

# Parental Control and Regulation of Schoolchildren's Television Viewing

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It is very hard to find empirically and theoretically sound analyses of the role of parents 'in-between' children and television. In the effects tradition, the accent is on rules and control. More recent research, particularly the cognitively oriented school, attaches more importance to children's social contexts. Various studies have highlighted the active role of children as viewers and interpreters of television programmes, as well as the important role that parents, older siblings and friends play in the development of media skills. In empirical work, however, all this tends to be ignored and forgotten: the role of parents in mediating and regulating TV viewing, for instance, is typically reduced to a handful of more or less self-evident variables: 'we watch/we don't watch TV with the children' (see e.g. Dorr et al. 1989). The empirical material collected for this study shows concretely that many, even widely shared conceptions about children and television are not in fact as self-evident as has been assumed.

The overly pessimistic picture drawn of parenthood also raises questions about the understanding of essential aspects of parenthood and family life. Why shouldn't parents pay attention to the guidelines and recommendations issued in a sphere of life which is considered important to children's development? Why should television be the only exception, when generally cultural meanings guide child development by providing a framework for parental understanding of child-rearing goals and methods? (Valsiner 1987, 68-69)

This is the question that lies behind the analysis in this article, which starts out from earlier conceptions of the roles of parents as media educators. Most of the earlier work on parents' mediating role

is based on a normative model of expected or ideal behaviour on the part of parents, with very few attempts to seriously explore and reflect upon this role. The variables concerning children and television, it seems, have been carried over from one study to another without ever questioning their relevance. This conclusion appears in the qualitative research of the 1980s, especially as a critique of earlier studies. Patricia Palmer, for example, says that the careful observation and description of children's television viewing, as it actually occurred at home, was very much neglected in earlier research. Early 'theories' of children's relationship to television were therefore based on assumptions which reflected the then-current thinking rather than descriptions and classifications of actual examples of behaviour, usually the first foundation of study in a new area (Palmer 1986, 2). The same argument is made by Robert Hodge and David Tripp, from a slightly different angle and even more polemically. According to them, earlier researchers have paradoxically attempted to prove something which is not understood in the first place. In future, they say, the emphasis must be placed on discovery rather than proof, exploration rather than demonstration and suggestiveness rather than certainty (Hodge and Tripp 1986, 2-11).

These ideas have regained currency during the 1990s with the work of David Buckingham (Buckingham 1993, 1996). Buckingham's results confirm many of my own findings, but are omitted from the time perspective of the present article, which is based on my licentiate's thesis at the University of Helsinki Department of Social Psychology in autumn 1996 (Kytömäki 1996).

The purpose of this study is not to assess how well parents meet certain pre-set norms. Its main object, instead, is to reconstruct parents' own dis-

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courses on control and mediation of children's viewing. How do parents say they act, how do they justify their thoughts, and what meanings do they give to the central concepts related to the relationship between children and television and the experts' recommendations? (On children's own views, see Kytömäki 1996)

The article also proceeds to offer more generalized, theoretical interpretations of the empirical results. The ideas put forward by Jaan Valsiner in *Culture and the Development of Children's Action* (1987) emerged as significant to this effort in that they shed very interesting light on the empirical findings. Valsiner's theory of developmental psychology combines children's creativity and activity with the seemingly self-evident idea that the child is assisted by another individual. Within this framework, development is seen both as an individual and essentially also as a social process. The interpretation of the interview observations on the basis of Valsiner's theory led to a new conception of the nature of parental mediation and by the same token to a more realistic picture of parents' responsibility with regard to children and television.

## Material and Method

The data on the viewing and reception of television programmes in families with children were collected in Tampere in spring and summer 1988 in semi-structured personal interviews. The interviews covered a wide range of themes from families' viewing habits to the adults' and children's favourite programmes. This article is based on the interviews conducted with the parents and focuses on their relationship to children's television viewing, on situations where the family watches television together, and on discussions about television programmes with the children. The same interview material has been used by several other studies concerned particularly with adults' own relationship to television (Alasuutari 1992, Alasuutari, Armstrong and Kytömäki 1991, Kytömäki 1991, Lempiäinen and Virtanen 1991).

