How and Why Parents Take on the Tube

Erica Weintraub Austin, Paul Bolls, Yuki Fujioka and Jason Engelbertson

A survey of 225 parents assesses patterns of television-related interaction, viewing habits and perceptions. Mediation is conceptually distinct from coviewing and has different motivations and implications when positive or negative in valence. A typology of mediation patterns includes nonmediators (parents who talk about television with their children infrequently), optimists (those whose discussion primarily reinforces television content), cynics (those whose discussion primarily counters television content) and selective (those who use both positive and negative discussion strategies).

From Plato to the 1996 United States Congress, society has taken it upon itself to control and censor information available to children. Whether via stories, regulations or V-chips, adults have tried to protect children from messages that might damage or threaten (Meyrowitz, 1985; Tatar, 1991). Nevertheless, the ubiquitous nature of television has made it more difficult to limit children’s access to ideas with which their caregivers might disagree (Austin, 1993; Meyrowitz, 1985). Because the flow of information is less easily controlled, other routes of parental influence take on increased importance. Scholarly understanding of such influences on children’s interpretations and uses of media content, however, remains limited. The purpose of this study is to examine parent-child interaction regarding television from the perspective of the parent in an effort to better understand conceptual differences among their communication activities as well as the motivations related to those activities.

Concern About Television—The Parents’ Role

Both the general public and parents express concern about television content. Mittal (1994), for example, reported that consumers evaluated much advertising as misleading, boring, irritating, offensive, silly, and trivial. The public has blamed advertising for such undesirable effects as spreading materialism, promoting sex and taking undue advantage of children. According to a 1989 Gallup survey of parents, parents watching television with their children experience discomfort about the content of television. In particular, parents of children under 18 objected to sex-related issues, violence and bad language. Ridley-Johnson, Surdy, and O’Laughlin (1991) reported parental fear over the

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effects of television violence on their middle-school children, worrying that television contributed to the acceptance of violence and made children feel upset and threatened.

According to competence-based perspectives on socialization (e.g., O’Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987), individuals are highly motivated to seek information that will help them function effectively in society. Television and parents, discretely and together, comprise two of children’s most significant sources of information. According to Burleson, Delia, and Applegate (1995), one of children’s most important developmental tasks is to develop “functional communication competence,” or the ability to use communication resources, such as the media, strategically to accomplish personal and social goals. The authors have shown that parent-child interaction is one of the most powerful forces on children’s ability to develop such skills. The style of communication the parent employs affects the things a child pays attention to, as well as the cognitive schemes the child uses to understand the social world. As a consequence, parental styles of communication relevant to television should affect the types of messages a child pays attention to, as well as how the child will interpret and make use of the content perceived in the messages.

An Area in Need of Study

Given the centrality of parental communication as an influence on children, along with the apparent importance of television effects upon society, a better understanding of parent-child interaction regarding the mass media is needed. According to findings such as those from Austin, Roberts, and Nass (1990), parents can successfully reinforce or refute television content. Concerned parents can exert direct or indirect control over potential media influences via four primary routes. These include (1) rule making (censorship), (2) modeling behaviors that confirm or disconfirm media messages (coviewing and everyday behavior), (3) general communication norms that influence children’s information seeking patterns, and (4) active discussion of media content, often called “mediation” (Austin, 1993).

According to the existing literature, parents do little to control or influence the messages their children receive from the mass media. Parents tend to make few rules and rarely discuss television content (e.g., Austin, et al., 1990; Bower, 1973; Comstock, 1975; Corder-Bolz, 1980; Lyle, & Hoffman, 1972). Parents also set poor examples for children of effective decision-making skills (e.g., Alexander & Fry, 1990; Austin & Nach-Ferguson, 1995; Flay & Sobel, 1983; Kandel & Logan, 1984).

It would be premature, however, to blame poor parenting for unwelcome media effects among children. Many of the studies that have examined parent-child interaction and the media are difficult to compare due to inconsistent definitions and measurement techniques across studies, and to apparently contradictory and potentially misleading findings. For example, scholars frequently combine such conceptually different activities as coviewing, the shared experience of media exposure by parent and child; rule making, the encouragement or prohibition of certain media experiences by the parent for the child; and mediation, the active discussion of television content (Austin, 1992).
The Role of Parental Mediation of Television Content

According to research on family interaction processes and effects, mediation may indeed be the most important role for the parent. Research on the effects of parent-child interaction on children's peer acceptance, academic achievement and moral development, for example, has indicated that parents affect these outcomes primarily via communication style, which affects the child social skills and cognitive competence. This process is known as the "mediated effects model" of parental influence (Burleson et al., 1995). Children increasingly rely on television and other media as they get older for information about the social world and for successful affiliations with peers (e.g., Christenson & Roberts, 1990). If their communication competence is an important determinant of their successful use of such information sources, and parent-child communication is an important influence on the child's development of communication competence, then the ways parents mediate the effects of television should have a powerful influence on television effects.

