



viewtrition n

Children and television today

A report by Dr Tanya Byron



Welcome

This report, which marks the start of a long-term initiative by Freeview, presents new research into how parents feel about their children's viewing habits; take a balanced look at other research that exists to date into the effect of television on children; and end by looking at various recommendations into how to provide a balanced 'diet' of television viewing for children.



Parenting is the hardest job in the world – and the one we get no training for. As a clinical psychologist working for almost 20 years with children, young people and their families, I know how the pressures of life can impact on our ability to raise our little ones with certainty. As the mother of Lily (13) and Jack

(10) I know how being a parent really is about learning on the job – despite the fact I've written many books on the subject!

I am often asked for advice on how to manage the way our children interact with the digital media – TV, video games and the internet. These media are very powerful factors in all our lives and offer many opportunities and benefits to us, however a constant stream of media stories about the risks and harms associated with them can leave many parents feeling anxious and overwhelmed. In truth, how can we navigate the contradicting research and advice, and – most importantly – how can we create a balanced television diet for our children?

So, when Freeview asked if I would explore these issues in more depth I was very happy to agree as I saw the opportunity to research, write about and advise on an area that effects me both professionally and personally. Freeview and I have named this campaign Viewtrition because we believe that in the same way that parents value evidence, advice and support to enable their children to have a healthy and nutritionally balanced diet, the same support should be available when it comes to managing our children's media experiences.

For this campaign, I have researched current evidence, as well as evaluating how children watch TV today and what

their parents think about it. It has also been supplemented with new research (amongst parents with children aged two to eleven) that has been commissioned by Freeview. In September 2008, 1,880 members of Mumsnet completed an online survey, and 20 mums took part in online focus groups which I also had the opportunity to join for a live web chat. As always the mumsnetters were fantastic and generous with their time and responses. You will find a selection of quotes scattered throughout this report.

My Viewtrition report aims to be the following:

- **Up-to-date** – present the findings from the recent comprehensive Freeview survey of parents about their attitudes towards their child's television viewing and consumption.
- **Evidence based** - review existing arguments and evidence for and against children watching TV.
- **Myth busting** - provide clarity, where possible, about some of the claims that make parents anxious and confused about their child's TV consumption.
- **Supportive** – provide a guide for parents and all those who care for children, to enable them to make confident decisions about their child's TV viewing behaviour.
- **Constructive** – provide advice for how technology can be used to support parents to manage their child's TV viewing behaviour by getting the most of their viewing time, the quality programming available and supplementary activity.

This report is about empowering parents to make the decisions about their child's TV viewing that are individually tailored to their children (after all, parents know their own children best) and what's best for each family. By pulling together evidence I hope that parents will find this a positive and useful aid to their parenting and will feel more confident about giving their child a balanced TV diet!

Dr Tanya Byron

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Executive summary

Dr Tanya Byron and Freeview present the Freeview Viewtrition report, an in-depth look at children and television today.

In the report Dr Tanya Byron looks at new research commissioned by Freeview - a survey amongst 1,880 parents and online focus groups with mumsnet.com, as well as the existing research available. The report aims to take a balanced look and show an insight into parents with regards to their children and TV today.

Below is a summary of the key findings from the new Freeview research:

- Parents have said they are confused about the effects of TV on children - survey results and the focus groups showed that parents **feel** both positive about their children watching TV (it is educational, entertaining) but also expressed negative concerns about this (worried about possible bad effects).
 - Parents believe that **TV has positive effects** on their children (80% of those surveyed) – e.g. expanded imagination; broader vocabulary; learnt numeracy skills; entertaining and relaxing.
 - Parents in the survey (67%) also believe **TV can have negative effects** but are less clear what these might be.
- Parents highlight a number of **strategies to enhance and manage their children's TV viewing** – e.g. scheduling viewing times and setting viewing time limits; checking what is being viewed; pre-recording good quality programmes; using red button technology to enhance the viewing experience; watching and discussing programme content with their child; using TV tie-in books.
- For the parents who use **Digital Television Recorders** (DTRs) to manage their children's TV viewing (50% of the total sample) there are a number of benefits – e.g. they

can control how much TV is watched (75% of sample said using a DTR did not increase viewing time); they can make the viewing experience more positive by pre-recording only 'good quality' programmes (50%); they can dictate TV viewing times around family routines (60%).

Below is a summary of the key points raised within Dr Tanya Byron's commentary of existing research:

1 Can TV make children stupid? It is recommended¹ that children under two years old have very restricted/ no screen time as this may be detrimental to neural development and that after that TV time is highly managed and restricted. Recently in the UK it was suggested that this age limit should be up to three years old². However, there have been many studies that have evaluated high quality children's programmes such as Sesame Street and have found that children aged three to five years old who watch Sesame Street for an hour a day are better able than those who don't to recognize numbers, letters and shapes – and when followed up as teenagers at school also showed higher results and more academic abilities (e.g. creativity, reading).

2 Does TV make children aggressive? There is short term evidence of children who watch aggressive programmes behaving aggressively – however these are often laboratory based studies that do not account for the impact of watching in the home. There is also evidence that watching programmes with strong morals and positive social messages impact positively on children. It seems the issue is about choosing age appropriate programmes with positive messages for children to watch.

3 Can TV cause ADHD? A report published by The Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle³ suggested that each hour of television watched per day at ages one to three increases the risk of attention problems, such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), by almost 10 percent at age seven. However a subsequent report from Texas Tech University in Lubbock⁴ found watching TV did not cause ADHD in children and suggested that TV may possibly be used more as a babysitter for tired parents of an overly active child. Also it was suggested that ADHD temperaments existed before TV was ever around, so while TV may be part of the problem; it is not likely the sole contributor to the problem of ADHD.

4 Does TV make kids overweight? Excessive TV time can cut across time being active and reduce metabolic rates, however children become obese for a variety of reasons including poor diet and lack of exercise. When children watch TV they may eat as well (often junk food and snacks) however this is less about the TV itself and more about their lifestyle in the home. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend that time watching TV is monitored and balanced against active pursuits in order to reduce weight gain⁵.

5 Does TV stunt language development? Research suggests that actively viewing age appropriate, educational TV programs with an adult may help language development and increase vocabulary⁶. To be most beneficial, the programme should introduce new concepts and encourage interaction such as word repetition, song and dance - programmes of this nature will provide plenty of opportunity for parents to join in and emphasise the important points.

6 Does TV stop children reading? Some educational TV programmes heavily encourage and promote books for enjoyment as well as learning. If a child enjoys a particular TV character, they may also be keen to read about them in series tie in books that many educational and entertainment series for children produce.

7 Can TV limit children's experiences? Television provides a window on the world - educational and cultural experiences for children and so provides breath and depth of information not locally available to them. Mass media in general may also build cultural understanding, tolerance of difference (e.g. disability, religious differences etc.) as well as awareness of current events, the weather and news.

8 Does TV leads to the erosion of moral values? Lack of screening of TV programmes watched can lead children to be exposed to inappropriate content. Good quality

children's programmes, however, often have strong moral messages (e.g. telling the truth; not bullying; being polite) that are either implicit or explicit. Research has also shown that children as young as seven show excellent skills of critical evaluation and cynicism when it comes to what they watch⁷.

In summary

Parents in the Freeview survey (2008) recognise the value of TV both positively to their children (e.g. educational) and to themselves (e.g. enables tasks to be done) but have concerns about possible negative effects and how to prevent these for their children.

- Television is part of everyday life and woven into the peer culture of our children.
- There is some evidence for short term negative effects in terms of excessive watching (e.g. obesity, hyperactivity) and watching unsuitable content (e.g. aggression); However, there is no evidence to suggest that TV itself is the principal factor in childhood disorders – rather a secondary factor for children who may already exhibit other vulnerabilities (biological, psychological or social).
- Parents recognise the importance of managing their child's TV consumption (e.g. supervised watching, locking off adult channels, watching together, pre-recording programmes for their child to watch, setting time limits).
- Technology now provides the means for parents to filter, monitor, control, limit and supervise what our children watch in order for them to develop a healthy relationship with TV and also over time learn, with us, to evaluate their interactions with technologies such as the TV in a way that affords them benefit and minimises risk.
- Digital Television Recorders are ways in which TV provides solutions to some of these issues for parents.

