

# Public Policy, Family Rules and Children’s Media Use in the Home

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would address public policy issues at the local, state, and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society, Media and the Developing Mind, Media and the Dialogue of Democracy, and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the intersection between public policy and private practice; in particular, the impact of the “Three-Hour Rule” and V-Chip technology on parental mediation practices within the home. Twenty-four focus group discussions were held in the winter of 2000. A total of 87 children and 62 mothers of children in grades three, six, and nine participated in the research. The focus groups were stratified by age, gender of child, and locale (suburban or urban Philadelphia).

Our focused discussions with mothers and children indicate that:

- **Parents do not actively seek out external information about programming for children.** Instead, they base their television-related rules on personal experiences, advertisements, or the time that a program airs. In addition, some parents report that they are not able to obtain information about television ratings. This suggests that the most effective way to reach parents with information about public policies and children’s programs would be to air the information during programs that adults are likely to watch.
- **Children make viewing decisions without their parents’ help.** They report turning to a specific channel that they like, looking for a specific show, flipping through preferred channels until they find something that they like, or going to the Preview Channel. Very few children say that they discuss program selection with their parents.
- **Multiple media compete for children’s time and their interests in TV, the Internet, video games, and music changes constantly.** Television is not the only, and oftentimes not the primary medium of interest in children’s lives. Not surprisingly, therefore, parents’ concerns about media ebb and flow based on their child’s interest in the medium and their own level of comfort with it.

These media practices appear to result in a low awareness of the Three-Hour Rule and V-chip technology.

- **The majority of mothers are not aware of the educational programming airing as part of the Three-Hour Rule, and do not know that such a requirement exists.** In fact, many of the parents could not think of three hours’ worth of shows a week that are educational and airing on the commercial broadcast stations, but they think it would be a good start.
- **Children’s awareness of the age ratings is greater than mothers’, but even they are unfamiliar with many of the V-chip content ratings.** Mothers are less trusting of the content and age ratings than the educational ratings. Children are also more likely than mothers to report seeing educational identifiers on programs, and to know what E/I means.
- **The majority of the children agree that having an educational identifier on a program does not make them more or less likely to watch a show.** The exception is ninth grade boys, who doubt that E/I programs for people their age exist. Nevertheless, children at all three ages report watching educational programs. Third graders report watching some of the educational programs airing on commercial broadcast stations, including animal programs and science programs. Older children have a broader definition of “educational” television. They consider anything that teaches them “lessons” -- about friends, family, or career -- to be educational. Mothers also considered a broad range of programs to be valuable.

The new regulations do not currently seem to be making an impact on parental mediation habits. Only a few parents report using the information or technology to help guide their children's viewing toward or away from certain programs. However, this does not mean they cannot be useful. Our discussions about how families think about and use television indicates that:

- **Mothers do feel that it is important to mediate their children's viewing.** They feel that it is important because they have witnessed negative effects when they watch too much or when they are exposed to problematic content such as violence. Some reported hearing research reports that television affects children's aggression, health, or creativity. They also talked about the potential benefits of television for play, relaxation, and learning, albeit less frequently.
- **Rules about television tend to diminish with age.** In addition, parents of older children are less likely to be aware of children's educational programs, naming instead programs such as *Oprah* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* as valuable programs to watch. Parents' rules about how much time can be spent with TV decrease with age.
- **Mothers make an effort to talk with their children about the content that they see on TV.** They report pointing out good and bad things characters do and explaining inappropriate behavior.
- **Mothers also watch TV with their children.** However, they are not watching educational programs with their kids – instead they are watching adult programs of their own choosing. Therefore, it is not surprising that parents have little awareness of programs airing as part of the Three-Hour Rule.

Although our discussions indicate that the Three-Hour Rule and V-chip system are not currently being widely used by families, many parents are mediating their children's viewing and the policies could help them to do so. The V-chip technology could provide a way of assisting mothers with their TV content concerns. In addition, the television programs airing as part of the Three-Hour Rule could provide them with positive alternatives. In order for the policies to be maximally useful to parents and children, families need to be aware of (and understand) the information and technology that is available. Public policy recommendations to help make TV a more positive resource within the home include persuading parents that television can be a valuable educational resource for school age children and making them more aware of the tools that are available to them via a public service and promotional campaign that airs when they are in the audience.

## INTRODUCTION

Television is widely available in virtually all homes in the United States. As a ubiquitous presence, it has great potential to be an educational tool for children. Nevertheless, the medium is widely perceived as teaching children behaviors and attitudes that are not conducive for healthy development. Recognizing both the positive and negative impact television can have in children's lives, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implemented regulations designed to increase the availability of positive programs on commercial broadcast stations and to decrease the potentially harmful content to which children could be exposed. Other research released by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) simultaneously with this report examines producers' and programmers' implementation of these policies (Jordan, 2000) and parents' and children's use and perception of media (Woodard, 2000). This report is an in-depth study of the intersection between public policy and private practice; in particular, the impact of the "Three-Hour Rule" and V-Chip technology on parental mediation practices within the home.

The FCC processing guideline known as the "Three-Hour Rule" has increased the availability of children's educational television programs on commercial broadcast stations (Jordan, 2000; Schmitt, 1999). In order to gain expedited license renewal, each week commercial broadcast stations must air three hours of programming that is specifically designed to educate and inform children 16 years of age or younger (FCC, 1996). These programs must be identified on the air as educational and informative (E/I) and be broadcast at a time when children are likely to be in the audience. Although the majority of stations do not provide significantly more than the minimum three hours, the broadcasters are complying with this requirement (Jordan, 2000).

In addition to the Three-Hour Rule, parents now have a tool that allows them to automatically block out programs with content they consider undesirable for their children. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 specifies that new television sets (manufactured after 1/1/00) must contain a computer chip (called a "V-chip") that can be set to block out programs with certain ratings. Most of the networks are, in fact, voluntarily rating their television content (e.g., V for "violence") and indicating age appropriateness (e.g., "TV-Y" for "suitable for all children"). Although the rating system of labeling programs for age-appropriateness and content is by no

means perfect (Jordan, 1998; Woodard, 1999), having content identifiers may help parents to better determine the suitability of programs for their children.

National surveys conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center indicate that awareness of the regulations is low, with approximately 45 percent of parents aware that commercial broadcasters label their programs as educational for children and even fewer knowing what E/I stands for (Stanger, 1998; Stanger & Gridina, 1999). Similarly, parental awareness of V-chip ratings has been on the decline, with only 50% being aware that programs are rated for age appropriateness, a 14% decline from last year (Woodard, 2000).

This study is designed to explore exactly what parents and their 8- to 14-year-old children know and understand about policies designed to help them make more informed program choices. While the national survey of parents and children conducted each year by the Annenberg Public Policy Center provides a snapshot that is timely, generalizable, and representative, it does not allow for a full exploration of the dynamics of the family and the normative contexts that shape parental mediation of television in the home. The insights offered by the 149 parents and children in this focus group-based research are designed to understand why and how parents do (or do not) guide their children's television viewing. In addition, the perspectives of parents and children illustrate the challenges and opportunities that must be addressed in order for public policy to be maximally useful in the daily decisions families make about television.

## **THE RESEARCH APPROACH**

To address these questions a series of focus group discussions with both parents and children was conducted. School age children's media use was of particular interest since the majority of children's television programs, including those airing as part of the Three-Hour Rule are aimed at children in this age group (Jordan, 2000; Schmitt, 1999; Woodard, 1999). In addition, research indicates that older children are more likely to be independently selecting programs and negotiating with other family members in the formation of rules about the media environment (Kim, Baran, & Massey, 1988). Mothers were selected as interview respondents since studies have found that they are typically the gatekeepers and boundary setters of children's media use (Jordan, 1992).

This report opens with an examination of parents' and children's awareness and use of the information provided by the Three-Hour Rule and V-chip legislation. Next, it explores how families actually use the media, as well as the impact of children's age and gender on how families perceive and use the media. Such an exploration highlights whether and if so, how, these policies are useful to families participating in this research. The report concludes with a consideration of the family as a system and mass media use as a component of the system that both shapes and is shaped by the norms, values, and beliefs of the home.

## METHOD

Twenty-four focus group discussions were held from January 4 to March 22, 2000.<sup>1</sup> A total of 87 children and 62 mothers of children in grades three, six, and nine participated in the discussions. The participants were selected to represent a range of experiences and backgrounds, and attempts were made to ensure diversity of the sample. Half of the focus groups were obtained by recruiting children and parents from urban Philadelphia public schools, the other half of the focus groups was recruited from suburban Philadelphia public schools.<sup>2</sup> Permission slips were sent home with children asking parents or guardians to consent to their child's participation in a study on media use, and encouraging mothers to participate in an evening discussion.

The children's focus groups included 6 to 9 participants each (mode = 7) stratified by community locale (urban/suburban), gender (boy/girl) and grade in school (3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>), resulting in 12 focus groups. Parent groups included 4 to 8 participants (mode = 5) and were also stratified by community (urban/suburban), child's gender (boy/girl), and child's grade in school (3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>), resulting in an additional 11 focus groups and one mini discussion.

Prior to the discussion groups, children and mothers were asked to fill out a background questionnaire. The results of the demographic information and the presence of media in the homes of these participants are presented in Appendix A. Briefly, most of the mothers lived with another parent in the home (88%), had a college degree (32%) or some post-secondary schooling (30%) and worked outside of the home at least part time (77%). Most of the mothers were White (64%), followed by African-American (30%), or Latino, Native American, or Asian (6%). All families had at least one working television (the median number of televisions in the homes was 3), with 90% of mothers having a television set in their own bedroom. Children were less likely to have a TV in their rooms (45%).