As a primary source of information for children, parents can help — through discussion — children interpret television more critically (Austin, 1993; Corder-Bolz, 1980; Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam, & Colimore, 1985; Salomon, 1981). According to Austin (1993), relying on Messaris's (1982) conceptualization of parent's television-related discussion, parental mediation involves three tasks: categorization, showing whether and how television reflects the real world; validation, involving endorsement or condemnation of portrayals; and supplementation, pointing out the usefulness of information from television by supplying additional information or by engaging in related activities. All three of these tasks can refute or reinforce television content by suggesting that television messages are/are not realistic; are right/wrong and are/are not applicable to real-life situations. Desmond et al. (1985) have noted that parental communication about television tends to include both nonvalenced and valenced (positive and negative) elements.

Predictors and Consequences of Parental Mediation

Whatever their potential for counter-influence, it appears that parents frequently watch with their children without actually discussing media content or by tacitly or explicitly endorsing it rather than refuting it. Parents may watch with children because they like the content, not because they plan to provide commentary. Scholars have suggested that coviewing may not be sufficient to mediate children's perceptions of television (Austin, 1993; Bower, 1973; Desmond, et al., 1985). In addition, it appears that scholars must distinguish between positive and negative reinforcement of content, which can be characterized by different motivations and different behaviors.

For example, endorsement of the content, positive mediation, may have different effects than countering of the content, negative mediation. As Austin (1993) noted, parental alarm may produce a defensive reaction in children, with endorsement producing a more approving response. A child may receive recommendations more happily than coercion. A defensive strategy may meet with resistance, giving negative mediation both the potential to backfire as well as to cultivate skepticism and parentally endorsed mores. While positive mediation may draw a child's attention to good things on television, it also may reinforce easy acceptance of other messages as well. Both positive and negative strategies have the potential for either success or failure.
By examining parent-child interaction regarding television from the perspective of the parent, this study represents a step toward examining the implications of the potentially disparate effects of positive and negative mediation, as well as their relationships to other aspects of parent-child television-related interaction. The current literature suggests that parents' primary response to challenging or offensive content is to turn to another channel rather than to talk about offensive content (Gallup, 1989). Nevertheless, some research suggests that parents are more likely to discuss television when it conflicts with their value system (Atkin, Heeter, & Baldwin, 1989). The first finding could suggest that interactions focused on television tend toward the positive, whereas the second finding suggests that most mediation is negative in valence. It is likely that both conclusions are oversimplifications of relatively complex parental motivations and behaviors.

Conceptual Differences in Discussion Patterns

Scholars have suggested that parent perceptions of television influence will affect their patterns of parental guidance (e.g., Bybee, Robinson, & Turow, 1982; van der Voort, Nikken, & van Lil, 1992). For example, Bybee et al. found that parents who believe television has a negative impact on children tend to make more rules and provide more explanation. Parents who held positive views of television also tend to engage in discussion. Also, van der Voort et al. confirmed much of Bybee and Turow's findings with a broader sample of parents. They also found parental concern about television positively related to "unfocused guidance" (coviewing).

The literature suggests conceptual differences between negative and positive communication strategies regarding television. Austin's finding that more frequent mediation (largely operationalized as negative) predicts greater skepticism among children, could suggest a specific role for negative reinforcement. Meanwhile, when Austin and Nach-Ferguson (1995) found that parental mediation increased children's brand-specific knowledge about alcohol, which associated with the likelihood that children 7-12 reported having tried an alcoholic drink, they concluded that they were tapping positive (perhaps accidental) reinforcement. Austin's 1993 study also found that mediation increased political involvement and public affairs media use along with engendering skepticism, suggesting that the endorsement of television as a useful tool by parents may well include both positive and negative reinforcement components. Parents can be expected to employ these mediation styles in conjunction with issues of their concern, rather than using one style exclusively. As a result, (a) positive and negative mediation are conceptually different and (b) parents may use one, both or neither strategy in their interactions with their children. It is hypothesized that:

$H_1$: In a factor analysis, positive and negative mediation behaviors will load into two separate factors.

