with the typical affluence portrayed on many TV commercials and by many television families. If the average socioeconomic status in the United States were judged solely by viewing television programming or commercials, it would be highly skewed in the direction of affluence. A related concern is that television removes a perceived ceiling on desires and creates high expectations for materialism. In sociological terminology, this is "anomie"-- in the language of many parents, it is greed. This is illustrated not only by television commercials and portrayals of families, but by many game shows where vast amounts of money can be won seemingly by anyone who walks in off the street into the television studio. Finally, research indicates that television commercials directed toward children influence parent-child interaction. Stone-man and Brody (Note 1), for example, found that the power assertions of mothers and the purchase-influencing attempts of children were higher in commercial viewing compared to non-commercial viewing experimental groups. An extension of this research focus might be to examine the impact of television commercialism on adult relationships.

Families and Minorities

Many writers believe that television not only portrays the world but helps to shape it as well. If this were true, television's portrayal of family life has a causative influence on the American family.

Although few social scientists have tried to investigate the imprints of the family-oriented series, there seems little doubt that it has altered our assumptions about how parents and siblings should behave. (Waters, 1978, p. 87)

This research interest, typified by the work of Alley and Brown (1980), focuses on TV as the independent variable. In this manner, it varies from much of the research reviewed above.

Highly related to the portrayal of families is the concern with the portrayal of sex-role stereotypes and ethnic minorities on television. Viewers may rely on television experience for ethnic attitudes in the absence of personal experience. This is especially problematic given the stereotypical portrayal of these groups by television.

TV AND EDUCATION IN THE FAMILY

When most people think of television and education in the family, they tend to think of PBS programming. Commercial television also provides educational television programming, but it is less obvious because it is scattered among the more prevalent entertainment-oriented programming.

The range of educational programming, even on commercial television, is fairly large and varied. The authors have developed a preliminary typology of educational programs to begin to organize this variety. "Education/information" is illustrated by television news and news magazines. News-related programming has become very popular since the hostages were seized in Iran in November, 1979, and held prisoner during the 1980 national election year. Because the primary vehicle of television is the image, television news tends to have a high entertainment component. Comstock (1980) stated: ". . . the image takes over from the cerebral and what was construed as illustration becomes the essence of coverage" (p. 43). However, "education/information" programming can provide the family with some potential for, if not true education, at least an increased awareness of current affairs.

An example of the second type, "education/instruction," occurred when NBC televised the *National Love, Sex, and Marriage Test*. This program attempted to teach some basic principles of family life education to the mass audience. Test forms were even published in many TV guides. Again, though a strong entertainment component was obvious in the program, potential for family instruction in the areas of marital communication and family functioning was widespread. Other kinds of "education/instruction" can involve the teaching of art, gardening, woodworking, gourmet cooking, and other skills and crafts.

When people think of educational programming, they generally think of "education/documentary" which presents animals, the undersea world, and other kinds of interesting information in an entertaining format. Even in this area, however, the question of family values can be important. For example, ABC recently aired a "news close-up" entitled *Homosexuals*. According to the program description:

Many of the men and women talk positively of their sexuality, but some recall the pain of being, as one man puts it, "different and constantly being put down for being different." Others interviewed include a museum curator who believes his creativity and homosexuality are "inextricably woven together"; a lesbian who believes that heterosexual couples "can learn a lot from us and from our struggles"; and a man who, at age 50, "suddenly went over the fence."

This was an "education/documentary" show but it was related to a topic that some families might consider inappropriate in their home. On the other hand, such a program could provide an opportunity for discussion between spouses or between parents and their children.

Examples of "education/dramatization" include classical literature reenacted on the screen. These could be used in the home to encourage an appreciation of classical literature through family discussion or by inspiring the family to check out the book from the library and read it together. In addition, "education/dramatization" may encourage individual enhancement and growth.

"Education/fine arts" includes mime, ballet, live theater, and other performing arts. As discussed earlier, the motivation behind commercial programming does not usually encourage narrow appeal programs. Occasionally, however, such special-interest programming can be seen on commercial television as well as on PBS.

The final type of educational programming falls in the category of "education/consciousness-raising." This may be done in one of two ways: either through dramatization or through documentaries. What separates this category from "education/dramatization" and "education/documentary" is the focus on social issues and cultural values. An example of consciousness-raising through dramatization is the week-long series *Roots*. This docu-drama taught Americans a tremendous lesson about the black experience. It was certainly an example of the potential of television to educate. Similar comments could be made about other dramatizations such as *Norma Rae*, *Holocaust*, and *Fallen Angel*. Consciousness-raising through documentaries is illustrated by several recent television programs dealing with such social issues as world hunger, poverty, drug abuse, and arson. There is potential in this kind of programming for the educational growth of many families.