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<sup>1</sup> Due to recruitment difficulties, the focus group with mothers of 6th grade urban boys was a mini discussion with three participants.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 80% of children attending Philadelphia public schools are living in poverty. Research indicates that poverty negatively influences children's health, achievement, and emotional development (Huston, 1991). In order to ensure greater comparability between suburban and urban children, the Philadelphia Public schools that were chosen were high achieving or magnet schools that have lower poverty rates.



The mothers and children who participated in the focus group discussions were diverse though not necessarily representative of the larger population. The findings of focus groups studies are not usually generalizable, as a rule. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this convenience sample is one in which mothers are more highly educated. In addition, though families of color did participate in the discussions, their numbers are lower in the suburban sample. Race and locale comparisons were not made because they confounded with each other in addition to other factors such as mother's level of education. Therefore, information about race and locale is presented alongside participant's quotes only to illustrate the diversity of the sample, not to suggest differences.

Children participated in a discussion led by a trained moderator about the kinds of rules that their parents have for television (and other media), their compliance with the rules, their method for choosing programs, and the extent to which they co-view programs with other members of the family. Children were also shown pictures of and asked about their familiarity with educational icons and television ratings. The discussions lasted approximately 40 minutes, and took place in their local schools before, during, or after school hours.

Focus group discussions with mothers of children in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade focused on topics similar to those discussed with children: viewing mediation and rules, motivation for the rules, sources of information about TV, understanding of regulations and ratings, parent-child co-viewing, and rules about other media. The discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes and took place in the evenings at the local school or at the University. Both parent and child focus group discussions were audio taped and transcribed for later analysis.

## UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS OF POLICIES

### Mothers' Awareness of the Three-Hour Rule

During each of the focus groups, mothers were asked about their understanding of the regulations for educational TV, in particular the Three-Hour Rule. Only two out of 62 mothers (3%) had actually heard of the Three-Hour Rule, one of whom mistakenly thought it was a requirement to air three hours of educational TV each day. Most of the mothers thought that the Three-Hour Rule sounded like a good thing; however, they didn't think that three hours a week was a lot. Some groups were incredulous about the rule because they could not think of three hours' worth of shows a week that were educational. They weren't sure what counted as educational and were surprised to hear that *Saved by the Bell* had that designation. They were also doubtful that the programs would air when their children are typically watching TV.

*I'd like to sit for a week and watch one major network and find 3 hours of educational TV for a child under 16 (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

*I don't remember seeing it at all on FOX. I mean, a show that would help the children on during their watching period. It's all cartoons after school. And that's the time my children would be sitting down and watching TV if they're going to watch TV (White mother of 6th grade girl, suburban).*

### Are mothers aware that E/I programs carry on-screen identifiers?

Programs airing on commercial broadcast stations as part of the Three-Hour Rule must carry an educational identifier. In order to gauge actual awareness of the educational and informational (E/I) program icons, mothers were shown pictures from two programs' opening credits (see Appendix B). After being shown the E/I icons, the majority of the mothers reported that they had not ever noticed the E/I symbol, and only one knew what it meant. In one group, the mothers wondered why the symbol is not shown at a time that they would be more likely to see it.

*Why in the beginning? Why not air it at the commercials? I notice viewer discretion but they say that, not just show it. (African-American mother of 6th grade boy, urban)*

Mothers were also asked whether they would trust the educational labels. Many of the parents reported that they wouldn't necessarily trust them. They expressed the

view that it would depend on the show, and that they would have to form their own opinion. Also, what others define as educational is not necessarily what they define as educational, or want their children to see. For example, two mothers disagreed about whether they would want their daughters to see a show about childbirth.

*I'm saying it says educational, but it still might be educational in one sense, but they might show things that you don't want them to see (African-American mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

A few of the parents, however, thought the educational icons would be a useful way to determine what is supposed to be educational. They thought that this kind of rating would be more trustworthy than the other kind of ratings (for the age appropriateness and content of programs). It appears they assume that someone who knows something about education is involved in classifying the programs. This indicates the confusion that parents have about who rates the programs.

*They're using it for a purpose, so I would trust it. Because if they do all the research and they have to sit there and they have to watch a show and they have to rate the show, then they're doing half my job because they already saw it (Latino mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

Finally, mothers of teenagers tended to doubt that these types of programs would be beneficial for their older children. As one mother of a 9th grade boy said, "*I don't think 13-year-old boys watch too much educational television.*" (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban). As will be discussed later, 9th grade boys had similar doubts, indicating a lack of certainty that educational programs for people their age exist.

#### Are children aware that E/I programs carry on-screen identifiers?

Children were also queried about their awareness of educational identifiers on programs. First, they were asked whether they had ever seen something on a program that means that it is educational. In half of the groups, at least one child had seen some kind of educational identifier on a program.

*I've seen a little apple on a skateboard. I'll be flipping through channels and I look at it. And like it's in front of Saved by the Bell or something (White 6th grade girl, suburban).*

*It would just like pop up in the bottom on the corner of the screen. It could be like a circle and it would say something in it, or a square (White 3rd grade boy, urban).*

However, most of the children who talked about seeing an educational identifier talked about seeing the age or content ratings, or the symbol on a channel that they consider to be educational (that is, the PBS symbol, Mickey Mouse symbol from Disney, or the History Channel “H”).

Secondly, children were shown the same pictures as the mothers in order to gauge actual awareness of the E/I icons (see Appendix B). Children’s awareness was higher than mothers’, with one child in all but two of the groups reporting that he or she had noticed the icons. Some children in the majority of the groups were also able to identify that this meant a program was educational.

*I’ve seen that and I know its educational (White 3rd grade boy, urban).*

*Like a robot shows you and it says educational show (African-American 6th grade girl, urban).*

Nevertheless, there was confusion about the symbols, with some children reporting that they had seen the icons on programs not airing as part of the Three-Hour Rule (such as ER). Others mistakenly thought signals of educational programs were viewer advisories, hotline numbers, or messages after the show. Only one group (3rd grade suburban boys) seemed particularly knowledgeable about the icons. Most of the children in each group reported never noticing the symbols. Even though most children had not noticed these symbols, or used them to choose programs, some did think they could be useful.

*You can just have it there, like show the sign and then take it away so people can know its educational (White 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

The majority of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders agreed that having an educational symbol on a program would not make them more or less likely to watch a program. Some children really like educational shows and seek them out, while others enjoy watching station-identified educational programs such as *Hang Time* and *Recess* (though they don’t necessarily think about them as being educational). Children report that they will decide to watch the show depending on whether or not they like it, or based on the name of the show -- not whether or not it is educational.

*It wouldn't make a difference as long as it's interesting (African-American 6th grade boy, urban).*

*Cause either way, if you watch the show because you like it, then you just like it, educational or not (White 6th grade girl, urban).*

*It wouldn't really make any difference because if I go, I watch it and I go into it just a little bit, maybe I give it 10 minutes and if I don't like it, I change the channel and if I do like it, and I think it's interesting, I'll watch it some more (mixed ethnicity 6th grade girl, suburban).*

Ninth grade girls also thought the identifiers wouldn't make a difference in their viewing. However, most held this belief because they were doubtful that many of the E/I programs were actually educational, or that they would really learn anything.

*It's not like you learn anything because everyone learns this stuff (African-American 9th grade girl, urban).*

Ninth grade boys were the only group that thought that having an E/I identifier would make them less likely to watch the program, simply because they were doubtful that E/I programs for people their age exist, except for the news or Wild Discovery. A few mentioned that they are not interested in watching E/I programs because of the bad acting or story lines that do not reflect real life.

*Like it's probably for little, little children, like little older, but not like high school (African-American 9th grade boy, urban).*

#### Do 8- to 14-year-olds watch educational programs?

Children were asked whether they watch educational programs, particularly whether they watch educational and informational (E/I) programs airing on commercial broadcast stations. Children at all three ages do watch shows that "have lessons in them." However, at all ages, children's definition of educational TV is sometimes different from that which is offered by the commercial broadcasters.

Third graders' definition of educational programming is most similar to what the commercial broadcasters are airing. They mentioned animal programs (*Zoboomafoo*, *Kratts' Creatures*, or programs on Animal Planet), science programs (*Bill Nye the Science Guy*, and *Science Court*) and PBS, the weather and the news as educational. They also watch some educational programs (not science or animal programs) airing on cable or PBS (*Zoom*, *Blue's Clues*, *Hey Arnold*, and

*Arthur*) and game shows (*Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*). One group also considered *Judge Judy* to be an educational program (apparently because it takes place in a courtroom and they learn about the law).

Sixth graders' definition of an educational show is any show that has something they can learn about, whether that is about friends, family, career, or animals. Mostly they talked about watching animal shows (*Crocodile Hunter*, *Jack Hanna*, or programs on Animal Planet) and game shows such as *21*, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and *Robot Wars*. A few also mentioned prosocial programs such as *Arthur*, *Recess*, *Hang Time*, and *Saved by the Bell*. Sixth-grade girls' definition was even broader, including family situation comedies (such as *Sister, Sister* or *The Parkers*) that provide social lessons or daytime talk shows (such as *Maury* or *Sally Jesse Raphael*) that provide models for how they do not want to act.

Ninth graders described watching shows that “teach them something” but are not strictly “educational.” Some boys mentioned watching programs that would help them improve their athletic performance, either through learning new moves from a televised game or gaining ideas for training. Even primetime programs that spotlighted specific industries or careers, such as *ER* or *The Practice*, were considered educational by some. Most were not watching shows about school related subjects; instead they were watching the Discovery Channel, and nature and wildlife shows. Some said they would only watch educational programs if the learning was incidental. The girls were also watching programs about relationships and people (A & E Biographies, cultural programs), and that teach them what to do in situations (*Saved by the Bell*, *Full House*, *Hang Time*, and *Hey Arnold*). Similar to the 6th grade girls, these teens considered talk shows such as *Jerry Springer*, *Oprah*, *The View*, and *Montel Williams* to be educational.