Motivators of Endorsing and Counter-Reinforcing Discussion Patterns

Some predictions regarding conceptual differences underlying parental beliefs and behaviors regarding the television medium are possible. For example, Dorr, Kovaric and Doubleday (1989) found that the use of television as a
socialization tool by parents, along with parental viewing encouragement, predicted increased coviewing. Negative comments, though, did not predict coviewing. Although the literature is at odds on this point (e.g., van der Voort, et al., 1992) coviewing appears to occur because of positive views toward television content more often than because of negative views. For example, Dorr, et al. (1989) have found coviewing more likely when parents value television content and think children should learn from television. This leads to the expectation that:

$$H_2: \text{Attitudes toward television content, with higher scores reflecting more positive views, will positively predict coviewing and positive mediation.}$$

It appears that negative views of television lead to somewhat different parental behaviors than positive views. Bybee et al. (1982), for example, found that while negative views predicted the use of both content-related discussion and rule making by parents, positive views predicted only discussion. Van der Voort, et al. (1992) found similarly that negative views predicted both discussion and “unfocused guidance,” or coviewing combined with nonvalenced discussion. Van der Voort et al. argued that parents’ strong concerns about television effects—good or bad—motivated parents to coview with children and discuss the content either to protect them from negative effects or to strengthen positive effects. Atkin, et al. (1991), however, concluded from their work that parents are more likely to discuss television content when it presents values with which they disagree. This would support the Atkin et al. (1989) finding that discussion increases when parental values appear threatened. Coviewing is thus motivated by positive views of television—perhaps by a desire to share an enjoyable experience, whereas it is less certain that coviewing can also be motivated by negative views of television. If coviewing is motivated largely by positive views, then coviewing should be related to positive mediation and to viewing frequency, reflecting reinforcement of an enjoyable experience. Some assert greater viewing time tends to imply less rule making and less critical viewing (Atkin, et al., 1991; Desmond, et al., 1985; Medrich, 1979). The research on Family Communication Patterns (e.g., Chaffee, McLeod, &Atkin, 1971; Chaffee, McLeod, &Wackman, 1973) has found that those who watch television the most tend to be the least skeptical, suggesting that positive reinforcement would be more likely than negative reinforcement among frequent parental viewers.

The consequence, according to Austin and Nach-Ferguson (1995), is that parents may unintentionally reinforce television content (such as alcohol advertising) by communicating their own enjoyment and tacit approval of content to their children. Active discussion appears to be motivated by both positive and negative views. This inconsistency then leads to the following hypotheses:

$$H_3: \text{Coviewing will positively predict positive mediation.}$$
H₄: More negative attitudes toward television content and less trust toward television advertising will positively predict negative mediation.

Mediation Style as a Predictor of Parental Uses of Television

If negative attitudes lead to negative mediation, then it follows that parents with such attitudes will be less likely to approve of the use of television as a babysitter. Scholars such as Lin and Atkin (1988) have found that rule making and discussion are strongly related. On the other hand, parents who approve of television content should be more likely to approve of the use of television as a babysitter. But co-viewing and positive discussion will not necessarily negate the use of television as a babysitter. Indeed, Medrich (1979) found that parent-child television viewing patterns were more closely related in television households in which overall viewing was lower.

Further, it follows that parents who communicate positively about television think television offers good lessons which should be reinforced. They are likely to agree that television is a useful learning tool. Bower (1973), for example, found that parents overwhelmingly saw education as the main benefit of television. Similarly, Anderson and Collins (1988) have suggested that mediation accomplishes little more than increasing children’s ability to learn from the medium, with Corder-Bolz (1980) suggesting that discussion significantly enhances children’s ability to learn from television. The relationship of negative mediation to views of television as a useful tool is less clear. Negative mediation may lead some parents who otherwise enjoy television to use television as a tool to discuss what children should not do (don’t act like Bart Simpson, for example) but also lead other parents to avoid television altogether. If so, patterns of discussion will reflect distinct patterns of beliefs and behaviors about television.

