

Impact of Family Media Environment on Children's Leisure Time Activities

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Abstract: *The mass media have tremendous influence on the lives of children. Considered as the third parent, its impact on the development and behavior of children has been studied by scholars worldwide. The new media technologies especially satellite television, internet, social network sites, play stations and gaming consoles keep children occupied in their leisure time. Childhood is a period of tremendous growth and development. Leisure time activities such as playing with friends and pursuing creative hobbies are beneficial for the development of the child. However due to the invasion of the new media technologies children are spending lesser time in these productive activities. This study examines the impact of the new media technologies on the leisure time activities of children.*

Keywords: Media Environment, Children, Leisure time activities, family.

1. Introduction

Childhood is a period of fundamental growth wherein marked changes in the physical development of children occurs along with an enhancement of cognitive and motor skills. It is a period of learning during which the child absorbs all that he/she sees and hears, learns from interaction with others thus laying the early foundations of physical, cognitive, language and socio-emotional development. Very young children respond to and are influenced by external sources such as parents, family members, siblings, caregivers and the home media environment, all of which have a bearing on this early development. Due to the pervasive nature of media environment at home, its impact on the development of children has been the concern of parents, pediatricians and researchers. As the amount of time that children spend with media is considerable, 1.25 hrs a day for infants and toddlers; 2 ½ hours a day at the age of 5 years to about 4 hours a day at age 12 (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988)[1], it is critical to assess the developmental impact of this screen time. The school years are a period of steady physical growth and rapid skill acquisition. As children grow, their increasing strength and motor coordination in turn contributes to good health, a sense of independence, high-self esteem and appropriate cognitive development. The extent to which heavy use of media can influence this development, and displaces the time that children would spend in other activities and verbal interactions, has important implications for cognitive development.

Various kinds of media, such as television, internet, mobile phones, play stations, etc, is an integral part of most Indian homes. In a typical Indian home, television is on for approximately hours. The drawing rooms of most middle class Indian homes where the television set and the computer is normally placed, is also the place where members spend most of their time. Children may eat, play, do homework or pursue other activities in the drawing rooms. As a result, even when the child is not watching television, he/she will be exposed to background television. The impact of this background television may be a distracting one, wherein it draws the attention of a child from the task being pursued or an interfering one wherein its sights and sound disturb

him/her. Researchers have suggested that background television interferes with concurrent cognitive processing, including reading comprehension and memory of the child (Anderson & Evans, 2001) [2].

School age children show greater precision of movement and coordination than younger children, along with more maneuverability and skill. This enables them to learn games and sports involving gross motor skills as well as games, hobbies and crafts that require fine motor skills. An enhancement of these skills occurs by pursuing these activities in leisure time. Excessive use of media may leave little scope for this, as such affecting the development of motor skills in children. The school age child is also making rapid stride in physical development. Excessive media use can cause a reduction in the amount of time spent in playing outdoor games that enhance the physical development of children. Obesity is the most common deviation from normal growth found among school age children. A sedentary activity like television viewing, playing video games, surfing the internet decreases the time spent in physical activities and play while also increasing snacking, particularly of calorie-dense junk food. Alternatively, obese children who cannot play games easily and are often embarrassed while participating in physical activities may turn to television and other media for companionship. Social isolation of this nature may also affect the socio-emotional development of children.

The present study explores the extent to which the family media environment affects children's leisure time activities. The stratified random sampling technique was employed to select the sample for the final study. Out of seventy recognized English medium schools in Tirupati (2005) thirty five schools were selected in random. From each school, 12 children were chosen randomly, 4 from each class (8th, 9th and 10th). Care was taken to ensure that the number of boys and girls in the final sample would be equal as far as possible. A sample of 390 children studying in classes 8th, 9th and 10th of which 197 were boys and 193 were girls were administered the tool. The tool (a questionnaire) explored the media habits of children and their leisure time activities.

The following table shows the distribution of the final sample gender and class wise

S. No	Class	Gender		Total
		Boys	Girls	
1	8 th	66	65	131
2	9 th	68	67	135
3	10 th	63	61	124
Total		197	193	390

The study revealed that there is a strong association between the various leisure time activities of Playing Outdoor games, reading books, interacting with parents, Creative Activities, Listening to radio/music and Playing Video Games with type of media at home (P<0.01). There is also an association between the leisure time activity of watching films on video with type of media at home (P<0.05). There is however no association of type of media at home with children's listening to radio/music in leisure time (P>0.01).

