EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENTAL ACCOMPANIMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with research surrounding “accompaniment by an adult.”

Accompaniment is referenced in the Motion Picture Act Regulations; it represents the necessity for a parent or guardian to stay with their children for the full duration of a motion picture.

Parental accompaniment, or mediation, comes in many forms including encouragement, discouragement, co-viewing, interaction, and any attempt to influence children’s viewing patterns.

Co-viewing is thought to be an effective tool in minimizing the potentially negative effects of visual media (Van Erva, 1998).

An adult watching a program with a child and discussing it helps the child distinguish right from wrong in the “real world” and helps the child understand that what happens in the program is for entertainment purposes.

Children may learn negative behaviour patterns and values from many other experiences as well as television programs, and parental guidance is needed to help children sort these influences and develop the ability to make sound decisions on their own (Nathanson, 2001).

There is a need for both co-viewing and parental mediation in order to enhance the pro-social possibilities of television and to abate its negative influences (Bryant & Bryant 2001).

Parents whose concerns include the cognitive effects of viewing are more likely to discuss program content with their children. Parents concerned with behavioural effects are more likely to mediate and focus their control on restricting when and what type of programming watched (Ableman, 1990).

Parents are less likely to mediate if they do not perceive television to have any effect, either harmful or beneficial, on their children (Ibid). This could potentially lead to lax attitudes regarding what is acceptable for children to watch.

Professionals in the areas of Communications, Media Literacy and Child Cognitive Development have found through extensive research that increased levels of adult accompaniment help educate and mitigate the effects of potentially harmful media on children.

If parents watch television and films with their children, they can provide other views to supplement, alter, modify, or refute information that their children are receiving (Van Erva, 1998).
The FCO Mission Statement contains the passage “FCO strives to protect children and inform parents regarding the motion pictures they may choose to view.”

With this in mind, FCO has implemented numerous proactive initiatives to educate the public on the office and the BC Motion Picture Act (MPA).

For example, FCO talks to BC high school classes in an effort to provide media awareness. In keeping with this proactive approach of “protecting children” and “informing parents,” this paper will explore different issues surrounding Parental Accompaniment as it relates to film.

Terms such as co-viewing, active mediation, restrictive mediation and evaluative guidance will be used to discuss “accompaniment” as it relates to FCO.

I have included direct passages from research documents throughout this paper. This was done primarily to relay an unbiased portrayal of the various researchers’ work. Where I have added a comment, I did so using the Italics function to represent my own voice.
RESEARCH

Parent and Child Perspectives on the Presence and Meaning of Parental Television Mediation (2001)

By: Amy I. Nathanson; Format: Experimental Research Study

Purpose of Study: To understand the motivations underlying parents’ use of mediation and how children interpret mediation messages.

Abstract: A survey of 394 parents and second through sixth-grade children was conducted to understand why parents mediate violent television and how children interpret mediation messages.

Mediation:

Mediation includes the following types of behaviours:

Co-viewing- watching television with children.
Active Mediation- talking with children about television.
Restrictive Mediation- setting rules about children’s television viewing.

Although it is often assumed that any form of mediation is good for children, research indicates that three forms of mediation are quite distinct and do not always lead to positive outcomes.

Previous research:

Some research suggests that co-viewing leads to positive outcomes such as learning educational content (Salomon, 1977).

However, co-viewing is also related to negative outcomes, such as believing that television characters are like “real-world” people (Messaris & Kerr, 1984) and learning aggression from violent television (Nathanson, 1999).

Active mediation is related to positive outcomes among children including scepticism toward television news (Austin, 1993) and lower levels of aggression (Nathanson, 1999; Nathanson & Cantor, 2000).

Parental restrictive mediation has been linked with positive outcome, but it can be detrimental to children (Nathanson, 1999).

This resulted in the following research questions (RQ) being asked:
RQ1a: Is there a relationship between parents’ and children’s reports of active mediation?

RQ1b: Is there a relationship between parents’ and children’s reports of restrictive mediation?

RQ1c: Is there a relationship between parents’ and children’s reports of co-viewing?

**Results:**

The research questions were addressed and the following results were obtained:

**Attitudinal Precursors of Mediation**

- Perceived harm of violent television was significantly related to negative active mediation indicating that parents who used negative active mediation of violent television believed that televised violence can harm their child.

- Restrictive mediation was more likely among parents who had little personal affinity for violent programming. They perceived little utility of violent programming for their children and believed that violent television can be harmful to their child.

- Co-viewing was found to be more likely among parents with a personal affinity for violent television and who believe violent programming can be useful to children rather than harmful.