For example, parents’ own communication skills with regard to television should relate to their communication patterns. More skeptical parents should encourage more skepticism in their children. Austin (1993) assumed this was the reason that increased mediation led to increased skepticism among children. Austin and Nach-Ferguson (1995) surmised that the reverse relationship was behind their finding that mediation was positively related to the number of beer brands a child could recite. In other words, parents who enjoyed beer advertising and exhibited less skepticism in effect encouraged their children to “buy” the brands advertised. Ward and Robertson (1972) similarly suggested that television advertising complements communication about product consumption within the family, with high levels of communication about consumption positively related to favorable attitudes toward advertising.

H₅: A typology of frequent/infrequent positive/negative mediation will be reflected in significant differences on a variety of constructs tapping parental media use and opinions, levels of expressed concern regarding television content, reported frequency of co-viewing, reported beliefs about appropriate uses for television, and reported levels of trust in advertising.
Method

A statewide phone survey (N=255) was conducted in Washington using a purchased list of phone numbers generated by a random-digit system. Additional phone numbers were created using the "plus one" method (Frey, 1989). The phone survey was conducted by undergraduate communication students who completed a half-hour training session prior to making calls. The survey took approximately eight minutes to complete. A response rate of 55% was obtained among eligible respondents, with potential respondents considered ineligible after three callback attempts.

Respondents

Eligible respondents were parents who spoke English with at least one child between the ages of 2-17 living at home. Parents who had more than one child in the age bracket were instructed to think when answering the questions of the child with the most recent birthday. More female parents (58%) than male parents (42%) responded. Respondents were predominantly Caucasian (90%), with a small representation of Native American, Hispanic, Asian and African American ethnicities. Respondent ages ranged from 19-69 (M=40). Education level was measured with an open-ended question coded as (1) less than high school; (2) high school graduate; (3) some college, AA or trade degree; (4) college graduate; and (5) graduate study. The median education level of the respondents was some college. Income level was measured via Guttman-style series of questions asking if the respondent’s household income (before taxes) was (1) over $15,000; (2) over $35,000 (if over $15,000); (3) over $50,000 (if over $35,000); and (4) over $80,000 (if over $50,000). The median income level was between $35,000-50,000 but ranged from under $15,000 to over $50,000. Among the parents, 75% were married or partnered, with 9% single (never married), 6% single (divorced), 8% single (separated), and 2% widowed. The gender of the child used as a reference for each parent respondent was evenly split, with 52% girls (n = 132) and 48% boys (n = 123). Child age also was approximately balanced with each age 2-17 making up 4-9% of the sample (M = 9.45).

Instrument

Principal components factor analysis was performed on such indices as parental concern with media content to confirm index unidimensionality, and Cronbach alphas were computed to assess reliability. To establish positive and negative parental mediation indices, principal components factor analysis was rotated using the oblimin function of SPSS, due to expected correlation between the two factors. In addition, the test was run using varimax rotation, resulting in only slight changes in factor loadings.

Most parental mediation measures were based on the mediation scale used by Austin and colleagues (Austin, 1993; Austin & Nach-Ferguson, 1995) for use with children and emphasized negatively valenced mediation. The measures were modified for relevance to parent respondents. They included six items, on a five-point scale (from never to often):
I'd like to know how often you tell your child more about something you've seen on TV?
How often do you tell your child that something you've seen somebody do on TV is not OK?
How often do you tell your child that something on TV is not real?
How often do you tell your child that an ad on TV says something that isn't really true?
How often do you tell your child that something you've seen in a TV ad is not OK?
How often do you explain to your child what ads on TV are trying to do?

It should be noted that telling the child more may appear to be nonvalenced, but previous research (e.g., Austin, 1993) suggests that the measure implies a skeptical attitude, in that it cultivates such an attitude in the child. The alpha for the scale was .74.

Two additional measures were intended to tap positive mediation and to make distinctions among mediation for advertising versus mediation for programming. Previous studies of parent-child communication about television have not included measures of positive mediation (e.g., Atkin & Greenberg, 1991; Austin, 1993; Desmond, et al., 1985; Dorr et al., 1989), with the exception of Abelman and Pettet (1989) and van der Voort et al. (1992), who included a measure of parental endorsement of “good things” people do on television. As a result, items were added to tap parental endorsement of things seen on television and in advertising. Items, measured on a five-point scale (never to often), included: How often do you tell your child that you agree with something you've seen in a TV ad? How often do you tell your child that you agree with something you've seen on TV? The items were positively correlated, \( r = .33, p < .001 \).