The sample was drawn from six primary schools and three senior secondary schools in different types of areas (city centre, suburbs, traditional residential areas) in the city of Tampere in southern Finland. The sample covered a broad spectrum of social strata as well as viewers with access to different programme supplies: most households in the city centre had access to cable and satellite in addition to the terrestrial channels of YLE (the public-service broadcaster), MTV and Kolmostelevisio. Sampling

was done by the interviewers Marja Alastalo and Marja Ikkala, who randomly picked 180 names, 90 boys and 90 girls, from the pupil rolls. The study met with a very favourable reception and there was no need to resort to any of the reserve names picked out in the sampling process. In most cases (80 families) one of the parents was interviewed, in 10 randomly selected cases, both parents were interviewed. Out of the total of 90 families interviewed, one child could not be reached. Thus the total number of children interviewed is 89, the number of parents 100.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were saved on diskette in a form suitable for word-processing, enabling the use of ZyINDEX, a software package specifically designed for handling qualitative materials. The material is relatively extensive, comprising some 1,700 double-spaced pages.

To illustrate each topic or theme, the text below uses quite a large number of quotations from the interviews; these have been chosen with a view to representativity. The quotations have been slightly edited for easier reading, mainly by omitting elements that are irrelevant to understanding the text and the subject discussed. The interviewer's initials (MA or MI), the number of the person interviewed, and for children, gender and age (e.g. G14) are indicated at the end of each quotation.

## Indifferent Parents?

Research on children and television has devoted much attention to parental behaviour in relation to children's television viewing. Traditionally, studies have been based on a normative model of how parents are supposed to act. Generally, it is proposed more or less explicitly that parents ought at least to:

- control the time spent viewing
- control which programmes are suitable viewing
- watch television together with the children.

The latter point has not been considered important in itself; the idea of coviewing is that parents should 'take an active role in mediating their children's experiences with television' (Dorr et al. 1989, 35). The term 'mediate', which is widely used in the literature, has been defined as referring to discussing programmes, helping to make programmes understandable and influencing viewing decisions through discussion – to disapprove of certain types of programmes and encourage watching others (Lin & Atkin 1989, 59). The concept can also cover a

wider range of educational processes, for instance the attempt by parents to influence their children's interpretations and judgements (e.g. Dorr 1986) of different programmes. However, empirical analyses show a strong bias towards narrower definitions. This is because they are chiefly concerned with the effects of mediation (or its absence) rather than with the mediation of viewing itself.

The picture emerging from research so far is quite pessimistic about parental control and mediation of children's viewing. For instance, a study by Dorr, Kovaric and Doubleday confirmed earlier findings according to which coviewing occurs primarily in instances where parents and children have the same viewing preferences. It follows that parents watch television more often with their older children, even though it is the younger children who would benefit most from the situation. On the other hand, the weak correlations found between coviewing and positive effects have prompted researchers to conclude that coviewing might be an 'imperfect indicator of parental mediation of children's television experiences' (Dorr et al. 1989).

However, many researchers go much further than that, even in the context of academic texts. Straightforward interpretations of parenthood can be found most particularly in studies on the control and rules of viewing. Swedish sociologist Marianne Svenning, for instance, (1988, 190-191) draws the inference that parents are 'bad censors'. In Germany, Baacke, Sander and Vollbrecht (1990, 334) say that the indifference shown on the part of parents to their children's media consumption is 'appalling'.

In Finland it is much less frequently that we hear these sorts of conclusions being drawn about parental action. The tendency, instead, is either to tell parents what to do (i.e. in terms of highlighting the importance of coviewing), or simply to state the research evidence, particularly with regard to the effects of violent programming and the amount of viewing (for a summary of the Finnish debate on TV violence, see Hemánus 1988). Although the results are presented as hard facts, they do convey the indirect message that not all parents control their children's television viewing. (There are children who watch 'brutal video violence' or children who watch TV 'half their waking hours' or 'even up to 9 hours a day'). Publication of the results is therefore an important, if not the most important way to inform what the public is expected to do, and to focus the attention of parents on what their children watch on television and how much.

To what extent do the findings genuinely reflect the actual situation around television in families

with children? The least one can say is perhaps that all in all, the educational processes taking place in families with regard to television, are still poorly understood and that they are far more complex than is given to understand in surveys. The definition of mediation by Leichter (1979) draws attention to the wide spectrum of educational processes involved, defining it as comprising the way in which the family screens, interprets, criticizes, reinforces, complements, counteracts, refracts or transforms the material seen (Leichter 1979, 32; quoted in Bryce & Leichter 1983, 310).