Conclusion

A balanced TV diet is something that many parents sensibly strive for by restricting time⁸; monitoring programme content, quality and delivery (e.g. via digital TV recorders) and maximising their interaction with their children about what they have watched.

New research from Freeview

85% of parents don't feel guilty about their children watching television

The survey

(i) How parents feel about their children and television

Almost three fifths say they feel relaxed that their child enjoys watching TV and that they were happy regarding what they watch (59%). 85% overall say they didn't feel guilty about their children watching television. Less than 1 in 10 (9%) say they feel grateful as television keeps their child occupied and 5% say they feel OK about it, as they don't let their child watch too much and they control what they do watch.

Only 5% say they feel worried about television. Mums of children aged eight to eleven are slightly more likely to say they feel guilty about television viewing – 20%, compared to 14% of Mums of two or three year olds. There are a small number of mums (4%) who say their child doesn't watch much or any TV.

Over eight in ten (84%) agreed there were a number of TV programmes that have had a positive educational benefit on their child (see Appendix 2). Conversely two thirds (67%) believed there were a number of TV programmes that had had a negative effect on their child.

Half (50%) agreed children's TV was fun and an essential tool in keeping their child entertained. Opinion was evenly split on the use of TV to signal bedtime with 45% agreeing and 42% disagreeing. Almost half (46%) said they did not use TV as a treat to incentivise their child to do tasks (see Appendix 2) – a third agree they use TV like this. Over two thirds say they do not rely on TV at the weekends to get a lie in.

Two thirds say they mind children's TV with adverts – only one fifth (19%) don't mind this. Parents are also not inclined to say TV was a language stimulus for their first baby – 71% disagree.

When asked about which specific programmes parents felt were most educationally beneficial, there was a wide variety of responses. Here is a summary of the top ten:

1. NUMBERJACKS

"It's really helped him with his number recognition just in time for school."

"Taught my son to recognise number shapes and count from a very early age."

2. SOMETHING SPECIAL



"I like the fact that he's potentially learning a skill that otherwise he would not be exposed to as he does try to copy the sign language."

"Teaches language in a simple, accessible and structured way. Also teaches concepts and ideas for play. Uses two-way communication so teaches some social/interaction skills. Also educates on people's roles and everyday life outside the home."

3. NINA AND THE NEURONS

"He often refers to facts he's learnt from the programme and relates them to something in real life."

"It has helped her understand about the senses and she enjoys the experiments."

4. DORA THE EXPLORER



"Learns counting, letters and some Spanish."

"She loves Dora and uses the Spanish phrases when we are on holiday."

5. NEWSROUND

"Has really stimulated an interest in current affairs and introduced him to new ideas and situations."

"It provides her with an insight into the world around her and broadens her horizons."

6. LAZYTOWN



"It is fun, inspires us to make things together and has regular peripheral elements that my son really engages with, such as the shapes."

7. IN THE NIGHT GARDEN

"Has helped teach my son counting, develop his concentration and memory, and anticipate what is coming next, as well as expand his vocabulary. Pleasant characters interacting nicely, 'safe' content."

8. TIKKABILLA



"A nice mix of songs, stories, craft ideas and education."

"Teaches songs and has lots of different sections i.e. story, going behind the windows."

9. COME OUTSIDE

"When she was younger it was Come Outside with Aunty Mabel which she would watch religiously. It enabled her to see all aspects of life - where people work and a variety of jobs, how things are made, a relationship and empathy with animals and nature, etc."

"This programme takes them into places like pencil factories, toothpaste factories, and they see where things come from. Aunty Mabel takes them behind the scenes."

10. BLUE PETER



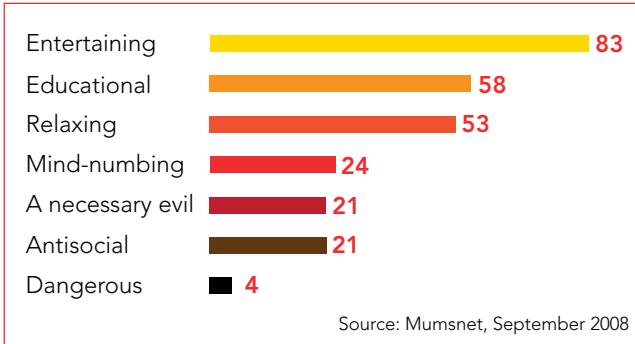
"It demonstrates good values and the wider world."

"It is timeless - full of ideas."

"A range of activities and topics and always keeps my children's interest."

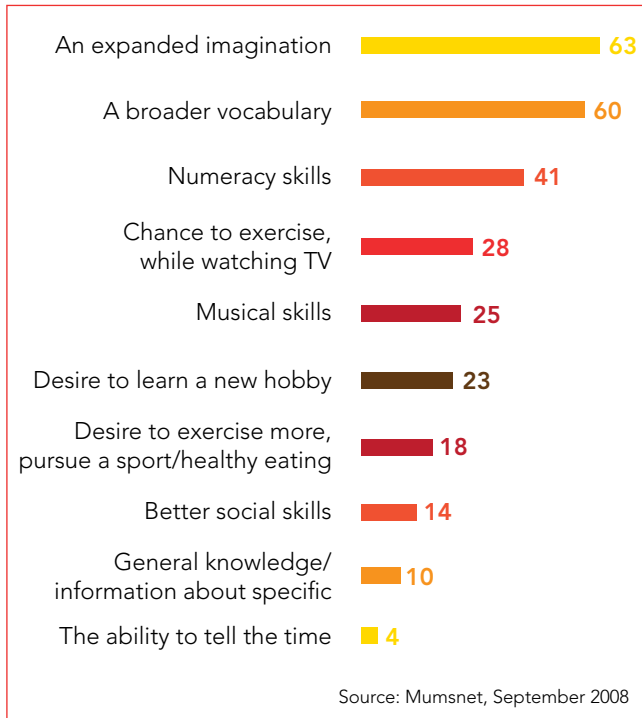
(ii) The perceived effects of television on children

The majority of mums describe the effect of television as entertaining (83%), this was followed by educational (58%) and relaxing (53%). Less than a quarter of mums felt the more negative words commonly associated with television were appropriate, as the chart below shows.



Q: Which of these words best describe the effect television can have on children? Select up to three

Mums feel that their children have gained an expanded imagination (63%) and a broader vocabulary (60%) from watching television and over two fifths (41%) say their child has developed numeracy skills. More than a quarter (28%) actively use television as a way for their children to exercise whilst watching programmes.



Q: Which of the following, if any, would you say your child has gained by watching television?

(iii) Managing children's television viewing

Four out of ten mums felt that between half an hour and one hour of TV viewing per day during the week and between one and two hours at the weekend is acceptable. Less than 5% think no television should be watched.