- RQ1a, RQ1b, discovered that older children were less likely to report that their parents talk to them about violent television than younger children.

- Children who reported that their parents talk with them about violent content believed that their parents held positive attitudes toward violent content. This was found to be consistent, because, children who received restrictive mediation were more likely to believe that their parents had unfavourable attitudes toward violent television.

**Discussion:**

The overarching goal of this study was to understand what the mediation of violent television means to the individuals who use and receive it.

Parents’ decisions to highlight the negative aspects of violent television with their children do not stem from parents’ own affinity or dislike of the content or any
conception that the content might be useful to children. Rather, these discussions are motivated by the belief that the content may be harmful.

Co-viewing was used most frequently by parents who do not believe media has harmful effects. Those parents also felt that media content can aid in children’s social learning.

However it was found that the dissatisfaction children may experience due to restrictive mediation may translate into children’s heightened awareness of this form of mediation relative to the others.

The observed relationship between co-viewing and children’s perceptions indicates that mere co-viewing constitutes, in the child’s mind, an endorsement of the co-viewed material.

There are two main parts to this study that are of particular importance to FCO.

First, the research found that the mere act of co-viewing was not enough to mitigate the effects of potentially harmful media.

Parental co-viewing without any form of mediation or discussion about the material may in turn send a message to the child that their parent endorses the content.

Secondly, this study illustrates the need for parental mediation.

This study found restrictive mediation to be most effective as it clearly sends a message to children that their parents disapprove of certain forms of media.

This is interesting because it explores the benefits of two opposite approaches for the parent: parental accompaniment to potentially harmful media and not allowing children to be exposed to harmful media in any form.

This study is particularly useful because the children were roughly 5 to 12 years of age.

This is of significance to the BC Film Classification Office (FCO) because a 14A classification is meant to keep children under the age of 14 from viewing films alone due to potentially harmful content.

The approach of FCO is to protect children by informing parents of specific content elements in films.

FCO should implement more proactive measures when educating the public.

This study introduces the idea of surveying parents through schools.
Abstract: This study replicates the Bybee, Robinson, and Turow (1982) investigation involving parental guidance of television viewing. Three distinct dimensions of parental guidance were found: restrictive, evaluative and unfocussed guidance. In addition to a number of demographic variables, parental beliefs about the effects of television on children proved fruitful in predicting guidance.

Background

Over the years, a number of studies have demonstrated that television’s impact on children can be enhanced, channelled, or counteracted through parental guidance of children’s viewing.

Parental discussions with children about programs watched together can help children comprehend media messages.

Comments made by parents can change children’s opinions about program content and counteract undesirable behaviour effects.

In addition, children’s emotional responses to frightening scenes can be dampened by parental comments.

Three types of parental guidance were discovered:

1. **Restrictive guidance** involves imposing restrictions on the child’s amount of viewing and on the material watched (e.g., forbidding the viewing of certain programs);

2. **Evaluative guidance** involves discussing program material with the child for the deliberate purpose of helping the child evaluate the meaning, morality (e.g. pointing out bad things actors are doing), and characterization of program content;

3. **Unfocused guidance** involves non-specific guidance methods, such as co-viewing with the child and talking to the child about programs. Parent-child co-viewing and discussions about programs may occur primarily because parents and children enjoy the same programs rather than because parents are concerned that their children get the most positive and least negative viewing experiences.
Results

As predicted, the tendency to restrict children’s television viewing was relatively great among mothers and among more educated parents.

Also as predicted, the restrictions placed on viewing decreased with increasing age of the child.

Contrary to the predictions, no relationship was found between the use of restrictive guidance and the child’s gender.

Parents most strongly convinced of the negative effects of television on children were most likely to use restrictive guidance methods.

Parents who were more strongly convinced of either positive or negative effects of television most often employed evaluative guidance methods.

Discussion

The use of unfocused guidance methods is greatest in families with relatively few children possibly because parents in smaller families have more time to watch television together with their children and to discuss programs.

Parental perceptions of the effects of television on children are related in a predictable manner to the use made of restrictive and evaluative guidance.

Parents who are strongly convinced of television’s negative effects are more inclined to use restrictive and evaluative guidance methods probably because they are highly motivated to protect their children from ill effects.

They hope to counter undesirable effects by imposing restrictions on their viewing and by providing evaluative commentary meant to prevent ill effects (e.g., commentary used to dampen children’s anxiety reactions to frightening television scenes).

Action groups concerned with stimulating the interest of parents in the guidance of children’s television viewing often emphasize that children should be protected from the possible negative effects of television. The results of the present study suggest a less one-sided approach may be more fruitful.