Conclusions drawn about parenthood, especially insofar as they are based on survey results, are highly problematic on account of the unconscious nature of the rules concerning television viewing. Ethnographic research in particular has demonstrated that these rules are rarely expressed in explicit terms, but are usually 'embedded in the activities of [people's] daily lives, unintentional and unremarkable at the time it occurs' (Bryce & Leichter 1983). Irene Goodman was one of the first writers to point out that existing social-psychological family research is also applicable to the study of television. According to her, implicit rules as a strong, invisible force in family life have remained very much in the sidelines, while the research has tended to focus on explicit rules (Goodman 1983, 410-411). From the point of view of family research, the result that there exist no rules concerning television viewing in the family, is quite simply impossible. What is possible is that there are no outspoken rules. A situation calling for explicit rules may arise, for instance, when a family member unexpectedly takes an interest in programmes that the family has previously not watched at all (op.cit. 415).

The empirical analysis below looks from the parents' perspective at what is regarded as one of their priority tasks, namely coviewing and controlling the programmes viewed by children and the amount of time children spend with television. However, our first question derives from the paradox that was briefly discussed above: how do we explain the recurring survey results according to which parents seem completely to disregard the public debate on children and television. Taken at face-value, the results of earlier research seem to be confirmed by the findings of this study as well: most parents say that they do not restrict their children's viewing in any way. This paradox may in part reflect the implicit, unspoken rules that we mentioned earlier. However, it is clear that this does not provide an exhaustive explanation. Parents could, if they so wanted to, stress the educational aspect in their interviews, or

at least leave unmentioned (for reasons of social desirability) the fact that they have no restrictions on children's viewing.

## Accepting the Special Character of Children

Perhaps the most surprising thing about parent's attitudes towards their children's TV viewing is the absence of moral undercurrents. Parents quite simply state what kind of programmes their children usually watch, without any effort to explain or defend their children by saying that they only watch television 'when they're tired' or 'just for the sake of entertainment'. It is taken for granted that children watch adventure and police series, comedies or soap operas. This neutral stance is emphasized in the context of the whole interview material, because television viewing is definitely a moral question for adults. Adults want to set themselves apart from the viewer who is ignorant of the risks of television and who becomes absorbed in its escapist world (Alasuutari 1992).

It is also surprising to find how rarely parents talk about television programmes and their viewing with children in positive terms, for instance for purposes of promoting social learning. This was not in fact explicitly asked of the interviewees, and the rare spontaneous examples suggest that there is probably little awareness of this aspect of viewing. The latter conclusion is supported by the findings of a participant observation study by James Lull, in which social learning emerged as one of the main forms of social uses made possible by television viewing (Lull 1980). However, the absence of positive educational goals from parents' descriptions also underlines the impression that parents are not seriously concerned about children's viewing.

The following, quite typical account of children's viewing can thus easily be interpreted as indifference.

– No, we've never really had any rules, and especially during week-ends he's allowed to watch pretty much what he wants to.

Do you generally try to control the amount of time that the kids are allowed to watch television?

– No, not really. But sometimes if it goes too far and they just sit there for hours on end, I sometimes tell them to move their backsides and get out for a while or do something else for a change. I'll say that it's not good for your

eyes, or something. But no, we've never had any serious discussion in the family about , you know, so and so many hours a day. MI, 40 (B13)

A more careful reading of the interviews does not lend support to this interpretation, however. The strongest argument against the interpretation of parental indifference lies in the understanding and appreciation shown by parents towards their children's TV-viewing. Parents know perfectly well what their children's favourite programmes are and that they react to these programme in a fashion that is typical of their age. This, to an extent, is self-evident when we think of the modern nuclear family, which is based on mutual emotional ties: parents allow their children to apply their own criteria in defining what they regard as good programmes.

This equality among family members is reflected in the appreciation shown towards children's programme choices and in the acceptance of children's enthusiastic attitude towards the programmes. This also means that parents are unable to rank-order the programmes their children like most:

– We receive three channels and have an old black-and-white tv-set for watching the news. There's not much else you'd want to see. We don't have all that many rows. When Robin Hood is on, nothing else matters, this gentleman here (the brother of the interviewed girl) wants to watch Robin Hood. MI, 36 (G11)

Some parents say they have actually opted to give up watching their own favourite programmes for a number of years. In this sense the parents' assessments involve a value judgement in that they might want to see their children watch something else as well. The fact that children do not do this is explained by reference to their special character; the time for this 'something else' will come later, when the children grow up:

Has there been any conscious education on your part in the sense that...

– (interrupts) Yes, certainly. But at that age they don't really want to listen, do they? I've tried to encourage him to go and see some proper youth films, but he's just not interested. At that age all they're after is excitement and thrills. MA, 35 (B11)

In stressing the special character of children as an audience of television programmes, the parents are in fact defining much of the programme supply as a

form of children's and youth culture. When they say that the programmes their children watch are special, they are at once implicitly saying that they themselves are different from children. It follows that the same norms cannot be applied to children's television viewing and adults' viewing. An adult may watch programmes that children like to give them company and for the sake of entertainment, the child watches the same programmes with enthusiasm and 'seriously'.