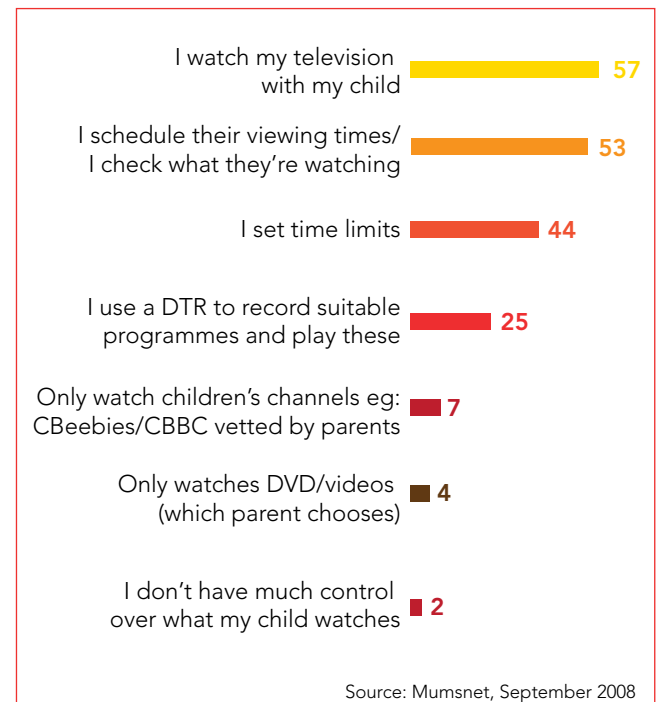
For older children, mums thought it was ok if they watched slightly more television – an average of 1.2 hours per weekday and 2.1 hours per weekend day for eight to eleven year olds (compared to 1.1 and 1.4 for two or three year olds).

The most commonly used methods of controlling what their child watches on television is watching with them (57%) and scheduling viewing times (53%). More than one in four say they set time limits.

Watching TV with their child is much more common with younger children (69% of two or three year olds watch with their parents vs. 47% of eight to eleven year olds) and time limits are more likely to be used for older children (60% of eight to eleven year olds have time limits vs 47% of two or three year olds).

A quarter of respondents use a digital television recorder (DTR) to record suitable programmes, and 4% opt for just DVDs or videos to control what their child watches.

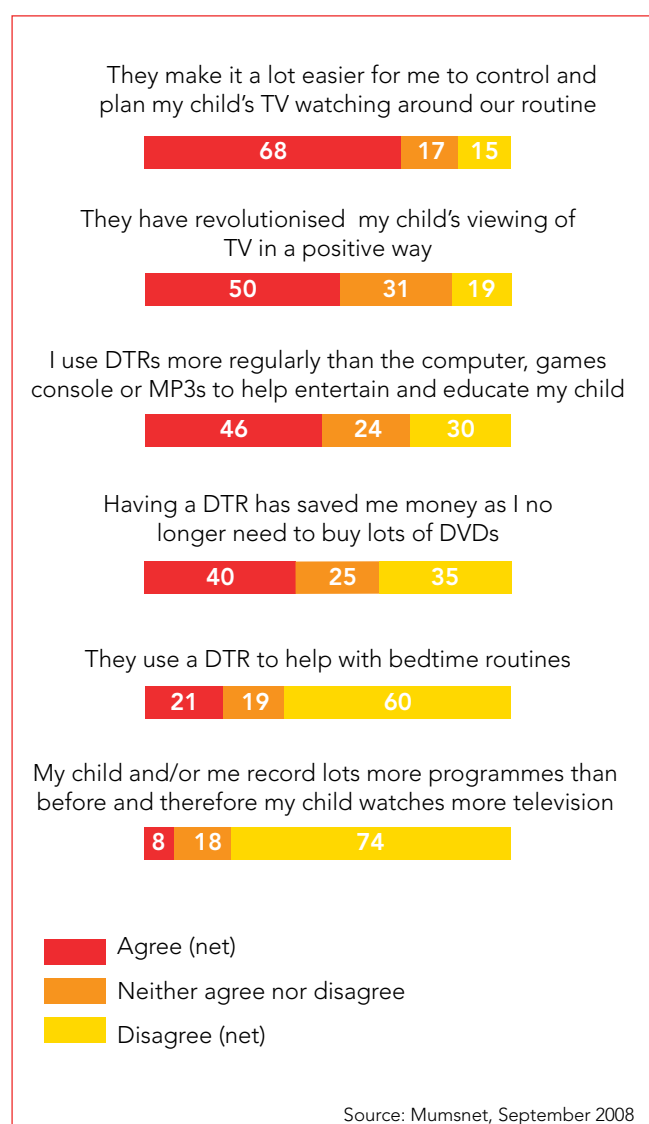
Only 2% admit they don't have much control over what their child watches – this is mainly those with children aged eight and over.



Q: Which of the following methods, if any, do you use to control what your child watches?

Of those who have a DTR (47%), two thirds of owners (68%) think it has made it easier for them to control and plan what their child watches around their routine, half (50%) say having a DTR has revolutionised their child's viewing in a positive way. Just under half (46%) say they use the DTR more regularly than other media devices to entertain and educate their child but that it hasn't meant their child watches more television overall (74%).

Opinion on whether having a DTR led to fewer DVD purchases is divided with 40% agreeing it had saved them money, but 35% disagreeing.



Q Agreement with statements about digital TV recorder (DTR) Base: All those expressing an opinion who have DTR

A summary of the survey

How parents feel about their children and television:

- 3/5 of parents are relaxed about their child watching TV.
- 85% do not feel guilty about their child watching TV.
- Mums think that on average it is OK for children (depending on the age of their child) to watch just over an hour per weekday day and just over an hour and a half per weekend day.

The perceived effects of television on children:

- 8/10 felt some television programmes had a positive educational benefit on their child.
- 2/3 believed some programmes had a negative effect on their child.
- The main benefits a child gains are expanded imagination (3/5 say this) and a broader vocabulary (3/5). 2/5 mention numeracy skills 8/10 say television is entertaining for children over half would describe it as educational and relaxing.

Managing children's television viewing

- Just under half have a DTR and the majority (2/3) of these thought it made it easier to plan their child's viewing around their routine and half thought it had revolutionised in a positive way their child's viewing of television. 3/4 say it does not mean they watch more television in total.
- Over half control what is watched by watching TV with their children, over half schedule viewing times carefully and check what they are watching and 2/5 set time limits.
- A quarter use a DTR to control viewing.

The focus group

This section presents some of the key findings and comments from the discussion threads of the online focus group.

Using DTRs

Technology while baffling for some parents is used by many of the survey respondents to manage their child's media diet.

"We do have a DTR and I love that I am able to record programmes I consider suitable or even useful for them so I don't resort to rubbish TV if I am busy."

"This is where having a DTR is a godsend, I can control what my children watch as I just record certain programmes suitable for their ages, and of course their favourite ones."

"You can pause TV if you need them to do something, or record it so there are no tantrums at bedtime and they want to finish watching something."

Role of TV in family life

Parents saw TV as an integral part of family life, sometimes as much for their benefit as well as their children's but also for positive reasons.

"A greater role than I would like, TV is a primary focus of our routine."

"I see it as a valuable entertainment tool, for both adults and children. I would find it very hard to give up TV altogether, and to be honest I see no need to."

"Our TV doesn't really have a major role in our house, it is there for occasional entertainment, to unwind and sometime educate my children."

TV and daily routine

"I know they vegetate in front of the TV, I'm aware it's bad for them, but it's bad for me to put up with choruses of "I'm bored" whilst I'm trying to make tea or clean."

"This hour gives them a rest, a bit of down time etc."

"It also forms part of our bedtime routine. The children watch two particular programmes every night, in their



pyjamas, while drinking their milk. This gives me the chance to put my son to bed while leaving my daughter sitting quietly for a couple of minutes, before I read her bedtime story."

Feelings about children watching TV

"I think that television can enrich a child's life, it can give an insight into so many different topics not available in their immediate environment. They can see different countries, cultures, wildlife, sport, history...the list is endless. Of course viewing needs to be moderated by parents to ensure they are watching age appropriate programmes and TV is not a substitute for real life so plonking them in front of a TV for hours on end is wrong."

"My three year old, in particular, picks up a lot of new vocabulary from TV as well as learning about lots of new things and experiences. I also find that it calms them both down and is good for some 'time out', particularly in the run-up to teatime when they are both tired and hungry."

Management of children watching TV

"I do think that parents have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that their children only watch appropriate programmes. However, I also think that the programme makers/broadcasters on the channels specifically aimed at young children do have a big responsibility to make sure that everything on those channels is suitable for their target audience."