To measure coviewing, a single item, on a five-point scale (not at all to every day), inquired how often the parent and the child watch TV together per week. This is consistent with most previous studies, which have used single-item coviewing measures (e.g., Dorr, et al., 1989; Gross & Walsh, 1980; Abelman & Pettet, 1989).

Parental attitudes toward television content was measured using six items, including a list of three genres, (news, advertising, and entertainment), for which respondents indicated on five-point scales whether they thought the genres generally teach really good things or really bad things to children, as well as a list of three issues, (political, sexual, and issues concerning alcohol), for which respondents indicated whether television teaches children really good or really bad things about each issue. Cronbach's alpha for the parental attitudes scale was .66. Although a factor analysis suggested that the measures could form two factors, with alcohol and sex separating from the other measures, these two scales also loaded on the first factor, and the alpha was highest with all measures included in a single index.

Viewing frequency for programming genres was assessed with a five-point scale ranging from not at all to every day, by asking parents “about how many days a week” they watch prime-time TV, sports programs, educational shows, and news programs. Although cultivation theory has relied traditionally
on global measures of television exposure, scholars consistently show that more specific measures of viewing patterns better predict beliefs and enable researchers to make distinctions among viewers who watch certain programming genres but not others (e.g., Allen & Hatchett, 1986; O'Keefe, 1984; Potter, 1993; Potter & Chang, 1990; Volgy & Schwartz, 1980). As a result of this disagreement in the literature, a supplemental analysis was performed to address the

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of variables

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<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
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Note: A high score indicates an answer in agreement with the statement or a more frequent behavior.

* Income: 0 = <$15,000; 1 = $15,001-$34,999; 2 = $35,000-$49,999; 3 = $50,000-$79,999; 4 = over $80,000.

** Education: 1 = less than high school; 2 = high school graduate; 3 = some college; 4 = college graduate; 5 = graduate work.

*** p < .001; alpha cannot be computed for index with fewer than three variables.
issue of whether viewing patterns were monolithic or varied. Factor analysis and the computation of Cronbach's alpha indicated that the measures did not form a single reliable index, supporting the view that viewing patterns are varied and selective across content types.

Skepticism toward television advertising was assessed on a five-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) with the following two statements: “TV ads are honest;” and “TV ads are realistic.” The two items correlated positively, $r = .31$, $p < .001$, and were combined for analysis as an index.

Two types of beliefs about appropriate uses for television were assessed on a five-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) with the following two statements: “TV is a good babysitter;” and “TV is a good learning tool.” The items were analyzed separately rather than as an index.

Descriptive statistics appear in Table 1.

**Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis 1 was tested via factor analysis, using principal components extraction. The factor structure was confirmed using the maximum likelihood method of extraction. An oblique solution is reported in Table 2, as orthogonality was not assumed. A varimax-rotated solution was performed also—with no appreciable differences in factor loadings. Hypothesis 5 was tested via one-way analysis of variance, using the Student-Newman-Kuels test for post-hoc differences among groups. An additional multivariate ANCOVA analysis was performed, controlling for child's age to determine whether any apparent typological differences might be attributable to age trends. The typology of four groups was developed via the median split procedure for each of the two positive and negative mediation variables, with the respondents then coded as high frequency or low frequency on one or both mediation valence. All other hypotheses were tested via hierarchical regression, with control variables (age, income and education) entered in the first block in a stepwise procedure. Independent variables were entered in the second block in a forced-entry procedure.