Across the groups, what children identified as the educational programs they watched are not typically the commercial broadcasters' E/I programs. In fact, the only educational programs airing on a commercial broadcast station mentioned by any age group were *Bill Nye the Science Guy* (airing in syndication), *Science Court* (now known as *Squigglevision* on ABC), *Recess* (ABC), *Hang Time* (NBC), and *Saved by the Bell* (NBC and in syndication).

There was some disagreement among the children about whether or not prosocial programs were educational. For example, when a group of third grade boys were

asked about *Arthur* and *Recess*, two shows that had been mentioned earlier in the discussion, the boys argued about whether these shows are in fact educational. One felt that *Recess* “teaches you what the consequences are for messing up in school” (White 3rd grade boy, urban), while another felt that *Arthur* offered school activities at the end of the program. Similarly, teens were skeptical about whether programs specifically designed to educate children their age, such as *Hang Time* or *Saved by the Bell* were, in fact, educational.

### Mothers’ Definitions of Valuable/Enriching Programs

Mothers were also asked what they considered to be valuable or enriching programming for their children. Similar to the children, mother’s definition of educational programming was quite broad. They indicated that even though shows with intentional social or academic lessons were clearly educational, programs which don’t intend to teach, but might show children what they should not do, were also educational. Additionally, shows with information about animals or about careers (including sports, cooking, or music programs) were perceived as educational.

Mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders most frequently mentioned games shows (*Jeopardy* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*), animal shows (*Zoboomafoo*, *Discovery*), prosocial programs for children (*Arthur*, *Hey Arnold*, and *Doug*) and a primetime prosocial program (*Seventh Heaven*) as valuable programs for their children. Some of the mothers also mentioned science programs (*Science Court*, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, *Magic School Bus*).

Mothers of sixth graders frequently mentioned channels (PBS, *Discovery* and *Animal Planet*) as being valuable for their children. They struggled to mention age appropriate programs, noting instead programs for preschoolers such as *Sesame Street*, *Blue’s Clues*, *Barney*, and *The Big Comfy Couch*. They only recalled three age-appropriate school-related programs (*National Geographic*, *Wishbone*, and *Bill Nye the Science Guy*) and one prosocial program (*The Babysitter’s Club*).

Mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders named even fewer channels (*Discovery*) and programs that would be beneficial for their children (animal, fishing, and cooking programs). This points to a relative lack of awareness of programs that are potentially beneficial.

As with the children, there was some uncertainty among mothers about the educational value of prosocial programs. For example, when talking about *Saved by the Bell: The New Class*, one mother said, *“I don’t think of it as traditional educational. I mean, they have certain situations and they show how they handle it. ...It teaches them how to react and how to handle themselves and that kind of stuff.”* Another mother added that she too thought it was not traditionally educational *“But it’s educational because it helps your kids deal with everyday life. If they can get it from the television show on how to deal with certain things and talk to us about it, then that’s more power to the television.”* (White mother of a 6th grade boy, suburban). It is particularly interesting, given the fact that this particular program teaches about topics that many said are important for their children to learn about. It may be that the format of the show, or the fact that the original version (*Saved by the Bell*) was not, makes it harder for parents to immediately see the educational value (although in discussions many did see it eventually).

#### What do children like about educational shows?

Children were asked what they liked about educational programs. Their responses provide us with additional insight into why they consider programs to be educational, and what they look for in a program. They liked educational programs that are:

- fun
- have games and can give them a sense they could win
- interesting
- related to career aspirations
- contain animals

As discussed previously, most 9<sup>th</sup> graders are skeptical about the benefits of educational programs. Therefore, it is not surprising that they like programs in which the learning is more incidental. For the most part, they don’t mind learning things from watching TV, but they are not necessarily seeking out an educational experience. What they do like is finding information that is useful to them in a way that it is still enjoyable.

*If it’s something educational that you’re interested in, you’re not just going to turn on something about dolphins because it’s educational, but if I’m interested in dolphins maybe I would* (White 9th grade boy, suburban).



*Well, the books are really cool. When she [Oprah] discusses them on the show, you might learn something about the author, the process it took to write the book that you may have read too (White 9th grade girl, suburban).*

When children were asked what they do not like about educational programs, at all ages they agreed that they don't like to be bored. They also don't want to watch a program that is "old" or only airing repeats.

*I don't like some of those educational shows sometimes because... they're trying to get you to too much information. That they give a lot of information. They talk and talk and talk and that gets boring (White 3rd grade girl, urban).*

### How Educational Programs Help Children with School or Relationships

Children of all ages feel that educational programs can help with schoolwork by allowing them, for example, to gain a better understanding of science, practice for Spanish class, or help with spelling and vocabulary.

*Sometimes if my mother tells me to watch the science channel [Discovery] I watch it and it helps me with science and stuff (White 3rd grade girl, urban).*

*You might just sit there watching and just say 'it's interesting' and not think about it. When you come to school and the teacher just so happens to show you that a couple weeks later, it's like, goodness, I never thought it would come in handy to let me know that (African-American 9th grade girl, urban).*

Third and sixth graders also talked about ways in which the programs help them in life situations. They talked about prosocial programs helping them know how to deal with other people and raise pets. They also claim to learn about inappropriate behavior from talk shows.

*I'm learning things, I think cause they take on responsibility and they take on the consequences of what they did and how they acted and they know they shouldn't did it like that. It's kind of educational (African-American 6th grade girl, suburban).*

Third, sixth, and ninth graders also talked about liking the shows because they could find out additional information about potential careers (for example, by watching medical shows, law shows, or music videos).

### Mother's Awareness of V-chip technology and ratings

Mothers were asked about their awareness of the V-chip technology and understanding of the regulations. More mothers had heard of the V-chip technology than the Three-Hour Rule, although there was still limited awareness. More mothers had heard of a “parental block” on their cable television, and understood what that was than knew about or understood the V-chip. Some of the mothers who thought they knew what the V-chip was mistakenly thought it was only in big screen TVs, or was a device that shuts the TV off after a certain period of time. Others knew about a blocking device on their cable television, or confused it with an Internet blocking device. Very few mothers both had heard of the V-chip and knew what it was. One mother, who had a pretty clear understanding of what it was, said:

*I think I have a general idea of what it is. They're going to put it in TVs and you will be able to program it. You'll be able to block out certain your children from watching TV shows or anybody else in your house from watching certain shows (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Some mothers, particularly of 6<sup>th</sup> graders, felt that the V-chip technology would be useful. Since they do have many rules about content, as will be discussed below, it may make sense that they would like to be able to block channels, such as Playboy and Cinemax. Others indicate that they would block violent content because: “*You know right away whether you're going to turn it off or not*” (African-American mother of 6th grade boy, suburban).

A few think the blocking capacity would be useful if the parent works outside the home or is unfamiliar with a program. Others mentioned that it could be helpful if the child has a TV in his/her bedroom. Finally, some noted that though the V-chip might be useful when their children are older, and home alone, it is not needed while the children are young. In general, those who did think it would be helpful felt that it is a tool that gives them more control over what their children see, as expressed by this mother:

*I think it's excellent because it's allowing parents to have a lot more control over what their children, I mean, let's face it – your children, they're not going to stick by the rules every step of the way – because they're children and they're going to do things they shouldn't do because they feel you're not visibly there to check them. So they're gonna sneak every once in a while and watch something that perhaps they shouldn't watch (African-American mother of 9th grade boy, urban).*

Many other mothers, particularly mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, were skeptical about the usefulness of the V-chip. The reasons varied, ranging from wanting to make the decisions themselves (by watching with the child), to not wanting to miss their own programs (not understanding that they would have the ability to unblock the programs.) Several also mentioned the challenges of blocking programs when the family is comprised of children of different ages.

*The rating system and V-chip is great but if you have an age difference in your children. Like my youngest is 4, my oldest just turned 12. How do you associate that with it's not fair to my 12-year-old to tell him he can only watch programs that my 4-year-old can watch (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban)?*

A frequently expressed concern was that if they blocked programs on their television set, their children would just go over to a friend's house to watch instead. This concern may be warranted, given children's tendency to break the rules as will be discussed later in the report.

*I rather know about it happening in my house and be able to talk about it with them than having them go over to a friend's house and not know about it. And I know they will (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Still others felt it would be difficult to impose a new set of rules on a child who had been watching particular content for years.

*My son will be 15 next week. He's our youngest so I, all of a sudden, I'm going to tell him he can't watch this show and that show but he's been watching it for three years. They all get into R-rated movies and they all get in because we buy them the tickets. I mean I'm guilty. I'm not talking about pornographic movies, I'm, some movies it's rated like that because of the language, but they hear it on the school bus so what's the difference (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban)?*

#### Familiarity with content and age ratings

Both mothers and children were asked about their familiarity with the ratings. Children of all ages seemed to be knowledgeable about the ratings. They generally knew the age based ratings: TVY, TV-Y7, and TV-14. Some children knew what FV meant, others guessed it meant "Fierce Violence" or "Family Vision." They were generally unaware of the meaning of content ratings, with the

exception of V for Violence. Only a few sixth graders knew what MA stood for (Mature audience), whereas almost all the ninth graders were familiar with this label. Many indicated they had seen the ratings on the preview channels or on the shows. They understand the ratings, because the “viewer discretion” advisories that accompany the ratings explain the program’s age appropriateness. Nevertheless, ninth graders didn’t seem particularly interested in the ratings. As one boy said, “*I could care less*” (mixed ethnicity 9th grade boy, suburban). Another girl complained:

*They put them on and leave little educational signs too but when do they ever say what those meant* (White 9th grade girl, suburban)?

Only a few children spoke about their parents using the ratings to guide their viewing.