Acknowledging the special character of children is one of the factors which makes it possible to describe children's viewing in neutral, non-moral terms. No explanations or excuses are needed for children being absorbed in their favourite programmes because this is natural and they will eventually grow out of it. This, however, cannot be the whole explanation. We need also to look in more general terms at how parents see the relationship between television and children. The first thing that has to be taken into account here is the way in which parents see the situation of their own family in relation to the much debated question of the role of television in leisure time.

### **Conceptions of the Proper Amount of Viewing: Not Us but Others**

Television research has always shown a keen interest in the question of how much time children and adolescents spend with television. The interest has been largely motivated by concerns over the attractiveness of television, that viewing might gradually gain the upper hand over genuine social relationships and activity.

On the basis of earlier research it has been concluded that only few parents restrict the amount of television viewing (for a summary, see Dorr 1986). However, these restrictions are understood in very abstract terms. It is clear on the basis of the interview evidence that parents do not think of their children's viewing in terms of hours and minutes; therefore parents will be inclined to answer this question in the negative, as in the example above (MI 40) where the interviewee said 'no, not really'. However, it is reasonable to assume that some concrete limits must exist. In the example above, the father continued his answer by saying that 'if they've been sitting there for a long time, I might ask them to go out'.

All the parents agreed that on the whole, the amount of time their children spent viewing was reasonable, even though there were times (especially during the long winter months) when the lim-

its of reasonable were overstepped. The definition of what is reasonable is obviously no easy task for parents because there exist no absolute criteria. The following example clearly illustrates how parents tended to consider the question in relative terms – and in relation to other families:

Do you think that's a lot?

– Well, to be honest sometimes I think it is a bit too much...but of course there's nothing to compare it with. If you think of our family...Perhaps they don't watch television as much as... I mean I don't know how much television they watch in other families, do they stay up half the night or what. Usually our youngest goes to bed first, then the next one has to be in his bedroom by eight o'clock, and the oldest one at half past. So they don't watch television after that. MA, 9 (G11)

Underlying this assessment there is clearly an image of 'other families' and their viewing habits, but there are also certain criteria against which one's own habits are justified. The excerpt above could also be read as saying that 'our children do not watch television from early morning late into the night, no matter what the situation is in other families'. Use-of-time limits ('before the evening news') are quite a common way of imposing restrictions on viewing. In addition, appropriate viewing is often defined as viewing at a level which is not addictive. An example is provided by a situation where a child who is watching television can leave when a friend drops by to ask him out. Viewing is under control when it is not the child's only leisure interest.

So, what do you think about your own children's viewing habits?

– Well, I think that we don't...that our children are not addicted to television. They both have their hobbies in which they spend quite a lot of time. Perhaps that gives them some sort of protection against addiction. And, er, we have had some restrictions with television.

Do you mean you've set a definite limit...

– Yes, when they are at school, we've always tried to set a limit. The news, after the news. MI 38 (G13)

At the time that the study was carried out in the late 1980s, children aged 10-14 watched television and video for an average one and a half hours a day (Kasari 1990, 23). Estimates by children themselves

have been found to exaggerate the amount of time they spend with television (van der Voort and Vooijs 1990). In this study, too, children's own estimates were certainly on the high side.

It is easier for parents than for schoolchildren to estimate the average amount of time spent with television by relating viewing to normal weekly routines, for instance. All the parents present in the interview situation interfered to correct their children's estimates, always to cut down the figure. One obvious reason for this is that parents do not want to give the impression that their children are heavy consumers; the children themselves were rarely aware of there even being such a risk. On the other hand, the impression one gets from the interviews is that despite the tendency of the children to exaggerate the amount of time they spent viewing, the parents were not overly concerned about the risk of being labelled heavy consumers; they took this exaggeration very much as natural thing for children to do. One possible explanation for this attitude is that the amount of time that one's own children spent viewing – one, two or even three hours – was nonetheless considered to be well below the figures for 'other children' or 'average children'.

–I think that's quite reasonable. I'm sure it could be much more. I mean if you look at the statistics the figures are quite fantastic, aren't they? Our children have so much to do that there's no harm in their relaxing every now and then. MA, 23 (G11)

People's conceptions of 'prototypical' viewing habits were not included in the interview schedule. However, these were clearly visible in a few other comments.

Do you think your children watch too much television?

–What do I think?