Perhaps at this point, it would be useful to point out a difference between "incidental learning" and "planned learning." Most television learning is incidental or "accidental" in nature and can be readily seen in children's imitation of commercials or action-oriented programs. The typology presented above was prepared to sensitize the reader to the potential of television for *planned* learning. While there are obvious examples of planned learning, such as *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers*, the authors believe that television has a much larger potential to provide prosocial and deliberate learning between husbands and wives as well as parents and children.

Related to this is a distinction between education and socialization. While the literature does not always make a clear distinction, education can be thought of as the imparting of facts, information, and knowledge. Socialization may be considered as teaching people how to relate to others, to be "human," and to fit into society.

Very often, planned learning is educational while the important area of socialization is left to incidental learning. This may be at the heart of the criticism dealing with external values intruding upon the home. Of course, it does not necessarily *have* to be this way. Such aspects of socialization as family values, communication skills, and cultural norms can be reinforced through the conscious use of television as an educator to the family. Through directing television's potential to socialize as well as educate, television can be turned into a positive force in the home. A woman's comment on the authors' survey related:

My daughter has been interested in TV within her capabilities since she was six months old. When

she was two or three, she went around the house with her toy mop "disinfecting and deodorizing." At three and one-half, she knows and recognizes all the letters of the alphabet, reads words, and counts to 30. Only some of this has come through our relationship. A larger part came through *Sesame Street*. I do not feel that she is unusual. I've never seen a baby who was not fascinated by a TV commercial.

This mother's experience illustrates both incidental and planned learning. That these kinds of learning can be channelled is an assumption implicit in the title, "Building Family Strengths Through the Positive Use of Television."

This is probably the area most in need of research at this time. Very little attention has addressed the frequency and consequences of viewing education-oriented programs in the home. Some work in the area of children's creativity has been done by the Singers (Murray, 1980). In addition, Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978) have profiled the typical consumer of PBS television. Clearly, much attention needs to be paid to the role of educational television in building family strengths.

TV AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Of particular interest to the present authors is the role of television in marital and parent-child communication. To test various hypotheses in this area, the authors conducted a survey of 256 families in a major urban center and in a university community. The sample was drawn using directories that listed households by address. This allowed the inclusion of a typically hard-to-sample population--those with unlisted phone numbers. Approximately 51 percent of the listed phone households and 36 percent of the unlisted phone households responded to the questionnaire. The presentation of findings is not a major emphasis of this paper. Therefore, results of this research will only be discussed as they illustrate issues related to the consideration of television's impact on communication within the family.

Current advice from groups, such as Action for Children's Television (ACT) and the National Parent Teachers Association (PTA), encourages parents to watch television programming with their children and to discuss family television viewing together. It is suggested that such communication offers the child a realistic perspective with which to evaluate television. Although this advice is generally accepted as correct on an intuitive level, little empirical research has

addressed the correlates of this behavior and the frequency with which it occurs. In the authors' questionnaires discussed above, the parents in the sample were asked how many times they watched cartoons and educational children's television with their 4 to 19-year-old child in the last seven days. As Table 1 indicates, 41 percent of the parents of children in this age group had not watched children's programming with their a child a single time in the last seven days. Sixteen percent of the parents had watched children's programming with their child more than three times. Table 1 also presents the percentage of parents who stated they had spent time in general with their child and enjoyed doing things with their child more than three times in the last week. The tentative conclusion is that watching children's programs was not a common parent-child activity for this sample of respondents who otherwise spent time and engaged in activities with their children.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Parents Interacting with Their Children Concerning TV and Related Activities*

Activity	Weekly Frequency of Occurrence				
	Zero	One	Two	Three	> Three
<u>Television activities</u>					
I watched cartoons and educational children's shows with this child	41	18	18	7	16
I talked with this child about TV shows we watched together	28	16	14	14	29
<u>Related activities</u>					
I spent time with this child	2	2	4	9	83
I enjoyed doing things with this child	3	3	10	9	74
I enjoyed talking with this child	0	2	5	5	87

*Children ranged in age from 4 to 19.