**Results**

Hypothesis 1 predicted that factor analysis of the items measuring mediation would produce two distinct factors representing positive and negative parental mediation behavior. Both principal components and maximum likelihood factor analysis produced two distinct factors. In the principal components solution, each item of the positive and negative mediation scales had a factor loading of at least .60 on its primary factor and less than .40 on the secondary factor. The results produced two factors, one representing negative mediation (communication countering television content) and one representing positive mediation. Following oblique rotation, no positive items loaded on the negative factor with weights over .23, and no negative items loaded on the positive factor with weights over .35. The factor measuring negative mediation consisted of six items placed on a five-point Likert scale (alpha = .74), explaining 35.4% of the variance. The factor measuring positive mediation consisted of two items that correlated positively ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) explaining 14.8% of the variance. The first factor loaded all six items that reflected nega-
tive mediation, with an eigenvalue of 2.83. The second factor loaded the remaining two items which reflected positive mediation, with an eigenvalue of 1.18. Positive mediation items included telling a child that they agree with something on television or in ads. Parental mediation scale items and factor loadings from the oblique solution are displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factor Loadings: Parental Mediation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Principal Component Analysis, Oblique Rotation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Communality Estimates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell Ad's Intention</td>
<td>0.73589</td>
<td>0.19261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad is not True</td>
<td>0.69985</td>
<td>0.06761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Ad is not OK</td>
<td>0.67343</td>
<td>-0.14106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV is not OK</td>
<td>0.62327</td>
<td>0.30201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell More about TV</td>
<td>0.59575</td>
<td>0.32659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV is not Real</td>
<td>0.65559</td>
<td>-0.08964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree with TV</td>
<td>0.18234</td>
<td>0.83024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree with TV Ad</td>
<td>0.23013</td>
<td>0.77104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eigenvalue: 2.83431
Variance Explained by each Factor: 35.4% 14.8%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results of Stepwise Regression Tests of Hypotheses</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Vars.</th>
<th>Independ. Vars.</th>
<th>R² Change</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coviewing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>.04**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>(1,197)</td>
<td>7.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>(2,196)</td>
<td>7.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>(4,194)</td>
<td>4.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Ads</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Mediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>(3,192)</td>
<td>8.92***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coviewing</td>
<td></td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Ads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative Mediation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>(3,188)</td>
<td>4.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coviewing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Ads</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
~Controlling variables (child's age, education, and income) were entered first in the equation when they are significant via the stepwise procedure. All independent variables entered simultaneously in the next block. Standardized betas reported from the block of entry.
Hypothesis 1 was supported, but it should be noted that the positive and negative mediation factors were not opposite poles on a common dimension \((r = .28, \ p < .001)\). The results of the test for Hypothesis 1, therefore, suggested that positive and negative were distinct but related behaviors, with parents engaging in one style of mediation likely to use the other as well. Measures related to advertising and programming loaded together, suggesting that parental behaviors did not differ significantly for the two programming types.

Parents reported relatively high levels of television-related interaction overall. For coviewing the mean was 3.5 on a five-point scale (somewhat often). The means for negative and positive mediation were 4.2 (often to very often) and 3.3 (sometimes) respectively.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that positive attitudes toward television content would positively predict coviewing and positive mediation. As shown in Table 3, positive attitudes toward television content did not positively predict coviewing of television with the child. Positive parental attitudes toward TV content \((\beta = .26, \ p < .001)\), however, significantly led to positive mediation, as predicted by the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 stated that watching television with a child (coviewing), would positively predict positive mediation. Coviewing was found to be a positive predictor of positive mediation \((\beta = .19, \ p < .01)\) as expected.

Hypothesis 4, which said more negative attitudes toward television content and less trust toward television advertising would be associated with more frequent negative mediation, was partially supported. Negative attitudes did not predict negative mediation, but trust toward advertising did inversely relate to negative mediation \((\beta = -.22, \ p < .01)\).

Hypothesis 5 predicted that a typology of frequent/infrequent positive and negative mediation would show significant differences on a variety of constructs tapping parental media use and opinions, including attitudes expressed regarding television content, reported frequency of coviewing, reported beliefs about appropriate uses for television, and reported levels of trust toward advertising. The typology represented the following mediation patterns (the cells in a bifold classification table):

1. nonmediators: low on both positive and negative mediation
2. optimists: high on positive but low on negative mediation
3. cynics: high on negative but low on positive mediation
4. selectives: high on both positive and negative mediation

In the ANCOVA performed to examine differences among typology groups on media use and opinion items, with child age controlled, significant differences were noted for the majority of items measuring parental beliefs and reported behaviors regarding television. Specifically, the typology demonstrated significant differences on the belief that television makes a good babysitter \([F (3, 226) = 3.79, \ p < .05]\), that television is a useful learning tool \([F (3, 226) = 4.23, \ p < .01]\), the frequency of watching prime-time television \([F (3, 226) = 3.35, \ p < .05]\), the frequency of coviewing \([F (3, 226) = 3.95, \ p < .01]\), attitudes toward television content \([F (3, 226) = 6.68, \ p < .001]\), and their levels of trust toward television advertising \([F (3, 226) = 12.04, \ p < .001]\). Age had signifi-
cant relationships with the use of television as a tool \[F(1, 226) = 4.95, p < .05]\, covingiewing \[F(1, 226) = 7.69, p < .01]\, and the frequency of watching educational television \[F(1, 226) = 19.10, p < .001]\, The typology effects demonstrated overall significance in the multivariate ANCOVA \[F(27, 660) = 2.54, p < .001]\, explaining 8 percent of the variance, as did the age variable \[F(9, 218) = 2.79, p < .01]\, explaining 11 percent of the variance. Means for each dependent variable by typological group are shown in Table 4. The variance explained by the typology, measured by eta-squared, ranged from 4 percent for covingiewing and for prime-time television, to 9 percent for trust in advertising.