Yes. Is this a silly question?

–Do the kids watch too much television? My kids don't watch nearly as much television as other children, I mean they watch it *all the time*. MI, 25(G13)

All in all, on the basis of these few observations, it may be hypothesised that we are looking here at a rather familiar phenomenon: television is a problem for others, not for us (cf. Cullingford 1984). In this connection the matter also has a broader significance. The conception of 'others' places one's own

family so securely on the 'safe' side that there is no need for any apologies of one's own practices or children's viewing habits. The finding that none of the parents regard their own children as heavy consumers has usually been interpreted as an indication of double standards of morality. Our interviews with 100 parents provides an excellent opportunity to examine the whole issue in this light.

The key question that needs to be addressed is this: Why did each and every parent interviewed think that television viewing in their family was within reasonable limits? It does not suffice to say that some of the parents wanted to conceal the real situation and make themselves 'look better'. Rather, it seems that there is no felt need to estimate television viewing in terms of hours spent with television. Given the 'incredible figures quoted in the statistics', it is impossible for the parents even to imagine that they might have a problem in their home. If there is a problem, it is someone else's. Hence the public representation of children's television viewing becomes counterproductive. Parents can rest assured that their own viewing habits are certainly acceptable, at a considerably lower level than seems to be common practice.

## Rules Concerning Viewing

Research on children and television seems to be more or less unanimous in its conclusion that most parents have no rules concerning their children's television viewing. Most studies also point out that it is even less common for children themselves to say that they have any rules. On this basis it is suggested that parents exaggerate the existence of rules for reasons of social acceptability (see Dorr 1986, 134-136, Cullingford, 1984). This result is often taken as a given fact even in studies that take a less traditional approach. Hodge and Tripp (1986, 1) who represent a semiotic approach, say that the belief that television is a bad influence is for many [parents] an unstable, insecure one. It is often hard to sustain in the face of the apparently healthy enjoyment of television by one's own children.

From the very outset it was clear that it would be difficult to interpret the responses to the question of whether the parents had any rules or restrictions on their children's viewing. In many cases the elements within one response seemed to contradict one another, particularly in the children's own responses. For instance, the child might have said that he was allowed to watch everything he wanted, only to go on in the next sentence to say that he went to bed

regularly at nine and that he never watched the late night programmes. Similar contradictions also appeared in the interviews with parents, and differences were found between the views of children and their parents. In one of the interviews, a father said that before bed-time the children were free to watch anything and everything they wanted, except for video cassettes he had marked as forbidden. The 10-year-old daughter gave a detailed description of a very strict weekly schedule which set out what she was allowed to watch.

The examples above draw attention to two problems concerning the interpretation of the interviews. Firstly, they lend support to the observation that rules may be implicit or self-evident and therefore not experienced as rules at all. Secondly, the impression one gets is that the parents' responses to the questions of control or rules are in some way haphazard. It is quite easy to pick out from the material two parents who describe the typical practices in their families in almost the same way, yet one of them may say that there are rules and control in the family, while the other says they have never had any rules. In this case it is evident that the concepts in question mean different things to different parents. One possible explanation is that these particular concepts – i.e. rules or control – are not very commonly used in the Finnish debate on children's television viewing.

The parents interviewed were asked whether they had restrictions on their children's television viewing and if so, what kinds of restrictions. It was clearly difficult for the parents to answer this question unambiguously. This was evident most particularly in the fact that various reservations and

specifications were added to the negative answers, i.e. which said that there were no restrictions. In these cases the parents answered the questions both in the affirmative and negatively at the same time. This, of course, raised the question as to which of the answers one should believe or stress.

Let us take a real example: The interviewee says that the family has no rules, but adds that if the child were to take a liking to videos containing violence, he would certainly intervene. On the one hand the respondent is thinking of violence as something that calls for control and intervention, on the other hand he is saying that there are no rules in his family. This observation led to the insight that the various reservations identified are in fact explanations and specifications as to why the family has no rules for viewing. This observation allows us to reconstruct typical survey results, and at the same time to take a closer look 'behind' the different answer categories for a closer analysis of what the parents in fact have meant with their answers. In Table 1. responses are based literally on the parents' own classification. Even though the responses 'yes we have; they are not allowed to watch late-night shows' and 'no, we haven't, but then again, they do not watch the late-night shows', have the same content, they are placed in different classes.