"We do watch the news together so they take notice of what goes on in the world and ask questions"

Life without TV

"If it's not part of their routine/day-to-day activities, they don't miss it!"

"When we go on holiday mine don't miss it. If there is something else to do they don't think about it. Have to admit it is harder for the parents though! Sometimes it's useful to have half an hour off while the TV entertains them!"

Impact of digital television

"It has taken away a lot of the burden of having to constantly monitor everything, and left me able to do other things - read, clean, study. I confess I am terrible at watching the TV with them (my husband is better), as I find it terribly boring, but having control through dedicated channels and recorded programmes leaves me confident they are only accessing suitable material. My third son in particular has benefitted as he doesn't respond that well to conventional teaching, but learned to spell his name on the CBeebies games accessed through the red button...that led on to him discovering the PC which seems to be a huge talent of his (and we are grateful as he is minimally verbal)."

"CBeebies and the associated website are a godsend, as they are virtually non-commercialised and maintain a general high quality in terms of educational value etc."

"A springboard to interactive play."

In summary

- TV can be used by parents as a babysitter, part of a daily routine (e.g. bedtime) or to manage sibling conflict. However also for their child to relax, have fun, learn, be entertained and to provide ideas for play, art and outings and as a springboard to interactive play.
- Parents also saw TV as part of their children's peer culture and conversations.
- Most parents have a set routine and are clear about what they will and won't let their children watch.
- Feelings about TV are generally positive, and it was described as being enriching in terms of insights and other cultures and experiences, although parents also have concerns about possible negative effects.
- TV watched by children is seen as most valuable when watched with parents and / or the programmes viewed are discussed together.

- Most children seem to not miss TV if it is not available to them over a period of time.
- Some children who struggle to learn via traditional methods learn well 'digitally' e.g. via TV and interactive games.
- The responsibility for managing children's TV viewing lies with parents / caregivers.
- DTRs provide an opportunity for parents to screen and manage both what their children watch and also for how long, using functionality such as pre-recording programmes or pausing live television.

So what does this all mean?

The parents in our survey were a self-selected sample who were already interested in and thinking about this issue and so were aware of the importance of finding a way to achieve a balanced media diet for their children. They would use a variety of methods including: watching with their child; using DTRs to pre-record 'good quality' programmes; using other digital features such as pausing live TV and red button services to enable their child to interact with the programme in a way that was stimulating and educational; scheduling what, when and how much TV their children watch; and setting time limits (e.g. maximum one hour per day in the week and maximum an hour and a half on weekends).

They were clear about their favourite programmes for their children, and highlighted the value of TV for the family e.g. sitting together and enjoying a family programme or to enable parents to get on with household jobs. Parents also highlighted the value of discussing programmes with their children and how they would be a springboard to other activities – e.g. digitally interactive learning and play; reading programme related books; giving ideas for in home creative projects, outings etc.

Overall, the Freeview Survey (2008) brings further support to our general understanding of how children watch TV. Most children watch TV and parents see it as being both beneficial to them (supporting household routines, allowing parents to complete household tasks) as well as for their children (entertaining, relaxing, educational and fun). However this survey showed that parents also felt conflicted about allowing their children to watch TV and expressed concern that they felt confused by the many mixed messages about the negative impact of TV watching on children, required some help navigating the many media scare stories that they read, and wanted clarity in terms of research evidence highlighting the pros and cons of children watching TV.

What's out there already

the effects of television on children

To supplement the Freeview findings and opinions, this section takes a balanced look at the existing research regarding the hypothesised positive and negative effects of television on children.

There are 60 million TV sets in use in the UK today⁹ – on average, more than two per household. It is part of the furniture and fabric of our daily lives. For parents, television offers many things including the chance to relax or get on with other jobs, while the children are viewing their favourite programmes. However, increasingly many parents express anxiety and even guilt about letting their children watch television and often feel judged that by doing so they are neglecting their kids in some way.

To present a balanced view, research has been written about the potentially negative effects of watching TV, including:

Obesity and diabetes

Excessive TV time can cut across time being active and reduce metabolic rates, however children become obese for a variety of reasons including poor diet and lack of exercise. When children watch TV they may eat as well (often junk food and snacks) however this is less about the TV itself and more about their lifestyle in the home. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend that time watching TV is monitored and balanced against active pursuits in order to reduce weight gain⁵.

Children watch too much television

Some children watch too much unscreened TV and also can often be left to watch TV in an unsupervised manner and therefore may view inappropriate content (i.e. sexualised or violent) can, at the very least, distress and unsettle them. However the children of the self selected sample of parents (who already think about such issues) did not watch TV for excessive periods (Freeview, 2008); the problem is more what they are watching when they watch.



Violence and aggression

There is evidence of the short term effects of children who watch aggressive programmes behaving aggressively¹⁰ – however these are often laboratory based studies that do not account for the impact of watching in the home. However – there is also evidence that watching programmes with strong morals and positively social messages impact positively on children. It seems the issue is about choosing age appropriate programmes with positive messages for children to watch.

It would also be nice to have some clear info out there about TV NOT always causing behaviour problems

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

In 2004 a report published by The Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle revealed that there is a link between children aged one-three watching television and the increased risk of attention problems, such as ADHD³. However a subsequent report from Texas Tech University in Lubbock suggested that watching TV per se did not cause ADHD rather that TV may possibly be used more as a babysitter for tired parents of an overly active child and that ADHD temperaments existed before TV was ever around, so while TV may be part of the problem; it is not likely the sole contributor to the problem of ADHD⁴.

Emotional problems

A wide ranging number of possible TV related emotional problems are often hotly debated¹¹. Lack of sleep (through excessive TV viewing, especially if a TV is in a child's bedroom) can lead to reduced performance at school and mood swings. Children can become distressed by what they view – especially if they are unable to understand and process what they are seeing (e.g. adult content). Some programmes (e.g. fast paced cartoons) can over stimulate some children and lead to poor and difficult to manage behaviours.

Language delay

A criticism of programmes for very young children is that they are more visual than language based and so negatively impact on language development. Also excessive TV

Parents express anxiety and even guilt about letting their children watch television

watching may reduce time families spend talking. It is recommended¹ that children under two years old have very restricted/ no screen time as this may be detrimental to neural development and that after that TV time is highly managed and restricted. Recently in the UK it was suggested that this age limit should be up to three years old².

Motor skill delay

Watching TV reduces time spent on tasks that encourage essential motor skill development and could lead to longer term difficulties, for example with co ordination and even the ability to hold a pencil.

Stunting creative development

TV provides children with images and narratives, however if there is no time away from a steady stream of TV programmes, a child has no opportunity to develop their own imagination¹².

A child has no opportunity to develop their own imagination

Much has also been written about the potentially positive effects of watching TV, including:

Language development

Research suggests that actively viewing age appropriate, educational TV programs with an adult may help language development and increase vocabulary. To be most beneficial, the programme should introduce new concepts and encourage interaction such as word repetition and song and dance. Programmes of this nature will provide plenty of opportunity for parents to join in and emphasise the important points.

Encouraging reading

Some educational TV programmes heavily encourage and promote books for enjoyment as well as learning. If a child enjoys a particular TV character, they may also be keen to

read about them in series tie in books that many educational and entertainment series for children produce.

“My son (who has language problems and is a visual learner) learnt some of the phonics sounds and weather vocabulary from TV programmes. Also his first attempts at symbolic play (making a bridge from sofa cushions and a rocket out of blocks) were influenced by TV characters. When he had massive language comprehension and concentration problems, he would make the effort to concentrate on Teletubby and Balamory books in a way he wouldn't for unfamiliar characters.”