A more thoughtful approach that pays attention to both the positive and negative effects of television on children might encourage parents not only to use restrictive, evaluative, and unfocused guidance methods to reinforce the benefit the child derives from television viewing.
This study suggests that parents who are aware of the potential effects of media are more likely to monitor their children’s viewing habits.

This assumption was found to be statistically significant which establishes their claim.

What should be carefully considered by FCO is that media awareness and accompaniment conceivably go hand in hand.

In order to get the desired effect from accompaniment, media awareness is needed to enable parents/guardians to make the appropriate choices in terms of what is potentially harmful to their children.

What some parents once considered to be offensive may not actually be harmful.

FCO should take this into careful consideration when implementing proactive initiatives in the community.

Parents may be quick to allude to certain contextual elements in films which they feel are unsuitable for children (e.g. sex, coarse language and violence).

However what is offensive to parents may not be harmful to children.

FCO should continue providing parents with social science research into the risk of psychological harm.

In striving to educate the public, FCO should not only consider the negative effects of film but also the beneficial aspects as well.

There is a wealth of pro-social aspects to film and media to which parents should be aware.
Abstract: The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recognizes that exposure to mass media (i.e., television, movies, video and computer games, the Internet, music lyrics and videos, newspapers, magazines, books, advertising, etc.) presents both health risks and benefits for children and adolescents. Media education has the potential to reduce the harmful effects of media. By understanding and supporting media education, paediatricians can play an important role in reducing the risk of exposure to mass media for children and adolescents.

Background

For more than a decade, the AAP has recognized both the public health risks and the benefits of mass media for children and adolescents.

However, paediatricians are increasingly aware of negative media influences on children and adolescents.

Five recently published AAP statements summarizing the available research about the effects of media on young people encourage media education for parents and children as an approach to mitigating potentially harmful effects.

The Amount of Time Spent with the Media

Currently, the average American child or adolescent spends more than 21 hours per week viewing television.

This figure does not include time spent watching movies, listening to music or watching music videos, playing video or computer games, or surfing the Internet for recreational purposes.

Time spent with media often displaces involvement in creative, active, or social pursuits.

The Impact of Media Violence on Aggressive Behaviour

More than 1000 scientific studies and reviews conclude that significant exposure to media violence increases the risk of aggressive behaviour in certain children and adolescents, desensitizes them to violence, and makes them believe that the world is a "meaner and scarier" place than it is.
Violence appears in various forms of media entertainment such as movies, video games, and television news.

Research has shown that news reports of bombings, natural disasters, murders, and other violent crimes have the potential to traumatize young children.

Sexual Content in the Media

American media, both programming and advertising, are highly sexualized in their content.

In fact, the average young viewer is exposed to more than 14,000 sexual references each year, yet only a handful provides an accurate portrayal of responsible sexual behaviour or accurate information about birth control, abstinence, or the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease.

Tobacco and Alcohol

Increasingly, media messages and images are normalizing and glamorizing the use of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs.

Tobacco manufacturers spend $6 billion per year, and alcohol manufacturers $2 billion per year, to entice youngsters into "just saying yes."

Popular movies are often showing the lead character or likeable characters using and enjoying tobacco and alcohol products.

Effects of Media on Obesity and School Performance

Increased television use is documented to be a significant factor leading to obesity and may lead to decreased school achievement as well.

Although there is concern that over stimulation from high levels of media use may lead to Attention Deficit Disorder or hyperactivity, there has been no research to date that demonstrates such a causal relationship.

Value of Media Education

Media education is defined as the study and analysis of mass media.

A media-literate public is able to decipher the purpose and message of the media rather than accepting it at face value.
With an educated understanding of media images and messages, users can recognize media's potential effects and make informed choices about their children's media exposure.

Media education represents a multifaceted approach to understanding and eliminating the negative impact of media images and messages on young people.

At the same time, it allows the positive and prosocial uses of media to be explored and appreciated.

Media education includes the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media products.

A media-educated person understands the following: all media messages are constructed; media messages shape our understanding of the world; individuals interpret media messages uniquely; and mass media has powerful economic implications.

A media-educated person will be able to limit use of media; make positive media choices; select creative alternatives to media consumption; develop critical thinking and viewing skills; and understand the political, social, economic, and emotional implications of all forms of media.

Research strongly suggests that media education may result in young people becoming less vulnerable to negative aspects of media exposure.

In several studies, children in elementary school-based programs were able to evaluate program and advertising content more critically.