*...sometimes I’ll be babysitting my little cousin and my mother says, make sure you watch the little squares in the left hand corner because if it’s too violent or it has sexual scenes in it, well, you can’t let her watch it* (African-American 6th grade boy, urban)

*I don’t think my mother knows about that. I think she knows like a movie’s coming on, like just like the big old black screen and they have a little box underneath and it has bad language* (African-American 6th grade boy, urban)

Mothers, like children, were familiar with the fact that the programs contained age ratings, and had a general sense of what they meant. Most of the mothers were able to interpret what TV-Y7 meant, and some of the other age ratings (TV-Y and TV-14). However, there was some conflating of TV and movie ratings (e.g., several mothers expressed confusion over TV-14 in terms of what it means in relation to PG 13).

Mothers were much less familiar with the content ratings. Two mothers knew that L is the rating for harsh language, but no one knew that FV is an indicator of fantasy violence. Perhaps because of their limited knowledge about the ratings, there was a great deal of skepticism over their trustworthiness.

*The ratings there, I wouldn’t trust those ratings. My child is 8, I wouldn’t necessarily let her watch Y7* (White mother of 3rd grade girl, suburban).

One other mother expressed an interest in ratings information, but said it is difficult to find. *“I have looked in the newspaper, I’ve looked in the TV section in the newspaper – the weekend has a book – I cannot find it anywhere” (White mother of 9th grade girl, suburban).*

Parents and children seem to be only vaguely aware of the FCC’s requirement that commercial broadcasters provide three hours a week of educational programming. They are unfamiliar with the broadcasters’ offerings and tend to work from a different definition of “educational” than that which drives most of the E/I programming. Though there is greater familiarity with the ratings associated with the V-Chip legislation, there remains confusion over who provides the ratings and what, exactly, they mean. Perhaps as a result, parents are not relying upon them to help guide their children’s viewing.

It is not clear whether parents are not widely using the information, technology and programming because the policies themselves are not useful or because the families have a system of behaviors and beliefs around the media that do not accommodate changes. Thus, the focus group discussions explored mothers’ and children’s behaviors and beliefs around the media that exist in the home. Such an exploration highlights why and how these policies are and are not useful in the current family environment.

## HOW FAMILIES THINK ABOUT AND USE TELEVISION

In this section, we examine four aspects of family norms and behaviors around television that provide insight into the role of the medium in family life. Though these are clearly not the only ways families assimilate television in the home, they do provide a windows into the points at which public policy meets family practice. Specifically, we examine how parents obtain information about television; what rules they have established around the medium; whether the rules are consistently maintained or subverted; and the prevalence of co-viewing and program-related discussion. Thus, we hope to illuminate how family styles of mediation may be assisted by the additional programming, information and technological tools that have resulted from the regulations.

### 1. Parents are not actively seeking out information about programming for children.

When asked where they get information about television and their motivation for putting rules in place, most mothers reported that they are not getting information about television from printed sources or news (only a few mothers stated that they get information from magazines or news reports). Most mothers reported watching the program themselves, or advertisements for the programs, to determine whether it's appropriate. Some have particular content concerns, and if the program contains inappropriate content they say that their child cannot watch it.

*The basis for my rules is just because of what I've seen in the commercials- what you see when you're watching whatever kind of show and the commercial comes on and then I know right then and there I do not want my daughter to see it (African-American mother of 9th grade girl, urban).*

Two mothers said that they use the ratings.

*I let them go by the, I don't know what it's called, it comes on the little corner of the television. It has a different letter and I know that Y is like youth. And then they have 14- so you know that is for somebody older than 14. I let them self-grade by that also (Latino mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

There were several reports of mothers relying on the day and time that a program airs to make judgments. Sometimes, this strategy doesn't work.

*Usually Sunday movies it's supposed to be, you know. You're sitting back and looking and the way [they] previewed it and how they was talking about it, you know. I thought it was a Black History program for children to watch something to teach them. I mean it had a lot of stuff in there that I did not want my children to see (African-American mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

Mothers also decide what is appropriate for their children based on observations of children (their own and others). For example, some mothers said that they would watch how their children reacted to more lenient rules about television (e.g., letting them watch TV before doing their chores) and then put stricter rules in place if the children didn't respond well (e.g., chores don't get done). Some of the mothers also noticed that television viewing had a negative effect on their children's cognitive development. A couple of mothers of 3rd grade girls expressed the view that the more television their daughters watched, the less creative they were. They also talked about fear elicited by scary programs as an issue that led to sleepless nights and prohibitions against scary stuff. Others said that their children got agitated, or disrespectful, after watching certain programs. Some simply reported that their children "zone out" after watching too much TV. Such observations lead them to place restrictions on how much can be watched or on the content that can be viewed.

*They can't watch cartoons before they're leaving for school in the morning. Because if you watch Looney Toons, then you leave home with Looney Toons in your mind and you'll act like Looney Toons on your mind and you'll act like Looney Toons at school. I mean, really, and I've seen it happen (African-American mother of 9th grade boy, urban).*

Related to their concerns about cognitive and behavioral effects of TV, some of the mothers in the study reported that they worried about the impact of violence on their children's aggressive behavior (approximately 1/3 of the respondents said they restrict their children's viewing of violence on TV). A couple of mothers felt that boys had an innate attraction to violence or action. Two mothers worried that their children would be desensitized to violence from watching violent programs. Some mothers make the distinction between the impact of different kinds of violence, as did this mother who said:

*Like with wrestling, they started watching when they were younger. And it's too violent and they started acting it out. They start acting it out with them... they going to do it out in the streets and it's not permissible. It's just a horrible way to live your life and act like that. So we don't allow anything like that. Yes, they watch horrible movies that have violence in it, but they don't go out and react the same way they do to something they know they can do (White mother of 6th grade boy, suburban).*

Another (albeit less commonly expressed) frame mothers use to think about what is appropriate for their children stems from their own experiences growing up with television. A few mothers reflected that they watched a great deal of television as a child and were not harmed. Conversely, others felt they had too many rules, which they resented. Therefore they wanted to be more lenient with their own children.

*So I think if it was alright for me, I'm completely sane, productive adult, is it so horrible for him? And you know, I guess I can try to limit it but how bad can it be if I did it all those years (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban)?*

For some others, their experiences with television as a child have led them to be more restrictive with the medium.

*And I would be afraid sometimes to open the door and be in an empty house and had I not seen somebody stalking around the house on a television show, it wouldn't have been planted in my head. And I see the same thing with my own. So I think that's kind of guided me and I just don't want the children to be exposed to things that are going to be either frightening and put the ideas in their minds or that will increase the amount of pressure that they already have to deal with, with all the guns and stuff (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban).*

Finally, some of the mothers of younger children mentioned that they had heard about the negative effects of television on aggressive behavior or childhood obesity from an external source, namely the newspaper and work colleagues. One mother talked about how the media perpetuate stories of children committing crimes as a result of watching and copying something from television (though she discounted the theory). Other mothers, however, say they limit violence because they believe it may be damaging to their children, pointing to the things they had heard and read about on the news about the Columbine incident. This concern seemed to be especially prevalent among mothers of boys.

*And you see things on the news and they come back to that these children played violent video games and they watched violent shows and they were involved in some kinds of violence and then. And so I think we just, from hearing it over and over, and then from our own personal experience, we know that we shouldn't be letting our children see that (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Much less common were discussions about the positive effects of television, though some mothers of third graders describe their children's learning the alphabet and or information about animals from television. Some mothers also felt



that television stimulated their children's creative play (although others disagreed that television had this type of effect on their child).

*When they were little, Sesame Street. I am convinced that how's they both learned the alphabet and how to count... Now I see if they're watching PBS, they learn from it (White mother of 3rd grade girl, urban).*

*She likes to watch the music videos so she can learn the dances to them, that's another thing. Not only to learn the words, she'll make up her own routine. That's why I am not so negative about TV as other people. I see her doing creative things versus negative things. If she were doing negative things, it would be off (White mother of 3rd grade girl, suburban).*

Thus, most mothers do not appear to be actively seeking out information about children's television (either because they choose to make judgments themselves, or they cannot find information). This presents challenges for broadcasters and advocates who provide information about their educational efforts and the age appropriateness of their programs to assist parents in directing their children's viewing.

## **2. Many parents do have standards and rules for their children's television behavior, but these rules diminish with age.**

Parents and children of all ages indicate that there are rules in the home about television. In this research, we sought to examine the types of mediation practices parents employ around television and the extent to which these practices vary according to the age and gender of the child. Knowledge about the ways in which parents guide their children's viewing provides insights into the ways policies may or may not be useful to families.

To explore the mediation, we asked parents about three dimensions of parental guidance, originally identified by Bybee, Robinson, & Turow (1982). These practices include: Restrictive guidance, which refers to setting viewing hours, forbidding particular programs, specifying acceptable programs, switching the channel on objectionable content, and having prerequisites for viewing; Evaluative guidance, which refers to explaining the meaning of content, discussing motivations of TV characters, pointing out good/bad things actors can do and explaining fantasy elements; and Unfocused guidance, which includes co-viewing TV with the child, encouraging specific programs, and talking about a show. Each of these types of guidance was addressed in the focus group discussions by

asking mothers and children about the extent to which each strategy was used in the home.

### Time Restrictions

Roughly three-quarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders had limits on how much TV they could watch. Most could only watch one show or one- to two-hours per day. Some of the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders also had rules about not being allowed to watch TV in the morning or past their bedtime. They are less restricted about how much time they can spend with television on weekends, however.

*My mother lets me watch TV when I'm done with my homework and I'm only allowed to watch it for 2 hours (White 3rd grade girl, urban).*

Fewer of the sixth and ninth graders reported having rules about how much television they are allowed to watch, but those who do have rules have ones that are similar to their younger counterparts.