On overall attitudes about television content, for which a higher value represents more confidence in television portrayals, cynics expressed significantly more concern than optimists and selectives. Optimists expressed less concern than nonmediators. For the belief that television is a good babysitter, optimists expressed significantly more agreement than cynics did but were similar to other groups. For the belief that television is a good learning tool, cynics expressed significantly less agreement than nonmediators, optimists, and selectives. For levels of skepticism toward advertising, cynics were more skeptical than all other groups, with optimists significantly less skeptical than nonmediators and selectives.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes about TV</th>
<th>Non-Mediators</th>
<th>Optimists</th>
<th>Cynics</th>
<th>Selectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust toward Ads</td>
<td>4.02a</td>
<td>5.06b</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>4.15a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV as Babysitter</td>
<td>1.95ab</td>
<td>2.42a</td>
<td>1.72b</td>
<td>1.95ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV as Learning Tool</td>
<td>3.44a</td>
<td>3.69a</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.58a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch Prtime</td>
<td>2.98ab</td>
<td>3.13a</td>
<td>2.60b</td>
<td>3.31a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch Sports</td>
<td>2.03a</td>
<td>2.10a</td>
<td>1.85a</td>
<td>2.06a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch Education</td>
<td>2.89a</td>
<td>3.21a</td>
<td>2.92a</td>
<td>3.23a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch News</td>
<td>4.06a</td>
<td>3.85a</td>
<td>3.75a</td>
<td>4.06a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coviewing Freq.</td>
<td>3.42ab</td>
<td>3.60ab</td>
<td>3.06a</td>
<td>3.89b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sharing the same letter indicates that no significant differences exist between the groups. A higher score indicates greater frequency, more confidence in television content, more trust in ads, and more approval of television’s use.

Concerning parental media use, cynics reported viewing significantly less prime-time television than optimists and selectives but were not significantly different from nonmediators. Cynics also spent significantly less time coviewing television with their child than selectives did, but were not significantly different from the other groups.
Discussion

Research on television effects and on family interaction processes, considered together, suggests that parent-child interaction regarding television may be an important influence in television effects upon children. This study investigated whether parent-child interaction surrounding television takes a number of conceptually distinct forms, each with its own implications depending on other aspects of the television interaction context. The study investigated positive and negative mediation styles, coviewing, and parental perceptions of television usefulness as a babysitter and as a learning tool. The measures focused on parental comments about television and advertising generally, rather than upon specific topics or programs.

Overall, the study demonstrates the existence of at least two types of mediation: positive and negative. Parents may embrace both positive and negative mediation strategies, one or neither. It suggests that positive mediation may occur more due to happenstance, with negative mediation associated more often with critical viewing and protective motivations.

One strength of this study was its random statewide sample. Some limitations, however, should be noted. The sample was limited in cultural diversity. In focusing only on parental reports, this study measured perception rather than behavior. It tapped only one parent's perspective about one child, though every family member may have a different interpretation of communication patterns within the family. Because the study method was cross-sectional, the results of tests for predictive relationships should be interpreted carefully. They demonstrate associations whose interpreted direction is based on theory. Measures for positive mediation were limited to two items, whereas the negative mediation index included six. Further development of measures to tap parent-child communication will be useful. The results should be considered exploratory.

A number of conceptual distinctions among aspects of parent-child interaction regarding television are now documented. An assessment of mediation per se does not establish whether discussion is negative or positive. In particular, the study suggests the existence of at least four distinct styles of parental mediation, each with unique motivations and associated behaviors. The data show striking differences among four mediation groups identified as (1) nonmediators (low levels of engagement in both positive or negative mediation); (2) optimists (high level of engagement in positive mediation but low in negative mediation); (3) cynics (high level in negative mediation but low level in positive mediation) and (4) selectives (high level of engagement in both positive and negative mediation).