**Recommendations**

The AAP recommends the following:

1. Paediatricians should become educated about the public health risks of media exposure through workshops and written materials.
2. Paediatricians should begin incorporating questions about media use into their routine visits.

Advice to parents should include the following:

- encouraging careful selection of programs to view
- co-viewing and discussing content with children and adolescents
- teaching critical viewing skills
- avoiding use of media as an electronic baby-sitter
3. Paediatricians should urge parents to avoid television viewing for children under the age of 2 years.
4. Paediatricians should alert and educate parents, children, adolescents, teachers, school officials, and other professionals about media-associated health risks.
5. Paediatricians should collaborate with other professionals, including the parent-teacher associations, schools, and community groups, to promote media education.
6. Paediatricians should encourage the government and private foundations to increase the funding available for media education research.

Media violence is so popular and easily accessible that attempts to shield it from children would be only partially successful at best.

The approach with the greatest promise is public education for parents and media literacy education for children and youth.

There have been several efforts to intervene in the effects of media violence on children’s aggressive behaviour through media literacy interventions (e.g. Media Awareness Network).

Such interventions have reported some success but the feeling is that parents are still misinformed.

This misinformation had lead to policy initiatives by the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP).

Organizations such as the AAP have realized that such policy initiatives and media literacy campaigns are of the utmost importance when trying to mitigate the effects of harmful media.

If there were structures in place where parents could keep abreast on media issues then initiatives such as the one from the AAP would be unnecessary.

FCO provides parents with information regarding a motion picture; however, this information is practically useless if parents do not fully understand the rating or the advisory attached to the film.

What does the advisory “violence” mean to a parent that does not understand the psychological or behavioural effects of a film that contains “violence”?

This is why media awareness coupled with initiatives from FCO and other public agencies is the only way to achieve the desired effects of media literacy.
To simply assume that one program from one agency is going to be enough to educate parents is unrealistic.

However, a multi-faceted approach from concerned agencies and organizations is the only way to achieve the desirable effects of media education.
CONCLUSION

Co-viewing and the Motion Picture Act.

The *Motion Picture Act Regulations* (Regulations) make adult accompaniment a requirement for certain films.

For example, persons under 14 years of age must view 14A rated films with an adult.

Further to the foregoing research referenced in this paper, I will take a closer look at the 14A category.

The Regulations define 14A as follows:

**14A - Suitable for persons 14 years of age or older. Persons under 14 years of age must view these motion pictures accompanied by an adult. Motion pictures in this category may contain violence, coarse language or sexually suggestive scenes, or any combination of them.**

Current FCO policies further describe film content in this category as follows:

**Violence:** this may include gunplay, bloodletting, stabbings, and torture which may or may not be fatal; bloodletting and/or tissue damage.

**Coarse language:** this may include four letter words, blasphemy, slurs directed to specific segments of society and sexual references.

**Sexually suggestive scenes:** this may include more than occasional depictions of naked performers. It may involve characters under the age of 18.

**Any combination of them:** the film contains violence, coarse language and sexually suggestive scenes but these three elements may not necessarily be depicted in the same scene.

Films rated 14A require persons under 14 years of age to be accompanied by an adult. These films in terms of psychological impact on the young viewer include the treatment of scenes and situations tending to be more frightening, intense, disturbing, or emotionally upsetting than would be allowed in the PG category.

Research has affirmed the importance of media awareness for both parents and children.
Parental accompaniment is one of the most essential aspects of media awareness.

The foregoing research carefully examines parental accompaniment and broke down the construct into various forms from the act of accompany a child to a motion picture to practising restrictive methods.

Throughout the research the usefulness of parental accompaniment is never negated.

If anything, the research pushed for a more active and intrusive role by parents with some research choosing restrictive guidance as a preferred method.

FCO does not necessarily advocate restrictive guidance.

FCO recommends exercising caution and being prepared to effectively talk to children about scenes which they may find frightening or stopping children from imitating scenes which they view.

Films at the 14A level may be psychologically harmful to younger viewers and include what some in the community may consider unsuitable for a younger audience.

Increased knowledge of the FCO classification system will empower parents with the ability to effectively choose appropriate films for their children.

Parents with children under the age of 14 should be aware when accompanying children to 14A features.

If parents choose to accompany children to a 14A feature, they should be abreast of the FCO classification system and what is tolerated at each classification.

Finally, accompaniment at the 14A category affirms FCO’s position with respect to protecting children and informing parents.

It is essential to keep accompaniment at the 14A level as both social science research and media scholars assert its importance.
WORKS CONSULTED