Similarly, the respondents were asked how many times they talked with their child about TV shows they watched together in the last seven days. As Table 1 indicates, 28 percent of the parents had *not* talked to their child about TV. Only 29 percent had talked with their child more than three times about TV shows they watched together in the last seven days. These figures are compared with how many parents had talked in general with their children. Eighty-seven percent reporting talking with this child more than three times in the last seven days and *all* parents had talked with the child at least once. These findings indicate that the parents in the sample *did* interact and talk with their children. It simply appears that television was not a salient topic of conversation and that the interaction between parents and children did not center upon television. These findings are supported by Postman (1979) who concluded:

Whereas the school curriculum is community centered--that is, learning takes place in the presence of others in something approximating a ritualized context--the TV curriculum is individual-centered. . . . *Television is an individualizing medium.* One experiences TV and responds to it in psychological as well as physical isolation from others. (p. 166, emphasis in original)

One question on the survey asked the respondents the frequency with which "I feel guilty about how much television I watch." Approximately 74 percent of the respondents reported rarely or never feeling guilty about their television viewing. This finding can be interpreted in one of two ways. Either this question simply elicited a socially desirable response or the majority of people did not feel guilty about their television use. If the latter interpretation were correct, one conclusion that may be drawn is that the recommendations of ACT and the National PTA are not having a strong impact on parent-child use of television. This has important implications for those interested in family life education.

There is another way to consider the role of television on communication in the family. The Nielson data on the growth of television households in the United States are compared with our data in Table 2. As can be seen, the percentage of American homes with television sets has been near the saturation level for a number of years. Currently, over 98 percent of all homes or 74,500,000 households have television. A second trend illustrated by the table is the number of homes with more than one television set. In 1959, less than 10 percent of American homes had more than

one set, but by 1979, the percentage of homes with more than one television had risen to 47 percent.

TABLE 2
Percentage of Households with Television
from 1959 to 1980

Year	Homes with Television	Multiple-Set Homes
<u>A. C. Nielsen data</u>		
1959	85.9	8.2
1965	92.6	18.0
1970	95.2	31.4
1975	97.5	43.8
1977	97.6	45.1
1979	98.0	47.0
<u>Authors' data</u>		
1980	98.8	68.8

Comstock, et al. (1978) concluded that families possessing one television set are more likely to view it as a family, whereas families with multiple sets are more likely to allow children's isolated viewing. The practice of isolated viewing has been the subject of strong cautions by those writing in the area of television-viewing strategies (Note 2). The issue of the potentially detrimental effects of multiple-set ownership, given indications from data collected by the authors, will need to be dealt with in the future in order to draw more definitive conclusions about the consequences of multiple-set ownership.

Television also impacts on husband-wife communication. Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976), in an important study dealing with television and marital tension, document the use of

television to avoid tense interaction, particularly in crowded homes.

The questionnaire data collected by the authors did not correlate television and family conflict but contained the questions, "How often does television *increase* communication between you and your spouse?" "How often does television *interfere* with communication between you and your spouse?" Both questions yielded distributions which were slightly skewed to the "never" end of the continuum. By itself, little can be drawn from this finding except that most respondents acknowledged the potential of television to both hinder and improve marital communication. Further understanding of this relationship was obtained by correlating responses to these questions with other indicators of marital communication. Perceptions of television's ability to increase communication were related to having a stimulating exchange of ideas, engaging in activities together, laughing together, and working together. Perceptions of television interfering with communication were negatively related to the same items. Those perceiving television as increasing communication appeared to be those who already possessed a high degree of "family strength." They were somewhat likely to express their true feelings with their spouse, tell their spouse how they thought, how they felt, and what they believed. Conversely, those perceiving that TV interfered with communication had more difficulty expressing feelings, shifting conversation away from trivial matters, and were somewhat more likely to complain that their spouse did not understand them.

The research was designed by the authors to test specific hypotheses related to television and parent/child interaction as well as marital communication. Preliminary analysis indicates that television did play a role in communication within the family. It is hoped that more research will help in understanding how television can be used to facilitate family communication.

TV VIEWING SKILLS

A recent trend in the consideration of television's impact on the family is to emphasize critical viewing skills. Comstock (1980) pointed out that "a very sizable proportion of the audience at any given time on a typical evening watches a program because it appears on the channel to which the set is already tuned. . . ." (p. 38). If television's potential to build family strengths is to be successfully tapped, families must learn to exercise control of the medium in the

home (Ellis & Streeter, 1980). Increasing attention in family life education is being paid to the development of critical viewing skills (Notes 2 and 3).