Supporting/enabling basic concept learning

There have been many studies that have evaluated high quality children's programmes such as Sesame Street and have found that children aged three to five years old who watch “Sesame Street” for an hour a day are better able than those who don't to recognise numbers, letters and shapes – and when followed up as teenagers at school also showed higher results and more academic abilities (e.g. creativity, reading).

It can be great as part of a mixed learning approach...I am huge fan of Brainiacs for getting my boys into science!

Development of morality

Good quality children's programmes often have strong moral messages (e.g. telling the truth; not bullying; being polite) that are either implicit or explicit. Research has also shown that children as young as seven show excellent skills of critical evaluation and cynicism when it comes to what they watch⁷.

“My son learnt to say sorry after he had hurt someone because of the Tweenies. I had tried explaining it to him many many times but got nowhere. He had a DVD of the Tweenies where Bella hurts Fizz. The grandad figure spoke to them about apologising and how it made people feel better. He hit out at me one day and when I said OUCH he looked at me and said sorry. I was thrilled.”

A window on the world

Television provides educational and cultural experiences for children and so provides breadth and depth of information not locally available to them. Mass media in general may also build cultural understanding, tolerance of difference (e.g. disability, religious differences etc.) as well as awareness of current events and news.

TV exposes the boys to a range of experience they could never have... exploring in Alaska? Camping with tribes in the rainforest?

Relaxation and fun

TV offers a chance to unwind and have some fun. Families can enjoy programmes together and this can provide opportunities to be together, laugh together and also talk about what is being viewed – a shared and positive family experience. Some programmes offer children the chance to be active and this was acknowledged in the Freeview survey where a third of respondents said that their child was given a chance to exercise whilst watching TV.

“Kids are, so it's reported, increasingly living in a stressful environment. Sometimes they need to relax a bit. An hour in front of cartoons is just as much a part of maximising childhood as endless clubs and spelling lists, and probably a lot more fun (fun seeming to equal an often forgotten part of being a kid sadly.”

Encouraging imagination

High quality children's programmes are often designed as an interactive piece between the viewer and the on screen characters/ presenter – within this there are many devices that encourage the viewer to imagine and create as they watch. 63% of parents in the Freeview survey believed their children gained an expanded imagination by watching television.

A conclusion on the effect of television on children

There is no unequivocal and undisputed evidence that TV per se causes long term problems for children and their development – equally there is no unequivocal evidence that it is beneficial to child development in the long term. There is some evidence for short term negative effects in terms of excessive watching (e.g. obesity, hyperactivity) and watching unsuitable content (e.g. aggression), however there is no evidence to suggest that TV itself is the principal factor in childhood disorders – rather a secondary factor for children who may already exhibit other vulnerabilities (biological, psychological or social).

An hour in front of cartoons is just as much a part of maximising childhood as endless clubs

The media effects research field is awash with researchers who become polarised in their debate, for example the TV/ADHD link. This adds very little to the debate about children and TV viewing except lead to fear-inducing media reports that leave parents uncertain and confused. Rather, therefore than think about the effect of TV on a child – it is more useful to think about the effect of the child on the TV they 'consume'. In other words how does a child's individual attributes and traits impact on and respond to the TV they watch.

Therefore we can hypothesise:

- A child who has a bad diet and a lack of physical activity will most likely spend more time watching TV and therefore this sedentary time will contribute to their increased chance of obesity.
- A child who lives in a household where aggression and violence are more the norm and who may watch TV programmes unsupervised and therefore unsuitable for their age are likely to view violence as part of 'normal behaviour.'

- A child who is unstimulated and left to watch hours of TV may show attention seeking behaviours around adults whose interaction they crave.
- A child with a propensity to high levels of activity is likely to be more stimulated by high octane TV programmes and so show greater levels of 'hyperactivity.'

"I don't believe TV does cause behaviour problems though. I believe that bad parenting which is compounded by the fact that they use the TV as a babysitter probably is. The TV is used as a distraction for parents who probably aren't very good at interacting with their child. It can lead to the child having problems integrating properly. It's not what they are watching but why."

It's not what they are watching, but why

- Every child is different and so TV viewing will impact differently from child to child.

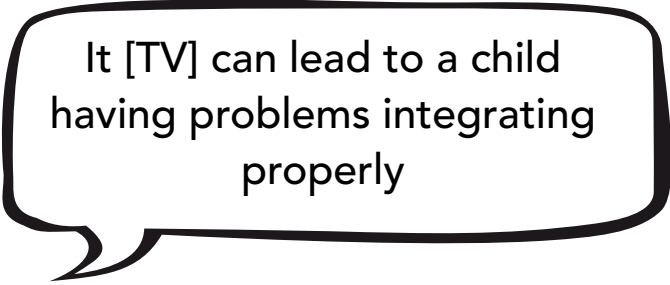
However – what we do know about children is that their brains develop quite substantially in the early years and especially in years one – two there is substantial neuronal development. Given this, there are many who express that caution should be exercised when exposing the under two's to TV – the US government via the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend no screen time for a child until aged two; in the UK there has been recent research suggesting this should be extended to children under the age of three but there are currently no NICE guidelines on this. Therefore this report deals with children aged two and above.

At age two, children still possess limited but developing frontal cortex functioning – this is the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control, critical evaluation, behaviour self management and the ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality. Given this, we must exercise the same control over their viewing behaviour as we do over their 'outside world' behaviour. In other words given that TV is a gateway to a whole range of images, experiences and information, we should adopt a similar approach to managing what they watch on TV as we do to where they go, what they do and who they interact with. As we all know, our management of all these things changes as they get older and we become less controlling and restrictive

as our children become more independent, and if we feel confident that they are able to discern what they are seeing and doing and critically evaluate (research suggests that we see this around age seven when it comes to children and media).

In summary

- TV will impact on different children in different ways.
- Vulnerable children who watch excessive TV in an unsupervised way are more likely to be negatively affected in terms of their vulnerabilities (e.g. obesity, attention difficulties, lack of parental stimulation and warmth).



It [TV] can lead to a child having problems integrating properly

- TV, if managed and supervised for children - with their viewing being both age and individual appropriate - can be positive in many ways as long as it is part of a balanced programme of stimulation, interaction and other activities.
- Caution should be adopted when it comes to the under twos watching TV – either not take place or be highly controlled (see AAP guidelines: www.aap.org).
- Although current (US) recommendations suggest that children between the ages of two and five should watch no more than two hours of television a day and that passive viewing is still likely to have a detrimental effect on development, in some circumstances viewing can be beneficial for this age group.
- High level, passive viewing by younger children of programs designed for older children and adults may impair development however, the use of age appropriate, interactive programs watched with an adult seems to be beneficial.

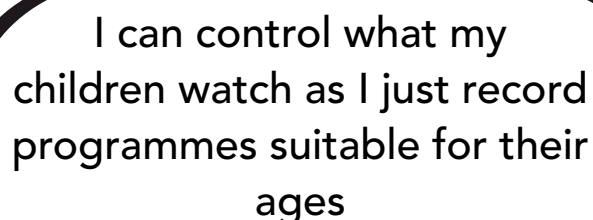
Television, technology and children today

Digital television means that the way our children are able to watch TV today makes for a very different experience than when we were children.

To build on the Mumsnet research and the academic findings into the effects of television on children, it is important to relate these back to the modern world in which we now live, and look at technological advances that also have an effect on the way in which children now view programmes.

Technology is more part of children's lives than it was for us and previous generations. While we are all familiar with TV, we may be less familiar with some of the other technologies they are now using e.g. video games or the internet. Television is a regulated space and offers a springboard to the online, unregulated arena in a way that ensures our children's digital consumption is high quality, age appropriate and provides benefits such as learning, entertainment and creativity.