Association of Leisure Time Activities of Children with type of Media at Home

Leisure Time Activity	Frequency	Type of Media		Total	Chi-Square
		Old Media	New Media		
Playing Outdoor games	Never	66	46	112	$\chi^2 = 59.846^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-16.92%	-11.79%	-28.72%	
	Sometimes	60	171	231	
		-15.38%	-43.85%	-59.23%	
	Always	1	46	47	
-0.26%	-11.79%	-12.05%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Reading books	Never	90	104	194	$\chi^2 = 34.995^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-23.08%	-26.67%	-49.74%	
	Sometimes	35	137	172	
		-8.97%	-35.13%	-44.10%	
	Always	2	22	24	
-0.51%	-5.64%	-6.15%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Interacting with Parents	Never	83	95	178	$\chi^2 = 30.662^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-21.28%	-24.36%	-45.64%	
	Sometimes	42	150	192	
		-10.77%	-38.46%	-49.23%	
	Always	2	18	20	
-0.51%	-4.62%	-5.13%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Creative Activities	Never	96	111	207	$\chi^2 = 38.999^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-24.62%	-34.62%	-53.08%	
	Sometimes	31	147	178	
		-7.95%	-37.69%	-45.64%	
	Always	0	5	5	
0.00%	-1.28%	-1.28%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Listening to radio/musi c	Never	94	176	270	$\chi^2 = 03.214$ (df=2) P value = 0.200
		-24.10%	-19.49%	-69.23%	
	Sometimes	32	79	111	
		-8.21%	-20.26%	-34.62%	
	Always	1	8	9	
-0.26%	-2.05%	-2.31%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Watching films on	Never	115	209	324	$\chi^2 = 08.298^*$
		-29.49%	-53.59%	-83.08%	

Video	Sometimes	12	49	61	df=2) P value = 0.016
		-3.08%	-12.56%	-15.64%	
	Always	0	5	5	
		0.00%	-1.28%	-1.28%	
	Total	127	263	390	
-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%			
Playing Video Games	Never	125	219	344	$\chi^2 = 19.056^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-32.05%	-56.15%	-88.21%	
	Sometimes	1	34	35	
		-0.26%	-8.72%	-8.97%	
	Always	1	10	11	
-0.26%	-2.56%	-2.82%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		
Playing Computer Games	Never	107	172	279	$\chi^2 = 15.406^*$ (df=2) P value = 0.000
		-27.44%	-44.10%	-71.54%	
	Sometimes	20	88	108	
		-5.13%	-22.56%	-4.62%	
	Always	0	3	3	
0.00%	-0.77%	-0.77%			
Total	127	263	390		
	-32.56%	-67.44%	-100.00%		

This study is supported by several similar studies that have found that use of media affects children's leisure time activities.

In the context of the day to day life of a child, the concept of disposable leisure time arises. This leisure time, comprises for most children, the amount of time left once sleep, school, homework, and household chores are completed. Utilization of leisure time has important implications for the development of the child. The activities that a child engages in during this time are an important determinant of their physical, emotional and social well being. The benefits of leisure time are considered to depend on how it is used. However, there is a paucity of research on the potential effects of various uses of leisure time. It is possible that the use of leisure time in many different ways may have positive outcomes for children. Leisure time activities provide the child with the opportunity to learn new skills and explore new environments. A child participating in sports is learning the particular rules and becoming proficient in the skills required of the game chosen. Sports also promote positive relationships with adults and with peers (Larson, 1994). A child participating in various arts and hobbies learns the specific techniques involved and can become more familiar with the culture surrounding the activity. The time children spend not only in school but also in school-related activities at home such as doing homework may boost their human capital and improve their cognitive achievement. Leisure time reading may also improve the verbal skills of the child and supplement the formal learning process. A child spending more time in leisure reading is thus making important gains in learning academic skills.