Looking at how the parents themselves answered the question, we find that only 32 percent said they had rules or restrictions concerning television viewing in the family. Although these kinds of results have been used to back up the argument that there is very little control, the figure does not in itself say anything about what the parents have, upon closer scrutiny, actually meant with their replies. Only 4

**Table 1.** *Parents' Responses to the Question as to Whether they Have Rules or Restrictions on Television Viewing, by Child's Age and Gender (%)*

	Boys			Girls			All
	10-12	13-14	Total	10-12	13-14	Total	
Yes	41	22	33	41	13	31	32
No	7	6	7	3	–	2	4
No longer	–	33	13	–	44	16	14
No, but							
time rules	30	–	18	21	25	22	20
psychological explanation	11	17	13	31	–	20	17
mediational explanation	11	22	16	3	19	9	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	99
N=	27	18	45	29	16	45	90

percent of the parents say unequivocally, without any reservations, that they have no limits or restrictions on their children's viewing.

The parents have various explanations for the lack of rules and restrictions. Most of these are based on bed-times: 'They can watch what they want, but then again they do go to bed at nine'. References to the time of day as an explanation for the lack of rules are made by one-fifth (20%) of the respondents (see Table 1). This is often justified by saying that there is nothing on television early in the evening that is not suitable for children. Thus far the results of this study are consistent with the findings of an earlier study where bed-times were found to be the most important restrictions (Wober et al., 1986).

In almost one-fifth (17%) of the interviews references are made to children's own control (psychological explanation, Table 1). Typically this is so expressed that viewing is not controlled because children can decide for themselves what is suitable viewing, or that decisions are made in an atmosphere of 'good mutual understanding'. The following excerpt gives some idea of what is usually meant by children's own control. The mother interviewed characterizes her children's viewing habits in a very typical fashion. It is only with the interviewer's follow-up question that violence emerges as a potential cause for control.

Have you at any stage imposed any restrictions on N's TV viewing?

-Well, there's been no need really, because she's very rarely at home during the evenings. And when she does stay in, she usually stays in her own room, or we play games or then she goes out with her friends. So she only really watches the most exciting programmes like McGyver and Batman. I know that if she watches anything more exciting, she'll have nightmares and she knows it herself, so we've had no problems with that. We'll have to see what happens now that we have video, you know, will we have to buy all these films and record programmes on tape; that's all a mystery. But so far, we've had no problems.

Do you think you'd interfere if she wanted to watch all the thrillers, and now that you've got video, and rent all these video films...

-Yes I would. I do not want her to get used to all that violent stuff. I think like in McGyver and what have you, the violence in these shows...we've talked about this, and I think they have plenty of violence for children of

this age, and that's the absolute limit. MA, 41 (G10)

The two classes discussed above, i.e. explanations referring to times of the day and to children's own control (together accounting for 37% of the responses) reflect a situation where the views of different family members as to suitable programming are in balance and no particular rules or restrictions are considered necessary. In these cases, 'there are no rules' means in practice that 'no rules are needed'.

The third reservation in the parents' responses refers to mediational measures; this was mentioned in 12 percent of the answers. This response differs clearly from all others and has rather connections with the category 'no restrictions any more' (14%). By this, the parents mean that their children are allowed to watch television more than before, but only on condition that the parents are present in the viewing situation when necessary. This is perhaps best illustrated by the following example:

-Now that he's older, somehow you feel that you can't be bothered any more... I mean if there's a good western on, I wouldn't want to say no any more. Because, I mean, they do select these films, don't they, for television. Video films are a different matter altogether.

So you no longer say no if there's something on that he wants to see.

-No, there's nothing really that bad. If there's sometimes been something he knows we wouldn't like him to watch, then he's really decided it for himself. On the other hand if we've not been quite sure, then we've also watched it, you know just so that he's not there on his own. So I mean the control is there in that sense. We talk about it and criticize the program together. MI 18 (B13)

The parents feel it is important for them to heed to expert advice, to watch television together with their children. In this situation they will try to 'criticize' the television programme (and the more dubious programmes in particular) and in so doing to influence their children's attitudes.

Overall the material lends support to the findings of previous studies which suggest that purposive, frequent viewing together with children and a concurrent discussion about what is happening on the screen, is comparatively rare. However, the interviews nonetheless indicate that parents do intervene in viewing, and do so with determination if neces-



sary. Mothers in particular often pointed out that even though they do not necessarily watch television together with their children, they are all the time 'on the alert', monitoring the viewing situation and, above all, their children's reactions. David Morley (1986, 160) has also pointed out that women do not immerse themselves in viewing to the same extent as men, but usually retain their role as parents, keeping an eye on the family situation even while watching television.