There are a plethora of channels and therefore greater choice and quality (both positive and negative) of programming. TV is now an interactive experience with children being able to interact digitally as they watch and continue the experience online. DTRs allow greater viewing control, with the opportunity to pause live TV and discuss what's happening on-screen, while the red button can supplement and enhance the content viewed. The Freeview research and focus groups demonstrate that parents today are embracing these new technologies as they realise they



I can control what my children watch as I just record programmes suitable for their ages

can enhance the television viewing experience for them and their children. DTRs enable parents to be selective about programmes, fit TV around the family routine e.g. bedtime, after school and family time, and create a balanced TV diet for their children.

However, while the research may not give precise answers to the question about how TV impacts on children – it is clear that TV viewing, like any life experience, needs to be managed and monitored in the very young with supervision decreasing as the child learns to appropriately manage their own viewing behaviour, critically evaluate what they view and discuss any issues or concerns that come out of what they have viewed. In this way – the way we manage our children's viewing behaviour matches the way we manage other experiences for them depending on their age and stage of development.

The Freeview research has highlighted that for many families, TV is an essential part of their daily lives – and it's here to stay. TV can be monitored and managed with increasing parental confidence given advances in technology. It is important that parents are supported and feel empowered – via their own management choices and their use of the available technology – and so feel able to provide their child with a balanced media diet.

A parental role in providing a balanced TV diet

Fundamentally it is the role and right of parents to make choices affecting their child's well-being and development.

We all hold different values and therefore will make different choices about what our children experience at different times throughout their childhoods. What they watch on TV and for how long will vary from family to family but these decisions should be made with a view to making TV part of a balanced diet of activities and experiences – in the way we watch what they eat, we must watch what they watch.

One aspect of the Freeview research that was valued by many that took part was the opportunity to monitor their child's TV viewing behaviour. This activity led to some parents changing the TV viewing habits of their children.

"Keeping the diary has made me turn the telly off even when the children aren't watching it. I openly admit we watch a lot of telly and it is on even if we aren't watching it but now I turn it off. I thought my son would notice but he didn't so maybe things will change a lot in our house."

Self monitoring is often the first step towards behaviour change and for many respondents to our survey there were some surprises at how much/ little TV their child watched compared to what they thought they did.

"They watch an awful lot LESS than I thought! Just because it's on, doesn't mean they're watching it. If you actually observe for a while (often a good thing to do with children I suppose) they pop in and out, pick up





books, crawl over each other / wrestle. The proportion of time spent interacting with the TV is actually a small fraction of available viewing time.”

The research highlights that the parents who feel the most confident about their child's TV viewing were those that had limits and routines set around this activity. Our respondents indicated that an hour per week day and an hour and a half per weekend day was appropriate.

Our respondents were mostly very confident and clear about good quality children's TV programmes – ones that they felt were 'viewtritional' for their children [see page 7]. They would assess quality by reading about programmes and discussing them with other parents. Also many parents selected programmes that linked to other activities and hobbies e.g. outdoor play, art etc. Viewtritional content

Interaction and discussion whilst watching programmes can be fun for parents as well as children - I've certainly learnt a lot from Kids TV!

was seen to be programmes with educational content and positive characters and values. Good quality TV programmes were often seen as springboards that spur curiosity, discussion and learning.

Parents were very clear that their children would benefit the most from the TV they watched if they had an opportunity to talk about the programmes they viewed e.g. in terms

of what they learnt or why they liked to watch a particular character. Furthermore, television was seen as a stimulus to creative thinking and imaginative play which enables parents to join their children in a shared imaginative experience. Conversation was also seen as a valuable part of the TV experience if a child had seen something exciting and interesting or distressing and unsettling.

Parents were most likely to screen their children's viewing by preselecting good quality programmes more often by recording via their DTR than using DVDs. It seems that Viewtritional TV viewing for children is to provide 'good quality meals' (i.e. planned programmes) rather than 'random snacks' (i.e. non planned TV 'grazing'). Preselected programmes also enabled parents to feel less guilty about children watching the TV while they had to get on with other chores.

Technology provided ways for parents to record programmes that they could then watch with their child and then discuss or interact with. For younger children these might be song, dance and learning activity programmes whereas for older children there was benefit seen in recording age appropriate news, weather and current affairs programmes. Also some parents used TV as an incentive to get other activities such as homework done and valued the ability to record favourite programmes.



Summary & conclusion

creating your child's balanced tv diet

Television is part of everyday life and woven into the peer culture of our children. There is some (often contested) evidence for short term negative effects in terms of excessive watching (e.g. obesity, hyperactivity) and watching unsuitable content (e.g. aggression), however there is no evidence to suggest that TV itself is the principal factor in childhood disorders – rather a secondary factor for children who already exhibit other vulnerabilities (biological, psychological or social).

As outlined by NICE on the Directgov Parents website¹³ :

“There is no doubt that TV can be a useful educational tool. It can help children learn to communicate and can stimulate their imagination, so banning your child from watching it all together would be a bit drastic.”

This view is supported by the Freeview 2008 survey:

- 3/5 are relaxed about their child watching TV, 85% do not feel guilty.
- 80% see a positive educational benefit (e.g. expanded imagination; broader vocabulary; numeracy skills).
- 50% see TV as fun and 80% as entertaining for children
- Almost 50% have a DTR with over 60% (around 25% of the total sample) using it to manage their children's TV watching in a positive way.
- 75% of the parents who owned a DTR are clear that using the DTR does not increase the amount of TV their children watch.

While the parents in this survey were self selected to take part and therefore had probably given the subject more thought, they clearly reflected a commonly held parental experience – feeling that TV offered benefits to their children but also feeling concerned that watching TV could also be harmful for their child. The Freeview research found this split reflected where 67% were concerned that TV could have a negative effect on their child while 84% felt that there were positive effects for their children in watching TV.



But, as discussed in the focus groups, many were unclear what such effects were and felt that there were a number of conflicting stories that left them feeling less confident about how to manage their concerns.

In line with our understanding of child brain development, many parents sensibly expressed a view that children should be exposed to some TV in order to learn how to evaluate it. TV is part of and reflects everyday life plus opens up experiences that parents saw as valuable and educationally enriching. With young children (aged two onwards) parents were clear that they were very in control of what and when their children watched. This reflects the amount of supervision that young children need in general and the fact that limited frontal cortex functioning (i.e. a lack of ability to critically evaluate and also to differentiate fantasy from reality) means that we need to ensure that their media experiences are age appropriate and reflect their world view.

Most parents surveyed would manage and monitor their child's TV consumption in a variety of ways that included: having set limits for watching time; sitting and watching with them; pre-recording high quality programmes using DTRs and using other technological features such as red button functionality to enhance the viewing experience.

Parents were also asking for good quality advice to enable them to manage any potential risks while they were maximizing the benefits of their children watching good quality TV programmes. What seems to be clear is that the media effects research that has often misled people into believing that TV (as well as other technologies e.g. video games and the internet) are fundamentally potentially harmful and damaging.

There is no doubt that children can (and do) access content that is unsuitable for them and if exposed to such content repeatedly can be effected by it. Just as children can learn positive moral messages from TV programmes, they can learn inappropriate language and about negative and harmful behaviours. If this exposure occurs repeatedly, without supervision and to a child that is in all probability vulnerable in other areas of their lives then that child is likely to be most affected.

However, technology today also provides the means for us to filter, monitor, control, limit and supervise what our children watch in order for them to develop a healthy relationship with TV and also over time learn, with us, to evaluate their interactions with technologies such as the TV in a way that affords them benefit and minimises risk. DTRs and digital functionality are ways in which TV provides solutions to some of these issues for parents.

So, to conclude. Parents in the Freeview survey (2008) recognise the value of TV both positively to their children (e.g. educational) and to themselves (e.g. enables tasks to be done). They also recognise the importance of managing their child's TV consumption (e.g. supervised watching, watching together, pre-recording programmes for their child to watch, setting time limits). A balanced TV diet is something that many parents sensibly strive for by restricting time; monitoring programme quality and delivery (e.g. via DTRs) and maximising their interaction with their children about what they have watched.