*My mother, she says if it's a school night, I can watch TV for an hour (African-American 6th grade boy, urban).*

In some homes, there appear to be strong norms about how young children should be spending their time. This seemed particularly true in homes where mothers were highly educated. Said one mother:

*None in the morning and then they are allowed to pick one show in the afternoon and they are not allowed to just go and turn the TV on. They can watch a couple of things Saturday morning if they like, but to sit there all day makes my skin [crawl]... just the thought of it (White mother of 3rd grade girl, suburban).*

At all ages, mothers reported having more rules about television time than the children (e.g., 71% of the mothers of 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders report having rules about time whereas only 35% of same age children report having rules). When children and mothers who were from the same family were matched, only half (51.5%) agreed about the existence of rules about television time. Mothers' and children's perceptions may not be in line because of over or under-reporting from the respondents. Nevertheless, the different perceptions may also reflect the fact that these rules may not always be strictly enforced or may be only an implicit part of the family's schedule. In fact, many of the parents reported that their children are too busy with other activities (such as homework and sports) to watch excessive amounts of television. In addition, time spent with the computer and video games

may sometimes supplant viewing time. Therefore, instead of having strict limits about how much television is allowed, natural limits emerge according to the ways in which the family punctuates its day (for example, through out of home activities or bedtime).

*It's time for their bath at like around 8:30. So 9 o'clock, when all of that rough stuff is coming on, they in the bed (African-American mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

Some of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders report that they are relatively uninterested in television. Other 9<sup>th</sup> graders don't have much time for television, due to extra-curricular activities, socializing, and participation in sports. As one mother said, "they're not in the habit to turn it on at all" (White mother of 9th grade girl, suburban).

Another talked about the rules being already well-established, such that the teens have developed patterns of behavior from childhood that no longer require a clearly defined restriction of TV.

*The rules change as the children get older. Until very recently, there was no television on school nights. It's not so much it was a rule in the sense that everybody followed it. But I guess we started early enough that there was no argument about it. They just never expected to watch television on school nights (White mother of 9th grade girl, suburban).*

The most consistent rule regarding the scheduling of television viewing is the requirement that homework (and to a lesser extent chores) be completed first. This rule applied to children at each of the three ages, and held true for both boys and girls. Almost every 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grader reported having this rule.

Ninth graders also have to complete homework before viewing, although they do not always call it a rule because it's something that they "know." Also, some of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders reported that they finish their homework at school so that it's not an issue.

*By the time you're in, like, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, it's like they don't have to tell you that anymore. You know you can't do a certain amount of things if you didn't do what you were supposed to do first (African-American 9th grade girl, urban).*

### Content Restrictions

The majority of third and sixth graders (86%) reported having rules about what they can watch on television. Third graders' rules mostly concerned foul language

and suggestive content. Sixth graders had a wider range of restrictions regarding content, with sexual material being of particular concern. Children of all ages reported being prohibited from watching certain porn channels and R rated movies that contain nudity and cursing. Some even mentioned that their mothers use a parental block on their cable (to eliminate pornographic channels).

*Like you know how I was saying sexual shows and my mother blocks those shows off and it's not appropriate for girls. And my mother says it's a popular thing for girls that do now is to have sex (African-American sixth grade girl, urban).*

Reflecting a concern that may be more salient to urban parents, both boys and girls from city schools talked about their mothers' dislike for violence and its potential negative influence:

*I can't watch movies with a lot of violence and guns cause my mother, like a show we'll be watching, she say cause it might be giving me ideas (African-American 6th grade girl, urban).*

*If I sitting in my room, and mind my business, and watching a violent movie, she'll come in and she'll be like, don't watch that. Don't watch that (African-American 6th grade boy, urban).*

Particular programs that were restricted for third and sixth graders reflect mother's content concerns. Programs with sexual content or adult themes, such as *Friends*, *Dawson's Creek*, *WCW*, *WWF* or *MTV* were restricted. Programs with foul language, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* were also restricted. Said one mother, "Funny, every kid on TV is a wiseass. It's just endemic and that drives me crazy" (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban). Although these types of programs are less restricted for sixth graders, there is still a sense that mothers are concerned about negative portrayals seen on TV. As one boy explained why he can't watch *Martin*, "because they're busting on people, talking about them... my mother don't like me to hear that stuff" (African-American 6th grade boy, suburban).

Only about a third of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders and their mothers had a similar perspective on the presence of rules regarding content. Fewer 9<sup>th</sup> graders (38%) than mothers (71%) reported having content rules on their pre-focus group questionnaires. Although the teenagers reported having few rules about watching violent content or profane language, some did talk about their mother's concerns about television pertaining to "adult shows." These are shows that the respondents described as "highly explicit" or "too mature for 14." By the ninth grade, it appears that parents

are less likely to prohibit particular programs. Instead they have general content restrictions such as 'no pornography.' This was especially true for 9th grade boys. The only program titles that teenagers mentioned as prohibited were *Taxicab Confessions* and *Charmed*.

### Encouraging Programs

About half of the parents in the focus groups reported encouraging their children to watch particular programs or channels. They most commonly reported directing their children to particular channels that they viewed as "safe" or educational. These included channels for children -- such as Nickelodeon or Disney -- or channels that more frequently deal with traditionally educational subjects, such as PBS, Discovery, and the History Channel. Sometimes this would lead to blind faith in the programming, as indicated by a mother of a 3rd grade girl:

*When I hear something that does not sound right, I'll say 'what are you watching?' It might sound like it's real violent or gory or sad music. She'll say, 'It's the Disney Channel.'" And then I'll just say, 'Okay' (Native American mother of 3rd grade girl, urban).*

Game shows (especially *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *Jeopardy*) were frequently mentioned as encouraged by parents. Programs of a more traditional educational nature or programs addressing particular interests were also commonly suggested.

*I'm Italian. So my Dad caught this Italian show about how our culture was from babies to being grown up. So my Dad told me to watch this to see if I wanted to see about my culture and stuff (White 6th grade boy, suburban).*

*She'll tell me, between her and my grandma, they'll tell me to watch the Discovery Channel and I enjoy that... and some of the game shows because they say you can learn stuff on some of the questions that you don't understand and when it tells you the right answer, you can learn from it (African-American 9th grade girl, urban).*

Children also reported being encouraged to watch programs that would teach them about life issues. *Oprah* was one such program. Parents of ninth graders also reported suggesting that their children watch shows that deal with issues that are relevant to teenagers; such as, drug abuse, sex, HIV, and inner city life.

*Stuff that gives meaning -- so what we shouldn't do and what we should do (African-American sixth grade girl, urban).*

### Implicit Mediation

Although many of the mothers and children who participated in our discussion groups reported the use of restrictive mediation, it is worth noting that some mothers appear to convey their feelings about television through comments, alternative activities, and the media layout in the home rather than explicit rulemaking. For example, some mothers reported making comments about the programs their children were watching as they walked through the viewing room, others enrolled their children in weekend activities to avoid TV viewing as a default activity. Several of the mothers talked about intentionally designing the media layout in their house so that a lot of rules are not necessary. They talked about having the television set close by so that they could walk by and see what's on. They also talked about not allowing bedroom television sets, or only having a TV set in the living room, which makes it easier for them to control viewing. Finally, several mothers also mentioned that it is easier for them to control the content that their children see by not having cable television. This mother summed it up nicely:

*I think a lot of things we do are more subtle than setting rules for our children. The choices about what rooms have televisions in them, which television happens to have working remote and which televisions don't happen to have working remotes. Which ones have VCRs attached and which ones don't. That was all deliberate on my part. That the television in the room where we have exercise equipment has a VCR attached so that, part of my thinking is: 'If you're going to watch television, at least, walk while you do it.' So those are the kinds of things that I think you do so you're not imposing something especially on a 14 or 15 year old who is not in an age group where he or she is as willing to go along with your rules. Whose job it is to fight against your rules (White mother of 9th grade girl, suburban).*

### **3. Children are able to subvert their mothers' rules about television.**

It is important to look at children's compliance with the rules set up by their parents. If having rules or using a V-chip blocking device is easily subverted, then such attempts may be fruitless and frustrating resulting in a general reluctance on the part of parents to try to implement them.

Children of all ages say they can easily get around their parents' rules about television. Out of 28 children, only two third graders said that they never break their parents' rules about television.

The majority of 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders also say they disobey some of their rules regarding television. Just how disobedient are 8- to 14-year-olds about rules

regarding television? Some children openly disobey their parents, as one boy explained,

*They turn it off and I turn it on. Then they turn it off, then I turn it on. But then they turn it off, then I go upstairs. We don't have cable upstairs (White 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Another explained, “*she sometimes says no but I would watch it anyway*” (White 6th grade boy, suburban).

Others, in particular third grade girls, were not as openly disobedient. They were more likely to describe their way of getting around the rules as ‘sneaking in peeks’ or watching when their parents were unaware.

*Sometimes if my mother is out and I'm by myself I usually sneak in the shows that I'm not allowed. Like if my mother's blow drying her hair or if she's in the shower, I'll turn on some weird television shows that I'm not allowed to watch. Like music videos, some music videos some of them have curse words in them and I'm not allowed to watch that (White 3rd grade girl, urban).*

Having rules may result in begging, pleading, or attempts to convince their parents to let allow prohibited shows. As one boy explained:

*Everybody watches wrestling. My cousins and their mothers and their dads are way into it. Sometimes, me, my brother and my dad. But my mother doesn't really like it that much. So I just tell her that my cousins like it, dad likes it. She doesn't really agree with me all the time but then she'll change her mind and tell me I can watch it (White 6th grade boy, suburban).*

### Enforcing Rules

With a few exceptions, mothers tended to say that it is not difficult to enforce the rules. Some of the mothers, particularly of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, did admit that it is sometimes challenging to uphold their restrictions, particularly since their children need constant reminders. Across the ages, however, most of the mothers have the sense that their children are compliant with the rules.

*On their own, they'll tend to Nickelodeon and they'll watch those shows rather search something that is intermittently interesting to them (Asian mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

*They already know. It's like, it's imprinted in their brain what I'm not going to approve of (African-American mother of 6th grade boy, suburban).*

Mothers gave several reasons why it is not difficult to enforce the rules. However, none of them indicated the utility of a blocking device, such as the V-chip or a cable lock box. Some of the mothers did mention that they did not always have the energy to enforce the rules, however.