The control situation changes dramatically when children reach adolescence. From the virtually problem-free situation with children aged 10-12, things become far more difficult to handle as decision-making authority shifts increasingly to children approaching adolescence. This is clearly seen in Table 1. If you add them together the indicators reflecting children's decision-making power 'no longer' and 'mediational explanation' increase from 11 percent to 55 percent among boys and from 3 percent to 63 percent among girls. In some families this shift takes place out of practical necessity, in others it is a matter of internalizing parental norms, and in others still it is simply a matter of not wanting to argue, even if parents do not like what their children are watching.

Regardless of the criteria set for acceptable viewing, it seems clear that one of the main objectives of imposing restrictions on viewing is to make sure that children cope at school without difficulty. It seems that programme contents is not a major factor; after all it is fairly common that during weekends families with children watch even the late-night programmes.

## How to Define a Violent Programme?

Violence (and, often synonymously, late-night programming) is the single most important reason for parental control. But what do parents mean by violence; why do they want to avoid it; why do they seem to fail in this avoidance?

The main objection against TV violence, both in the public debate and in academic research (see e.g. Hemánus 1988), is that it is believed to foster aggression and/or violence in the audience. None of the parents interviewed for this study raised this argument as a reason for controlling their own children's viewing. Although parents believe that these kinds of effects do exist, they do not think their own children would be affected. However, another common research finding was mentioned quite often: that television violence gives children an unrealistic

picture of the consequences of violence at an individual level.

Is this parental attitude towards violence an indication of double standards (it affects others but not our children)? Our material does not seem to support this idea. Rather, it seems that parents sincerely feel they have been successful in controlling the viewing of violent programmes. The following interview is a good example of how parents understand harmful violence:

-Well, at least I think... shows where they, well, just shoot you in the face. I think they're not for children. I think that a normal...if one shoots from a distance like you see in many films, you can't help that, but in my mind it's awful... shooting at close range. It is so horrible that I would definitely.... No, and not on video. MA 61 (B 10)

This is a representative account of what kinds of programmes parents will not let their children watch, programmes that are often characterized briefly as too cruel for children to watch. The interview above could easily be seen as a naive apology for entertainment violence. The essence of the statement, however, is similar to the notions shared by many parents and can be expressed in a more sophisticated form:

-But I mean programmes like westerns, they're something of a borderline case. Some of it...in relative terms it can get extremely violent. But of course you have to realize that the environment and all the rest of it is different, they can't relate to that sort of reality, so they don't experience it in the same way.

We've tried to avoid these sorts of programmes, or even told them plainly that they are out of the question, if we know they are excessively violent...but in any case they're in bed by the time most of these things are on. MI 42 (B14)

Gunter has arrived at very similar conclusions in a study of how the British audience perceives violence. Violent acts portrayed in the context of ordinary everyday life and close by in terms of time and place, clearly added to perception of violence, whereas violence in surroundings that are clearly imaginary is experienced as less confusing and frightening (Gunter 1985, 245).

Horror films or programmes which are 'too exciting' will also cause parents to switch the television off, often in good understanding especially

with younger children. However, these programmes are linked with the category of violent programmes. They are described as wholly unsuitable to children, so much so that they cause them to have nightmares.

The main purpose of control, then, is to spare children from experiences which might shock or frighten them. This motive is clearly and understandably stronger than the aim of giving children a realistic picture of the consequences of violence. Parents will, however, try to make it clear that the portrayals they see do not give a realistic picture of violence.

Do you talk about these programmes while you're watching them?

—Yes we often do criticize programmes, you know if it's something really crazy. So we criticize it...that's how it comes, and R. will realize what it's all about. Because he's always been quite a sensible boy, ever since he was very small. He seems to understand things, and doesn't take everything seriously. So that's why we've given him some freedom to make his own choices, because he doesn't believe all of it.

—(Father) That's right. I mean like there, where they hit you over the head, really kick you in the face. Absolutely stupid. It's not like that in real life anyway. And he's seen it at school, they had this demonstration so he knows what happens. So I mean when they keep punching each other in the face for minutes on end and nothing happens, he understands it's not for real. He knows it's only a film. MI 18 (B13)

In many responses the parents said that they also try to make it clear to their children that not everything you see on television is for real. In the example below the parent interviewed highlights the utility of this method (in practice taught by the child's older siblings):

Do you think that these programmes they show after 9 pm...how much of it is not suitable for children?

—I don't know if it's any different from many serials you get before the news. But because R. is...you know she's not afraid of it. Even when she was younger, well perhaps it is because she's got older brothers. So she sometimes watched these programmes with her brothers and they've explained to her that it's just a film, that is how they do it. She doesn't believe it's for real. She knows it's

only acting. She's not afraid of these things, the scenes they show. But somehow I've been thinking that they are more suitable to adults, the programmes that are on after the news. That they've been chosen, that someone else has made the choice. MI 29 (G11).