My suggestions on how to provide a balanced TV diet for your children

- Balance time spent watching TV against time spent in other healthy and enriching activities.
- Research, read up about and discuss with other parents the relative value of programmes watched.
- Choose programmes that complement your child's interests and also challenge their learning.
- Use TV – for a limited time - as an incentive after other important tasks have been done.
- TV is best enjoyed and has greatest impact for children when shared and discussed – this is called "co-viewing." Using the pause button on a digital TV recorder can help.
- Use technology to your advantage - get interactive via the red button, go onto TV programme websites, and series record those programmes that you find nutritional using a DTR.
- Use the TV programme as a springboard to other activities such as reading and role playing – a "web of learning."
- Use TV to capture your children's curiosity and then supplement this with trips to the library and open discussion.
- Help your child understand links between what they view and the wider world – e.g. cultures, weather, geography.
- Take TVs out of young children's bedrooms and limit their viewing on the main family TV set.
- Make sure the TV is not on all the time so that it becomes valued and appreciated when it is.
- No TV at meal times - monitor time spent watching TV
- As they get older let them decide with you what they enjoy (and why).

For further information and guidance on providing a balanced TV diet for children, read Freeview's parent's guide to quality TV for kids.

www.freeview.co.uk

APPENDIX 1

Biography for Dr Tanya Byron

Tanya did her first degree in psychology at York, her clinical psychology Masters training at UCL and her doctorate (on the treatment of cocaine, amphetamine and ecstasy misusers) between University College Hospital and Surrey. She has worked in the NHS for 18 years working in Drug Dependency, HIV/AIDS and sexual health, adult mental health and eating disorders services. She was the Consultant of an in patient unit for 12 - 16 year olds with severe mental health problems and child protection issues. Tanya now works one clinical day a week as a Consultant in child and adolescent mental health.

In September 2007, the Prime Minister asked Tanya to conduct an independent review looking at the risks to children from exposure to potential harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games. The review was published in March 2008. Tanya is Chancellor of Edge Hill University and Parton of the charity, Prospex.

Tanya also presents television programmes on child behaviour, science and current affairs (Little Angels; Teen Angels; House of Tiny Tearaways; Panorama; How to Improve Your Memory - with Professor Robert Winston, BBC TV). Her series about human behaviour (Am I Normal?) aired on BBC2 in spring 2008. Tanya also writes with Jennifer Saunders (The Life and Times of Vivienne Vyle).

Tanya has published three books on child behaviour and has recently published Your Child Month by Month – a guide to child development and the early years with Dorling Kindersley. In addition Tanya writes a weekly column for the Times newspaper and for several magazines.

Tanya is married to the actor Bruce Byron and is mother to Lily (13) and Jack (10).

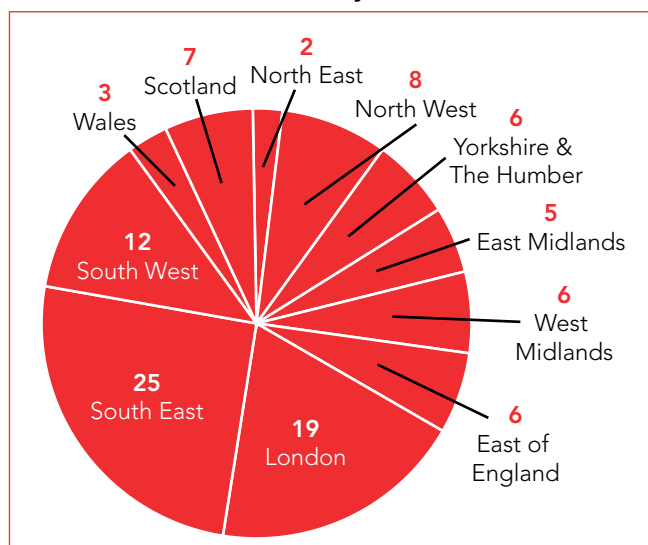
APPENDIX 2

Research background

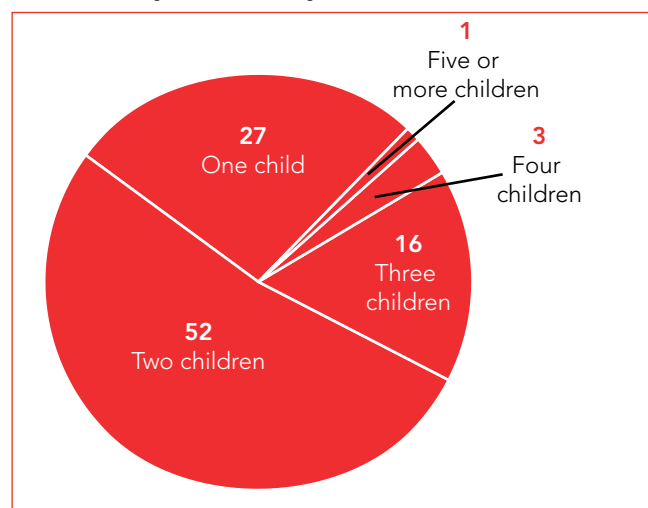
In September 2008, Freeview commissioned an extensive piece of research with Mumsnet, an online parenting community with over 400,000 monthly unique users. The content of the research looked at how parents feel about their children's viewing habits and consisted of an online survey and focus group. A total of 1,880 mums from all over the UK, and who had at least one child aged two to eleven, completed the online survey. Mums were asked to think specifically about their child (or one of their children) and answer questions with them in mind – the average age of the child was 4.6. If they had more than one child in this age group, respondents could complete the survey more than once, for each child. The average number of children per respondent was two.