*I find it's hard to counter that and that it requires a lot of energy to suggest alternatives, not only to suggest but to turn the TV off and get them out of the house (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Some mothers feel that it is not difficult to enforce television restrictions because their children are not that interested in watching television. Mothers of 6th grade boys also say they're too busy with other media (especially video games). Some mothers said that their children are so busy with extra curricular activities that they didn't have much time to watch much television.

*Between homework and church and activities, she doesn't get a lot of time to watch television (African-American mother of 9th grade girl, urban).*

Certain characteristics of the family can make rule enforcement difficult. Birth order may contribute to patterns of rule enforcement in that rules may become stricter or looser depending on whether there are older or younger siblings in the house. In several of the focus group discussions, mothers talked about having rules that were the same for all of the children in the house, especially if they're close in age. It simply may be easier to establish and maintain rules when they are the same for all of the children in the household. However, mothers also reported that when there is an older child in the house, the rules are more lenient for the younger children because it is more difficult to control what they see.

*Our children don't spend the night away from home really. But when the big children are watching all the little children, it's a free for all (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Alternatively, the impact of the younger sibling on the older sibling can be one of the rules being stricter. In a few instances, mothers said that older children look out for those younger than them and don't allow inappropriate programming to be watched.

Beyond sibling influence, mothers also report the impact of fathers' viewing preferences on children. In particular, mothers reported that their husbands watch



programs, regardless of whether they are acceptable for young children. Sometimes, mothers make exceptions and allow their children to watch programs they wouldn't normally let them watch (especially wrestling and *The Simpsons*) when their father is present.

*He likes to watch wrestling. The only time I'll allow him to watch it is with my husband (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Having a television set in the child's bedroom was viewed by some of the mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders as making rule enforcement more difficult. Some mothers do not allow a television set in their child's bedroom for this exact reason.

*And they're getting into high school and of course, now one has a television in his room... So the rules have kind of gone by the wayside (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban).*

It's interesting to note, however, that some mothers use bedroom sets in the child's bedroom as a way of preventing arguments. Three mothers even go so far as to only have bedroom television set (that is, there is not a common viewing area).

*There's certain things the younger children have no interest in. And that's one of the reasons why he does have a TV in his room so he has his time as well (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Finally, some mothers of older children (6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders) talked about feeling that they needed to trust their children to follow the rules. So even though they admit that their children could and did get around the rules, they had to have a certain element of trust in order to maintain family harmony.

*Especially if they're like 11 or 12, you have to pretty much know your child and be able to trust your judgment (African-American mother of 6th grade girl, urban).*

*But they work really hard, like go to school and on the sports field and if he feels he needs this break and his homework is not done, then I trust his judgement. I feel that as they get older you have to give them a little more discretion in terms of management of their time (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban).*

### Methods of Subverting Rules

The most common way children report subverting the rules is to watch TV after hours or in rooms where their parents don't know what they are watching (upstairs, out on the porch, or in the basement).

*Sometimes when my mother is upstairs and I am downstairs watching TV, I watch something I am not allowed and whenever me and my sister hear footsteps we change the channel (White 3rd grade girl, suburban).*

For 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, watching after their parents are asleep is also a way to get around the rules, albeit less frequently than simply going to a different room to watch TV.

*Sometimes I get to be able to stay up later 'cause my mother, I'll be real quiet and then she falls asleep in her room. And I can stay up as late as I want until she wakes up (African-American 6th grade boy, suburban).*

Some children report having the opportunity to watch content that they are generally not supposed to by watching with their parents. For example, one sixth grade girl said she simply pretends not to watch. In addition, parents often make exceptions to the rules if they are present.

*Sometimes there's a movie on that has bad words in it. It feels like a really good movie except for the bad words. I would only be allowed to watch it if I had my parents with me (White 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Having a television set in the child's bedroom increases opportunities for subverting the rules. Sixth (75.5%) and 9<sup>th</sup> graders (55.1%) were more likely to have bedroom television sets than 3<sup>rd</sup> graders (22.6%). Sixth graders, who were most likely to have a bedroom television set, reported watching television in their bedroom when the living room set has been turned off, a younger sibling was watching cartoons, a parent wanted to watch something different, or before they go to sleep at night. Most frequently it is described as something they will do so they don't get interrupted. Approximately half of the sixth graders who have bedroom television sets say that they break the rules by watching when or what they are not allowed to view on those TVs.

*When I have to go to bed, I just go upstairs and watch TV in my room. (White 6th grade boy, urban)*

Of the ninth graders who have bedroom television sets, only boys seem to use them to watch prohibited programs. As one girl said, "I have a TV in my room but I only use it to fall asleep at night" (White 9th grade girl, suburban). Alternatively, boys sometimes watch objectionable programs in their room, or at least would like

to, but are not always able to. As one boy said, *“I don’t have cable in my room so like if I rent like a movie or something and it’s rated R and has a lot of cursing or something and I just watch it in my room”* (White 9th grade boy, suburban).

Finally, a few of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders get around the rules by watching TV in other places, including their grandmothers’ or fathers’ home (but not typically their friends’ – only when they are bored).

*Usually at my dad’s house he likes like the violent stuff and so do I, but usually my mother doesn’t want me to watch that but I watch it anyway* (White 3rd grade girl, urban).

Clearly children are able to subvert some of their parents’ rules about television. It appears that subversion is dependent upon how motivated they are to watch the particular programs, and how strictly the rules are enforced. Younger children try to get around the rules, but mostly this is in the form of sneaking in peeks or occasionally watching a forbidden program. Most of them are not staying up late to watch shows, or watching TV before completing their homework. As children get older, they are more likely to explicitly attempt to break the rules.

#### **4. Parents watch television with their children, but co-viewing declines with age.**

Time spent watching television with parents appears to decline with age. Almost all of the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders regularly watch television programs with their parents or grandparents. They report that this is an enjoyable experience for them (indeed, some said they are not able to watch with their mothers as much as they would like).

Though young children enjoy watching children’s programming with their mothers, mothers are not always as enthusiastic. They would rather simply walk through the room (to monitor what their children are watching), or do something else while the television is on (such as sewing or crafts) than sit down and watch with them. As one mother said, *“I just don’t like television at all. It doesn’t interest me. It’s very hard to sit there with them. Mostly I’m in and out... Usually I’m on the computer, I’m doing something else”* (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).

Some reported that their husbands watch with their children more than they do.

*My husband loves to watch the old Flipper's with my girls. If that's on TV, they are all sitting down. It reminds him of his childhood and how much they all loved that. It's really nice for them to do that together (White mother of 3rd grade girl, suburban).*

Nevertheless, for some families, watching television together can be a way of sharing an experience. Some mothers say that they watch programs that they don't like, just so that they can spend time together with all of their children as a family.

*Then my daughter and I will be together, but with my son. This is my only way of keeping us together sometimes. With those horrible Friday shows, sometimes I'll just watch it so we can be together (White mother of 3rd grade girl, suburban).*

Unlike third graders, the sixth graders revealed more conflicted feelings about watching television with their mothers. In particular, several of the boys said that they watch programs with their mother only when asked or "forced" to.

*My mother, she likes to watch the Antiques Roadshow... she asks me to watch that with her... sometimes, she'll make me come in and watch it with her. I'll watch it with her... (African-American 6th grade boy, urban).*

Boys' frequently described their mothers as trying to teach them things about what they see on TV, perhaps the reason for their expressed dissatisfaction with co-viewing. Sixth grade girls, on the other hand, expressed more enjoyment over watching with their parents, but they indicated that they nevertheless watch things chosen by their parents.

Mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders also talked about watching television, such as game shows, sporting events, and movies, with their children. As one girl said, "*With my entire family, we sometimes watch TV together. I watch Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" (White 9th grade girl, suburban). However, for some teens, watching television with their parents can be uncomfortable, such as when a dirty joke is told. Many teenagers therefore expressed a preference for watching television without their parents. A small minority simply like to be alone, as one girl explained, "*I don't like watching TV with people around me*" (White 9th grade girl, suburban). Only a few of the mothers of adolescents say that they watch TV to establish a connection (similarly to mothers of younger children), or to check out what they are watching.*

### Co-viewing

From these focus groups, it appears that two genres of programs are regularly watched together as a family: sports and game shows. Across the different ages, both children and mothers talked about watching wrestling (especially boys), *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *Jeopardy*. Mothers and daughters also talked about watching Lifetime, Biography, and *Oprah* together.

Mothers reported watching animal programs, Nick at Nite, *Who's the Boss* and TGIF (ABC's Friday night lineup) with their children. Children also reported watching cartoons (*Dexter's Lab*, *Cat Dog*, *The Flintstones*) and movies (James Bond, Jackie Chan, and Indiana Jones) that their fathers like. They also talked about watching adult programs such as *ER*, *Friends*, *Ally McBeal*, and nature programs with their parents.

What is interesting is that they are not watching children's educational programs together, or, for the most part, children's entertainment programs. They frequently are watching innocuous programs, some of which they consider to be educational (e.g., *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *Oprah*). For the most part, the parent (e.g., a father who likes wrestling or a mother who likes foreign films) chooses what is watched. Thus, it is not surprising that more than half of the top 20 most popular programs amongst 2- to 12-year-olds are adult programs such as *Friends* (Nielsen, 1998).

At the beginning of the discussion group, children were asked what their favorite programs were. A few mentioned children's programs (*Pokemon*, *Arthur*, and *Hang Time*) but most reported cartoons, wrestling or sitcoms that air during primetime. Since there are few children's programs airing during primetime (Woodard, 1999), this allows minimal opportunities for parents and children to co-view age appropriate programming.