Optimists expressed more positive opinions on television. Cynics manifest the most concern. Optimists were least skeptical about ads; cynics, the most skeptical. Nonmediators and selectives took the middle ground. Cynics were least likely to consider TV a good learning tool. Optimists were most likely to consider television a good babysitter. Cynics were less likely to coview than were selectives but did not do so significantly less than nonmediators or optimists. Cynics watched less prime-time television than did other groups, but media use patterns among the groups were similar.
Considering the significant differences with this typology, it is fair to suggest that cynics have the most negative and skeptical attitudes toward television, and watch television the least (during prime time). This may explain why they also coview the least. Optimists, at the opposite extreme, have the most positive and trusting attitudes toward television, including the belief that television can be used as a babysitter. Selectives have some similarities to optimists in terms of media use, coviewing and overall positive attitudes, but they are more skeptical than optimists, even as they tend to agree that parents can use TV as a good learning tool. Nonmediators appear to rest somewhere between cynics and selectives: They are more negative and skeptical than optimists, but they watch television and coview with children to the same extent as optimists and selectives. They also tend to agree that TV can be a good learning tool, but their level of discussion with children is significantly lower than the other three groups, suggesting that opportunities for learning directed by these parents are limited.

An important result of this study is its support for the contention that coviewing and critical or analytical parental discussion of content are conceptually distinct. Nonmediators, for example, have the same levels of coviewing as optimists and selectives, confirming that coviewing can exist without concurrent discussion. These data suggest that coviewing is more likely to relate to positive mediation—noncritical discussion that reinforces television content—than to negative mediation. Coviewing by parents appears unlikely without other influences to develop critical viewing skills in children.

The study identifies some positive parent views on TV as well as active parental media consumption (watching prime time TV and coviewing with children) as significant predictors of positive mediation behaviors. It appears that liking of television inspires more viewing, which results in more coviewing. Once parent and child are together in front of the television, they may discuss it by happenstance as much as by previous parental intent. Their discussion is likely to be more positive than negative. Parents' positive attitudes toward television may also motivate them to direct their children to television as a useful tool. This suggests that parents often use television as a tool to reinforce positive lessons, rather than as a source of examples of what not to do.

Although positive attitudes are associated with positive mediation and use of television as a tool, negative attitudes do not predict the use of negative mediation. The problem may be due to the particular measurement used, in that negative mediation may result from dissatisfaction with a specific portrayal (e.g., sexual issues), rather than with parent views of television content, or even of the portrayal of issues on television. Parental concern may vary widely by topic and situation.

In support of this interpretation, the results did show that negative mediators tended to be more critical viewers overall, and that they tended to watch less television. This observation supports the Gallup (1989) finding that parents tend to turn off the television when content offends them, but it also supports Dorr et al.'s (1989) assertion that parents discuss television more when their values appear threatened. These results suggested that though parents may turn off what they don't like; they may continue discussing it.
Future research should develop the distinctions among mediation style
typologies, including implications of mediation types for child perceptions and
behaviors. This study focused on parental perceptions. Although based on
theory, this study is primarily descriptive and is limited in its predictive value
for explaining media uses and effects for children. Some studies have sug-
ggested, based on children's reports, that parents do not mediate television to a
great extent. These results suggest that parents think they mediate television
quite a bit ($m = 3.8$ on a five-point scale). It could be that children key more on
negative aspects of mediation than on positive. Parents may consider rein-
fforcement of television content as mediation. Children may not consider
cowatching as tacit reinforcement, even though in this study coviewing tended
to be associated with positive reinforcement of television content. This matter
merits further examination. These findings could suggest that advising parents
to watch television with their children is insufficient to make mediation posi-
tive or negative and at times may be counterproductive advice, if the intent is
to cultivate critical viewing skills in children.

Other avenues for future research are worthwhile, given the distinc-
tions that emerged among various aspects of parent-child interaction regarding
television. It appears from these results that some parents do indeed take on
the tube, while others are more complacent, reinforcing many of the lessons
their children see portrayed by television. Some theorists have suggested that
parent-child discussion styles have profound influences on the child's develop-
ment of communication competence. Competence then affects a child's abil-
ity to use information sources to affiliate with peers, succeed in school, and
develop self reliance (Burleson, et al., 1995).

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