Respondent profile

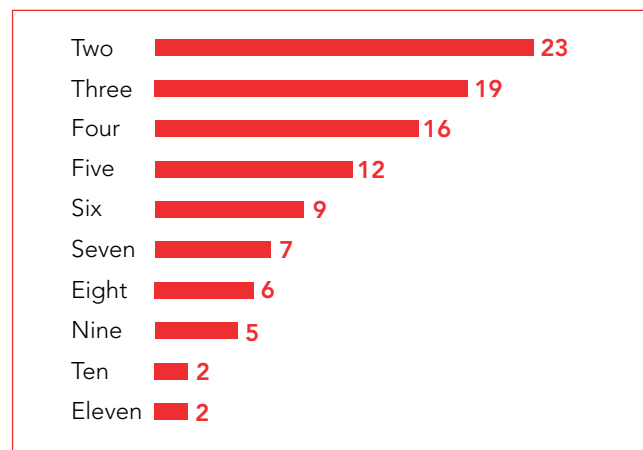
Q1 Whereabouts in the UK do you live? %



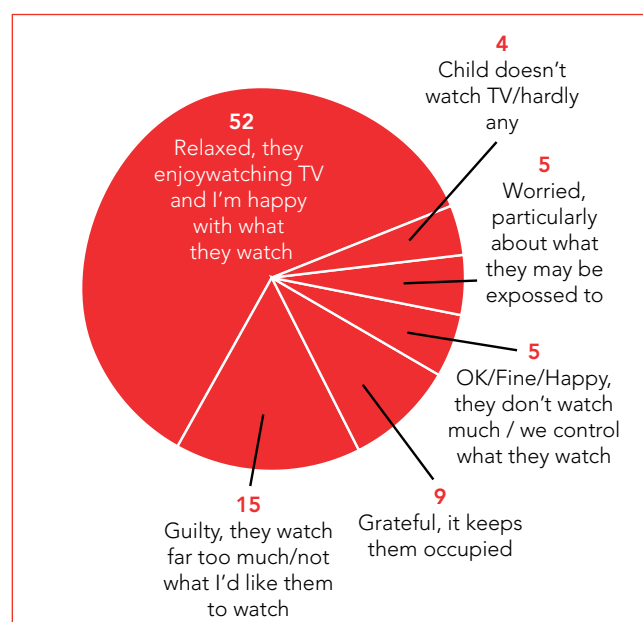
Q2 How many children do you have? %



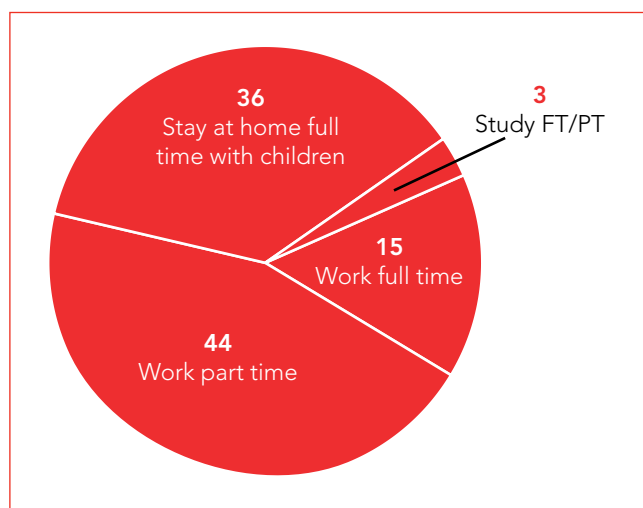
Q3 How old is the child you are answering this survey about? %



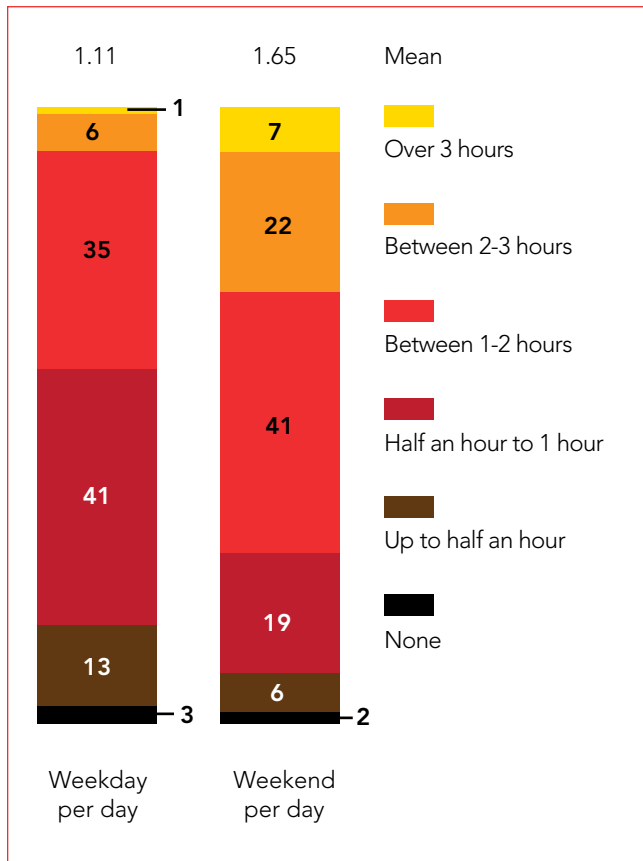
Q4 Tick the one which most closely matches your situation. Do you..? %



Q5 Which of the following best describes how you feel about letting your child watch television? %



Q6 On average, how much television do you think it is OK for children of this age to watch during the course of a weekday/school day (per day)? %



Q10 Agreement with statements %

■ Agree (net)
■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Disagree (net)

I believe there are a number of TV programmes that have a positive educational benefit for my child

84 ■ **11** ■ **5** ■

I believe there are a number of TV programmes that have a negative effect on my child

67 ■ **19** ■ **14** ■

Children's TV is fun and it's an essential tool in our house for keeping him/her entertained

50 ■ **28** ■ **22** ■

I use TV at the end of the day to signal that it's bedtime and give him/her time to wind down

45 ■ **13** ■ **42** ■

I use TV as a treat to incentivise my child to finish their tasks such as getting ready for school or bed

36 ■ **18** ■ **46** ■

I/we depend on it at the weekends to give us a lie in

19 ■ **11** ■ **70** ■

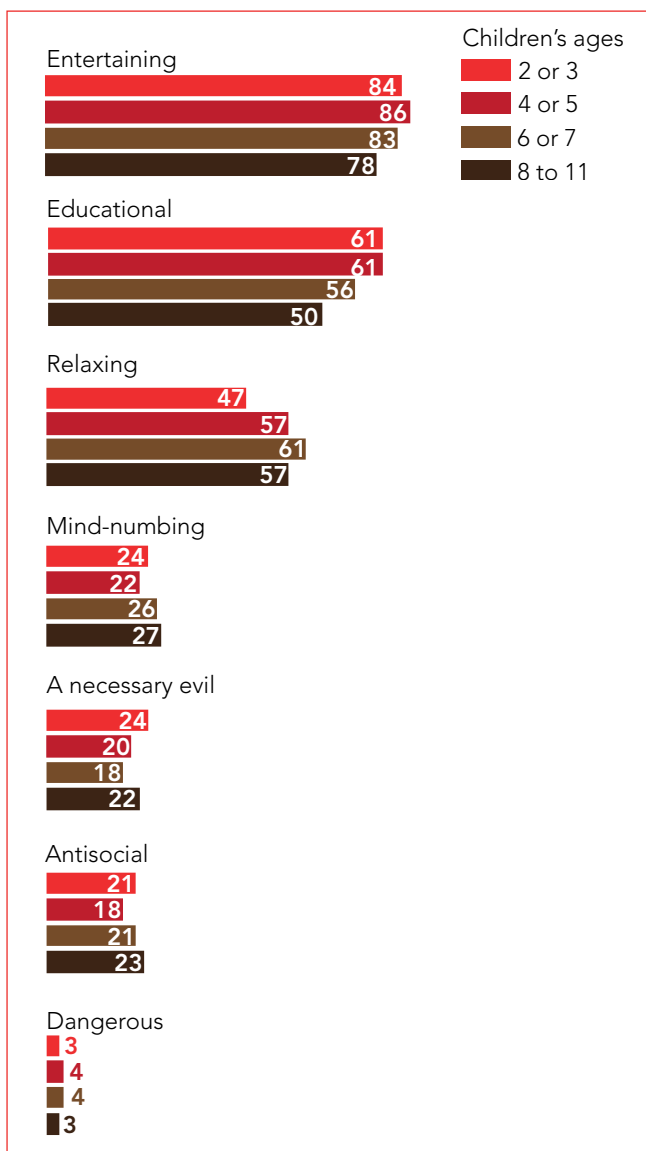
I don't mind him/her watching children's channels with adverts

19 ■ **17** ■ **64** ■

As a first time mother TV was an essential language stimulus for my baby when we were on our own

12 ■ **17** ■ **71** ■

Q11 Here are some words or phrases that people have used to describe television in relation to children or the effect television can have on children. Which of these would you agree with. 'Television is...'? You can choose up to three.



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Appendix 4: Endnotes

- ¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP]
- ² Sigman, 2007
- ³ Christakis et al, 2004
- ⁴ Stevens and Muslow, 2006
- ⁵ DirectGov, 2008
- ⁶ National Literacy Trust, 2008
- ⁷ Buckingham, 1996
- ⁸ American Academy Of Pediatrics [AAP] guidelines: little or none at all for under twos; maximum half to an hour per day for pre-school and young school age children; maximum one to two hours per day for older children.
- ⁹ GfK
- ¹⁰ Buckingham, 2008
- ¹¹ Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2006
- ¹² Palmer, 2006
- ¹³ www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Familyleisureandrecreation/DG_071029)

Thank you to all Mumsnetters who took part in the research, including:

Freeview1, Freeview5, Freeview10, Freeview7, Freeview20, Freeview15, Freeview5, Rhubarb, Freeview17, Freeview18, Freeview4, Freeview12, TotalChaos, HRHSaintMamazon, Freeview1akaPeachy, and Laughalot, whose quotes have appeared throughout this report.



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