### Discussion

Co-viewing with older children oftentimes includes efforts to mediate content. Some but not many of the mothers that we spoke with do use an evaluative mediation technique, and say that they do have discussions with their children while they are viewing that go beyond explaining things that they do not

understand. In particular, the mothers talk about the reality of things that they see, discuss inappropriate behaviors, sexual behavior, or the power of advertising. It appeared that mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders had discussions with their children about a wider variety of things seen on TV than parents of younger children. This included discussions about the degradation of women, adultery, and sexual relations. Some parents also took the opportunity to explain why one cannot behave as television characters.

*He likes to watch Cops. Cause his dad has it on and sometimes I feel it's good and sometimes I feel it's bad where he could see there's an incident, a drunken incident or a drug incident. And I can explain to him this is what happens. This is if you get into that type of situation, this is what happens to you (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Some mothers also take the opportunity to point out positive things seen on TV. For example, when a mother knows that her child has a particular career interest, she will sometimes have related discussions (e.g., the music on MTV or the fashions on E!).

Third graders did not appear to always be aware of their parents' attempts to mediate content. Only sixth and ninth graders reported such conversations, talking about how their mothers use TV to teach them about the consequences of negative behavior, especially violence and drugs.

### Making Choices

Based on these focus groups, there appears to be a lack of parental involvement in the television program selection process. When children were asked how they decide what to watch, almost none said that they discussed program selections with their parents or watched shows that their parents encouraged them to watch. Instead, children were equally likely to report flipping channels until they found something interesting, going to the Preview Channel and looking for a particular program, and going to certain favorite channels. Some of them also talked about negotiating program choices with a sibling.

It appears that co-viewing is infrequent, especially at the older ages. Programs that are watched together are mostly primetime programs chosen by the parent. Since co-viewing of educational shows is all but non-existent, it is not surprising that parents have little awareness of programs airing as part of the Three-Hour

Rule. In addition, some parents do watch television with their children as an attempt to mediate content, especially at the older ages.

## HOW FAMILIES THINK ABOUT OTHER MEDIA

Other media besides television are increasingly available in American homes. Most mothers and children in this study indicated that they had cable television, a video game system, and a computer (see Appendix A). Because multiple media compete for children's attention and parents' concern, we also asked about parental mediation of other media.

One sees patterns in concerns over time and content in non-television media in the home. Some mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were most concerned about the content of other media (no violent video or computer games, age appropriate Internet sites, problematic advertisements in magazines), while others were mostly concerned about the amount of time spent with other media. Rules about time with other media, such as the Internet, were more often practical (e.g., someone needs to use the telephone) rather than reflective of attempts to mediate content.

Similar to their rules concerning television, mothers of 6<sup>th</sup> graders were particularly concerned about the media content their children may see. A few mothers of boys also try to limit the amount of time their sons spend with video games, while a few mothers of girls limit the amount of time their daughters spend on the Internet. The majority of rules, however, concern pornography on the Internet, violent video games, scary movies, and visits to chat rooms.

Other media seem to be more of a concern than television for mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Mothers of boys expressed greater concern over rap music whereas mothers of girls expressed concern over Internet content. To a certain extent, the rules concerning other media may be related to the child's current interest in different media. As their interests ebb and flow, so do parent's concerns. As one child said,

*She doesn't really care about me watching TV cause she knows TV is not my favorite thing. Talking on the telephone is. She puts rules on the telephone. She puts rules on my little sister about watching TV (African-American 9th grade girl, urban).*

### Internet Content Concerns

As the number of homes with Internet access continues to grow (Woodard, 2000), so too do parents' concerns about this new medium. Though parents fear that the



Internet could harm their children, they also realize that it can be a beneficial educational tool (Turow & Nir, 2000). Mothers who participated in our study expressed concern about Internet content, such as pornographic web sites or chat rooms. Sometimes this concern was greater than the concern about television—particularly for mothers of teenagers. Most of the concerns regarding the Internet are related to the sense by mothers that they can neither adequately control it, nor do they have sufficient knowledge about it.

*We've talked to her about it that she shouldn't do, go onto certain things. Cause I don't know how to do all this. They can go further in and play, which I don't sit and play at the computer... You can always walk by. It's wide open. You can see it. It's not in her room or anything. She knows not to go into something that she shouldn't go into (White mother of 6th grade girl, suburban).*

Some mothers deal with their concerns about the Internet by not letting their children go on alone, or at the very least for younger children, not giving them the password (more than half of the mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders report using this technique).

*Usually someone is in the room with him when he's on the computer. Just to see the sites that he's at (White mother of 3rd grade boy, urban).*

Other mothers use blocking software (e.g., AOL or Cyberpatrol), restricting children to age appropriate chat rooms (or from going to chat rooms at all).

*You do your best and trust her. As long as you have parental block, it's age group. For us, it's chat rooms up to the age of 16. At least you know it should not be an old guy talking to her. You could manage it like that. Also, they don't have passwords. We have it that we could just click into their site they can check their mail, everything. It's open. As young as you are, you have nothing to hide. If I want to go to your webpage and check out what you are doing, I do so. And I've found nothing bad yet. Letters from friends (African-American mother of 9th grade girl, urban).*

Mothers of 9th grade girls also expressed concern about their daughters email address “getting out” and about them giving out private information. This seems to be reflected in the fact that the mothers of 9th grade boys were more likely to say that their sons have their own passwords.

*You hope they have enough common sense if somebody asked them things they shouldn't be asked that they don't give that information. That's where we need to teach them because some of the stuff we don't have as much control over. So we've got to teach them what you don't, that you don't give them that piece of information or meet anybody. You read these stories ... it's very frightening. And I say again, I think that's where we need to put our efforts. Teach them values and safeguards (White mother of 9th grade girl, suburban).*

Mothers of 9th grade boys, although annoyed about instant messaging, expressed the sense that it is too hard to really set up rules. As one mother said: *"It's real hard to do that because they tell you they're doing their research, looking up their history on the Internet"* (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban).

### Video Games

Mothers of boys had more concerns than mothers of girls about video games, presumably because more boys own these systems (87% of the boys and 65% of the girls). This was also found in our national survey of parents (Woodard, 2000). Only mothers of sixth grade urban girls had rules regarding video games – they limited how much time their daughters could play (this is also the age at which girls were most likely to have a video game system). By ninth grade, the novelty of video games for both boys and girls seems to have worn off, making rules for the most part, unnecessary. Only one mother, who acknowledged that her daughter had lost interest in the games, still had rules such as more time on video games means less time on the computer.

Mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6th grade boys do have some rules regarding how much time their sons can spend with video games. However, these are not usually explicit rules. Some have clear time restrictions (e.g., 1 hour on weekdays or none during the week), while others only impose restrictions if they notice a change in behavior or if the child happens to be spending a lot of time on media that day.

*I guess I don't even have hard and fast rules but if I see him spend the day, 2 hours in the morning with TV, move onto computer games, move onto Game Boy, and after that Nintendo, I reach a certain limit and say 'No, you can't do that' (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

Some of the boys' mothers also expressed concern over the content (especially violent content) of video games. As a result, some will only buy sports video games, while others don't allow trading of the games.

*I wish I could throw them all in the trash... the majority – the games look more violent than the actual TV (African-American mother of 6th grade boy, suburban).*

### VCRs & Movies

Most families own VCRs, and several children even have a VCR in their bedrooms (Woodard, 2000). Since our discussions with mothers about television indicated that they were particularly concerned about R rated movies (especially foul language and sexual content), it is not surprising that VCR rules seem to mirror television and movie theater rules. In fact, one mother indicated that she only has rules regarding movies, not TV. The content of movies was talked about with more concern than the content on TV, but not all mothers place prohibitions on such content.

A few of the mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were concerned about movies that children could watch on the VCR. Some dealt with this by monitoring which videos were rented, others restricted older children from watching unless younger ones were asleep. Some mothers expressed concern that movies marketed for children really weren't appropriate (e.g., Adam Sandler and Jim Carey movies, Bicentennial Man, Home Alone, and Mrs. Doubtfire.)

The mothers of 6<sup>th</sup> graders are more concerned about the movies their children could see in the theater than those that are rented. They do not have rules about this, however, because their children cannot rent or be admitted to R rated movies without a parent.

### Magazines, Books, & Newspapers

Although a small minority of mothers expressed some concern over the content of advertisements in magazines or books, the majority said that if the books or magazines encourage their children to read, they don't censor content.

*If they're willing to read, we go for it. Well, there was, I know, some Goosebumps thinking that went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth... But some of them, just the graphics on the front were pretty frightening but usually we try to go for it if you're willing to read it (White mother of 3rd grade boy, suburban).*

*Whatever is in the newspaper is printed to be seen and she has enough maturity if she does read it, if she has a problem with it. She will come to me and ask me. Okay, I have no problem with that* (African-American mother of 9th grade girl, urban).

Only one group had rules about reading. Mothers of 6th grade girls were concerned about the content in magazines, particularly sex and violence. Also mentioned by some mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are the advertisements in magazines, reading at the breakfast table, or reading things that are too advanced. Although not mentioned by mothers of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, some of the boys reported having restrictions from magazines containing pornography, violence, or information on bomb building.

### Music

There was some concern about rap music among mothers of children in the two older age groups, but most especially among mothers of 9th grade boys. Some found rap music more offensive than any content on TV, but they found it hard to enforce any restrictions beyond asking children to turn it off when they are present. A small minority prohibits sons from listening to the radio or CD's, while others just prohibit rap music. Only one mother prohibits rap music at particular times of day (before school). In one 6th grade group, mothers of girls talked about screening music, but they said they did so because of older brothers in the house. Some mothers expressed the view that their sons use music as a form of rebellion.

*Well, I think it's very difficult to direct. I mean, I feel I can say, if I'm hearing the music, if it's playing in a room, I feel comfortable saying, 'please turn that off. I really can't tolerate that. I really don't like the message. I don't like the swearing or whatever.' But a lot of time, it's with the headphones and they're listening to these CD's in the car* (White mother of 9th grade boy, suburban).