Activities that aim to develop specific skills such as arts and crafts are considered to bring in long-term benefits. Besides learning a skill, children learn about a specific craft or hobby that may sustain their interest until adulthood and beyond. Development of a hobby is also found to be associated with better social competency of children. The developmental implication of leisure time activities thus makes it important

to explore the various factors that affect children's use of leisure time. The realization of the importance of leisure time activities in the development of the child has also led to an increased investment by parents in this area.

For children in middle childhood, the most preferred leisure time activity is playing. Faced with a choice between friends and media, children choose friends, leaving media to fill the moments of boredom and loneliness. There are many circumstances in young people's lives that made media consumption the ready solution to boredom and loneliness – particularly the finding that television and video games are preferred solitary activities only when social activities like friends and play are not readily at hand. Watching and playing were what children chose to do when they had 'time to kill' and had little supervision (Kline and Botterill, 2001)[3].

Play is considered to be the foundation for a child's development. Play as a category of time encompasses most of children's activities that are not formally organized, such as board games and playing around the house. Researchers believe that play is more than just an enjoyable form of self-entertainment. It lays the foundation for a fundamental human capacity of life-long value – the capacity for thinking about the possible, for wondering "might this be?" This ability to transform objects or settings into possible alternatives is crucial for adult thought, planning and creativity (Singer, 1994)[4]. Playing with toys are an important part of child development, wherein children acquire a variety of skills for life, such as motor-coordination, social and cognitive skills. Jean Piaget (1962)[5] considered symbolic play as not just a passing feature of growth en route to the emergence of logical, orderly thought, but as an intrinsically adaptive feature of our human condition. It is a foundation of a long term incorporation and consolidation of a major human characteristic: imagination.

Children who engage in more outdoor play are found to score well on physical well being as well. Leisure time activities can also help foster creativity in children and aid in the development of their motor skills. There is evidence that participation in a number of leisure time activities may have direct benefits for children. Children's participation in arts programs is associated with math, reading, writing, and language skills. Also working with creative drama and theatre may have benefits for language, reading, writing, and interpersonal skills (Seidel, 1998)[6].

Meanwhile, the plummeting costs of media related goods and technological development has converted most homes into mini media centers, causing an increase in children's engagement with these media. The rise of a "kids' consumer market", that offers a myriad of media related products created especially for children is fostering the 'media culture' in which the child is becoming an active co-constructor of his/her media environment. Innumerable media choices are available to children from television software, video games, DVDs that often claim to be educational as well as entertaining, computer games and now of course the Internet. However, in many parts of India, television still remains central to children's conceptions of

leisure and home as economic limitations serve as a barrier to children's access to these new media technologies.

Simultaneously however, concern about the physical and psychological well being of children is increasing and the value of non-mediated leisure is now being recognized as an important investment in child development. Activities such as playing and learning have been recognized as crucial in this context. Schools should include media literacy in their curriculum wherein teachers can guide children to be wise media consumers. Teachers can work with children when themes of violence appear in their play to facilitate more appropriate problem solving and/or creative, imaginative play. Teachers should inform parents when negative or violent themes appear as a regular part of their children's play and support parents in their efforts to monitor children's viewing habits.

- Interaction between parents and children in leisure time is important during which a parent can tell the child that:
 - Why the child is not allowed to watch certain TV programs.
 - How watching certain programs may be beneficial to the child.
 - Why the child is encouraged to do other things than watching TV.
 - What are the rules for watching TV and why the child must follow them?
- Parents must spend more time with their children so that children realize that playing is more fun than watching TV.
- TV viewing must be considered by parents as part of a larger 'media diet'. Parents must evaluate the amount of time that children spend with various media (such as computers, video and the internet) over a week and set limits to children's total media time.
- Other family members including neighbors and friends must be included in parent's efforts to make children wise consumers of media.

2. Future Implications of the Study

Most of the research in the field of the impact of new technologies on children has been done in the west and very few studies of this nature exist in India. There is therefore a need to study the impact of new media on children in the broader context of the family. The following are some of the suggestions that the researcher wishes to propose in the light of the findings of the present study.

The burden on parents who live in multi-media homes has become enormous. Some of them worry about the potential impact of these media on their children, many speculate about the consequences and only a few actually impose any meaningful regulation. The present study has revealed that new media technologies do impact the leisure time activities of children and therefore parental mediation is a must in the use of new media by children.

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