Basically, viewing strategies are ways of learning how to view television in a critical manner rather than allowing its values to affect the family through random and incidental learning. Techniques include planning viewing for a week at a time, restricting the number of hours for viewing, and restricting the type of program viewed (Comstock, et al., 1978). Some families try reducing television's intrinsic appeal by buying small black and white sets or using small rabbit ears instead of a cable. One woman in the authors' sample wrote:

I could be a real TV freak. I'm learning that when I'm very busy I must force myself to turn it off or I can't get anything accomplished. I have to prioritize my activities. I feel good if I've done my work first and *then* watch TV.

This woman uses television viewing as a reward for completion of her household chores.

One reason to learn viewing skills is that viewers are "captives" of the networks' schedules. Technological advances promise to offer options that will help alleviate this problem. For example, pay movie channels typically run major movies six or seven times, allowing the consumer to fit the viewing into the family schedule rather than being captive to the networks' schedules. Video cassette recorders, which have the capability of automatically taping several hours of programming to be played back at the viewer's convenience, also offer this type of flexibility.

Viewing options are expected to be expanded further by an increased number of channels. The expansion of cable television and satellite television is expected to provide a choice of twelve or more channels for over 70 percent of all American homes by 1985 (Fournier, 1980).

Consideration of this expansion of options raises a peripheral, but extremely important, point. This entire paper has dealt with the issue of television *quality* and the greater choice of programming can potentially help improve the quality of what is viewed. However, as more options allow increased viewing of programs the family enjoys, the total amount of time spent viewing can be easily increased. This is the issue of television *quantity*. By the end of the 1970s, the *average* number of hours of family television viewing was seven hours per day (Comstock, 1980). If new television options significantly increase this figure, it is doubtful if the goal of building family strengths is being served.

Many writers believe that *any* increase, even "high quality" viewing, can have serious negative consequences. This seems to be particularly problematical for children who have not yet accumulated the experience necessary to separate television fantasy from television reality--perhaps the most important component of critical viewing skills.

The "pause button" function of most video systems is particularly important for families interested in increasing their interaction with television viewing. Traditionally, it was difficult to discuss on-going programming since programs cannot be stopped for conversation. With the capability of interrupting taped shows at the touch of a button, discussion of interesting aspects can occur without missing any of the program.

One strategy that deserves special attention is simply getting rid of television altogether. This will not be a viable answer for most people. For one thing, television is expected to occupy an increasingly important place in society. The technology exists to combine television with the home computer as well as with a video communication system. In addition, it is doubtful that throwing out the television set can really solve the problem. Condry (1979) has drawn an analogy between an industrial smokestack and television. For him, going without television is no more a solution to a society that is increasingly violent and sexually-oriented than closing the window is a solution to a community's air problems. Rather than ignoring the problem, viewers need to limit and mediate television's effects through developing critical viewing skills.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The majority of research reviewed in this article focuses primarily on television values and their effects on children. This focus does not represent the only important questions that need to be addressed. The present authors are interested in looking beyond the perspective of the child to examine the effects of television on all relationships within the family and on the family as a holistic system. Because of new television options, such as the video cartridge or video disk capabilities, pay television, and an increasingly popular cable network, television's impact on the entire family unit is a question that will be receiving greater and greater attention. There is need for research to replace the folk wisdom and opinion that is currently believed when the issue of television's impact on family dynamics is raised. It is hoped that this extended research perspective will be

a viable concern in the future and spawn much valuable research (Note 4). This is not to say that no attention has been paid to either positive aspects of television or to the impact of television on intra-familial relationships. Important work (Murray, 1980) has been done, but greater research attention will help to obtain a more complete picture of television's role in building family strengths.

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NOTES

1. This research, entitled *The indirect impact of child-oriented advertisements on mother-child interactions*, was presented at the annual meetings of the National Council on Family Relations on October 14, 1981. For more information contact: Zolinda Stoneman & Gene H. Brody, Department of Child and Family Development, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602.
2. One example of a concise pamphlet presenting critical viewing strategies is entitled, *Watching TV wisely: Suggestions for parents*. Copies can be obtained by writing: Dr. Gregory T. Fouts, The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, T2N, IN4, Canada.
3. An example of a cooperative extension booklet which overviews the extent and nature of television's effect on the family, with specific suggestions for mediating each type of effect, is available from Kansas State University: Dr. Michael Martin, Extension Specialist, Human Development, Cooperative Extension Service, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 66502.
4. The *Journal of Family Issues* is currently planning a theme issue on this extension of television and family research. The issue is scheduled to appear in June, 1983. For more information write to: Dr. Godfrey J. Ellis, Family Study Center, 114 H.E.W., Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078.