One mother talked about using advisories to judge whether her daughter could order music from a CD club. For the most part, however, mothers just prohibited certain rap songs.

*They tell you at the bottom. They'll say if there's a parental advisory or something like that. I know that last year – this year she didn't do it – last year, when she picked, out of five of them three had them. 'Like, I don't think so honey'* (White mother of 6th grade girl, suburban).

For mothers of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, mediation of music does not compete with mediation of television or other media. Some do not allow their children to watch music videos. Mostly, they talked about positive things their children listen to on the radio, in particular "Radio Disney."

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In-depth discussions with parents and children during the Winter of 2000 reveal that the information, programming and technologies provided by recent regulations are neither widely understood nor frequently used by families seeking to guide their children's use of television. Our exploration of the mediation practices of families with 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders provides some insight into the ways in which public policy is disconnected from private practice.

First, parents are not actively seeking out information about programming for their children. They believe that they are the best judges of what is appropriate for their children. While, they do not necessarily trust the age, content, or educational labels that air at the beginning of programs, they also do not have the sense that educational television is widely available. In addition, many parents appear to be working with a different definition of educational television, calling programs such as *Oprah* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* educational, perhaps because they are unaware of the educational programs airing on the networks.

A second problem lies in the choices families make about what to watch together -- typically adult or general audience programs (such as situational comedies and dramas) rather than children's programs. Co-viewing declines with age and only at the older ages, are parents likely to use television as a teaching tool. Research indicates that children may learn more from educational programs when they have discussions about them with a parent (Lemish & Rice, 1986). Parents of children eight years of age and older are missing a potentially valuable opportunity to help their children learn from educational programs, mostly because they are not watching educational programs together. They are also missing an opportunity to assess the information provided by the labels (e.g., TV-14 or E/I) and make informed viewing choices on this basis.

Third, families vary in how they mediate television and other household media. Some appear to keep a close eye on when children watch and what they watch. They do not allow television sets in children's bedrooms and strictly limit the number of hours children view. Other families set up rules to address concerns about television content, particularly sexual and violent content. They do not allow their children to watch programs with certain ratings nor do they permit exposure to certain kinds of programs (e.g., wrestling). These concerns appear to be

particularly salient for children in the younger grades, whose mothers indicate greater interest in mediating television, and who are particularly concerned about the harmful effects of television. What is clear is that different families have different concerns – and that these concerns change as their children grow and mature. For many families, the v-chip ratings and technology and the increased availability of educational programs may be valuable resources. However, if parents are confused or unaware of these resources, they will lack any sense of how they can be utilized within the home.

Furthermore, multiple media compete for children's time, and children's interests in video games, television, the Internet, and music change constantly. As a result, parents may have concerns about other media that ebb and flow depending on their child's interest in the medium and their level of comfort with it. Though television is the focus of most parental concern, video games, the Internet, movies, and music also give rise to worries over time displacement and content.

Fourth, the fact that children are able to subvert their parents' rules (by watching in their bedrooms, at the homes of others or after hours), presents some challenges to parents' successful employment of the V-chip technology. Although at all ages there was some disdain for rules, this was most prevalent amongst boys. This is consistent with other research by van den Bulck & van den Bergh (2000), and may be important in terms of the impact of new mediation efforts on family harmony. If the family attempts to install a new rule system, such as the V-chip technology, how will boys respond? Some research indicates that children may simply turn to other, less restricted media (van den Bulck & van den Bergh, 2000). In addition, our research suggests that children will go to someone else's home or to a different television in their own home that is not V-chip equipped.

Finally, it is clear that the entire family system influences the media environment. Media perspectives of the mother may be shaped by having multiple children, differing expectations for their children, and their sense of their own roles. Thus, it is important to consider the ways in which the family operates as a system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), where all members influence one another and where interactions flow in a circular, reciprocal manner. In this vein, it is critical to consider how the family adjusts to change (for example, as new media, new information, and new developmental stages are reached). It is also important to recognize family as a system with a history. This became particularly clear when

parents talked about their own childhood experiences with television or how established norms and rules around media were no longer considered “rules.” Thus, in considering how public policy might empower families as they negotiate the medium of television one must be consistently reminded that the family is a system that both affects media (for example, by choosing what is available) and is affected by media (for example, by children teaching parents how to use the Internet).

Because families are complex systems it may be difficult to incorporate new technologies and beliefs into the family system. Parents will only adopt and adapt when they have a strong sense that changing the system will provide benefits that outweigh the costs to the family. So, for example, parents will block violent programs when they believe that not doing so will lead to more aggressive behavior in their child. Or, they may encourage educational programs only when they are convinced that the time and attention it takes will yield positive benefits for the child. Thus, it is important to take into account the structure of the family and media system when thinking about public policies.

Although our discussions illustrate that the Three-Hour Rule and V-chip system are not currently being widely used by families, this research indicates that parents see value for their children in programming that teaches about school topics and life situations. In addition, parents are clear in their concerns about children’s exposure to sex and violence. Because children are able to get around the rules (for example, by watching on bedroom television sets or when a parent is not home), the V-chip represents a means for making it harder to circumvent parents’ wishes.

Given the normative practices we observed around children’s relationship with television, however, it appears that numerous obstacles must be overcome in order to ensure that the public policies meet the needs of the families they were meant to empower.

**Parents are the key to bringing children to quality shows and providing feedback to broadcasters about the programs they air to fulfill their public interest obligations.** Though APPC surveys indicate that parents feel TV “does more good than harm” (Stanger 1998; Stanger & Gridina, 1999), parents nevertheless seem wary of the medium. Perhaps they need to be persuaded that

television can be an educational resource in the home beyond the preschool years. For this to happen they need to know that enriching programs are available on the nation's free airwaves (Jordan, 2000).

Parents must also understand the ratings and the technology if they are to use the V-chip blocking device in their homes. Although they are concerned about television's effects upon their children, they will not be able to use the new technology unless they are convinced that the ratings are trustworthy and the system is easy to use. In order for this to happen, policymakers and advocates must make families aware of policies designed to place children's educational programming on the commercial broadcast stations and to limit children's exposure to potentially harmful content.

**Broadcasters must inform parents about which of their programs are educational for children and solicit feedback about the quality and usefulness of the programs they are offering.** Although these programs are currently labeled on the air, the symbols are often obtuse and impossible for parents to interpret. In addition, parents are generally not co-viewing E/I programs with their children (so these labels are not reaching their intended audience). More effective, perhaps, would be a public service and promotional campaign that airs when parents are in the audience (e.g., morning shows, news and primetime). Although some broadcasters are making efforts in this area such as promoting programs during primetime (FCC, 1999), the efforts are not widespread enough to be making an impact on parents.

**Broadcasters and cablecasters should also inform parents and children about what the rating system means.** Although many of the programs on the air are currently labeled, it is difficult to find out what these symbols mean. Providing information about program ratings and what they mean in a consistent and recognizable manner may yield the same benefits provided by the MPAA ratings for movies. Our national survey indicates that a full 80 percent of parents rely on MPAA ratings to guide their children's choices.

Although the research on the impact of the Three-Hour Rule and V-chip ratings in the home is not encouraging, we now have a better insight into how the policies can be made more useful for families. The premise of the regulations seems borne out by the respondents, who indicated high levels of concern over what their



children see and strong interest – particularly for younger children – in becoming involved in their use of media. The information, programming and technology provided today may help them make the medium a more positive resource within the family system.

**APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND ACCESS TO MEDIA**

**Demographic Information as reported by children**

|                            |                        |       |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Birth Order of Focus Child | Oldest                 | 41.1% |
|                            | Middle                 | 30.0% |
|                            | Youngest               | 28.9% |
| Race                       | Caucasian/White        | 54.4% |
|                            | African-American/Black | 33.3% |
|                            | Hispanic/Latino        | 4.4%  |
|                            | Asian                  | 1.1%  |
|                            | Native American        | 2.2%  |
|                            | Mixed ethnicity        | 4.4%  |

**Demographic Information as reported by mothers**

|                            |   |         |
|----------------------------|---|---------|
|                            | Median Age of Mother                    | 39 yrs. |
|                            | Percent with Another Parent in the Home | 81.8%   |
| Employment Status          | Work Full Time                          | 43.9%   |
|                            | Work Part Time                          | 33.3%   |
|                            | Self-Employed                           | 4.5%    |
|                            | Homemaker                               | 16.7%   |
|                            | Unemployed                              | 1.5%    |
|                            | Work Inside the Home                    | 16.6%   |
| Education Level            | Did not complete High School            | 3.0%    |
|                            | High School Degree or Less              | 18.2%   |
|                            | Some Advanced School                    | 19.7%   |
|                            | College Degree                          | 16.7%   |
|                            | Some Graduate School                    | 13.6%   |
|                            | Graduate Degree                         | 28.8%   |
| Race                       | Caucasian/White                         | 63.6%   |
|                            | African-American/Black                  | 30.3%   |
|                            | Hispanic/Latino                         | 3.0%    |
|                            | Asian                                   | 1.5%    |
|                            | Native American                         | 1.5%    |
| Birth Order of Focus Child | Oldest                                  | 56.1%   |
|                            | Middle                                  | 18.2%   |
|                            | Youngest                                | 25.8%   |

**Percent of Media Access as reported by mothers**

|                                |      |
|--------------------------------|------|
| TV in mother's bedroom         | 90.3 |
| TV in focus child's bedroom    | 44.6 |
| Cable TV                       | 77.3 |
| Owns 3+ TVs                    | 66.7 |
| Daily Newspaper Subscription   | 47.7 |
| Weekend Newspaper Subscription | 70.8 |
| Computer in Home               | 92.4 |
| Internet Access                | 75.4 |

APPENDIX B: EXHIBITS PRESENTED TO FOCUS GROUPS



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