This example shows how television violence is often defined in relation to the capacity of the child to take in what he or she sees. At the same time, our examples clearly illustrate another special feature of mediation. In learning to watch television, it is possible to identify periods which are related to the child's developmental history and during which certain things are explained to the child. In an earlier study it was found that parents have to make it clear to the child at a very early stage, by age 3-4, that there are things that are true and others that are fantasy. These processes often get under way when parents notice their child has fears or is worried about the fate of imaginary characters. Another factor that lies behind mediation at this age is the real physical danger involved in imitating the actions of cartoon figures, for instance. This kind of mediation of TV viewing is a way of socializing children to the concept of fiction which is an essential part of our culture (Messaris 1987). In our study many parents said they remembered the stage when they had to make it clear to their children how unrealistic TV violence really is. In many families this had been a distinct period when the subject was much discussed and the children's viewing closely monitored.

### **New Interpretation of Parental Mediation of Children's Television Viewing**

Why do parents not feel they have to stress and underline their own role and contribution in regulating and controlling their children's viewing? Clearly, they do not feel there is any problem as far as television is concerned in their own family. They believe that their children's favourite programmes reflect a taste that is typical of their children's age and that this is a phase which will pass in due course. The amount of time that children spend with television is nowhere near the figures that are quoted in the media. The rules that are in place to control viewing in the family are for the main part implicit, unspoken rules, which means that there is no need for parents to stress the role of active control; things will be decided upon in 'good mutual understanding'. As far as violence is concerned, parents feel that they are doing the responsible thing by ruling out all forms

of violence that are not suitable to the child's current phase of development. Having said that, things do get somewhat more complicated when children reach adolescence and they gradually have to take on the responsibility for viewing decisions themselves.

The main motive for intervening in children's viewing is to protect them from shocking experiences; this is the reason why parents impose restrictions on programmes depicting realistic violence and horror. The criteria that parents employ for purposes of practical decision-making are the reactions observed in children in continuous interaction. If these observations warrant an intervention in the viewing situation, that is what the parents will do. From this it follows that acceptable programme contents will change as children grow up. This means that on the basis of the programmes viewed by children at different ages and stages of development, it is impossible to draw inferences about, say, differences in parental permissiveness, because all parents seem to follow the same principle in applying restrictions.

Parental control does not always mean an absolute ban on viewing. It is clear, however, that programmes which on the basis of prior experiences are suspected to have unfavourable effects, will be subjected to special monitoring. These programmes are invariably viewed together with children, particular attention is paid to the child's reactions, and parents make clear their own views about the programme. The results of this study suggest that schoolchildren's interpretations of programmes are constructed partly in interaction with the parents.

The findings lend support to the view that coviewing does not serve as an indicator describing parental mediation. Parents do not consider it their duty to watch television regularly with their children. They will intervene in viewing situations when necessary, and therefore forms of viewing together which genuinely reflect mediational aims, may be very rare indeed. Especially with younger children, whose programme choices are not seen as problematic by parents, the 'teaching periods' may be limited to a few situations in which it is 'made clear' to the child that the world of fiction is different from reality. In contrast to what is generally believed, the increase of coviewing with older children does not necessarily reflect a convergence of tastes (Dorr et al. 1989). At least in part, it seems that influencing children's interpretations of programmes and the world they portray is at this age the main form of parental mediation when an outright ban on viewing is often too difficult to implement. All in all, the

question of viewing together is not an 'either-or' issue. Even in the case where a parent refuses to watch a programme that he or she considers dubious, the very exceptionality of this decision may be an extremely powerful educational measure.

The description above may well be seen as complementing existing research. However, familiarizing myself with the thoughts and theories of Jaan Valsiner has given me the insight that the independence allowed to children and the periodical intervention of parents in their children's viewing is not an empirical specification, but an integral part of an underlying developmental theory.

The idea that coviewing is an indication of parental intentions to mediate, to influence the children's choices or their interpretations, places accent on quantity at the expense of quality. Valsiner has heavily criticized this assumption that is very common in psychology, i.e. that people will try or that they should try to maximize their actions (see Valsiner 1987, 28). Valsiner says that in most everyday situations solutions are based on incomplete information and that there are many different possible solutions. Therefore in most ordinary life-situations people will try to find solutions with which they can be satisfied, which are adequate. Valsiner argues that the principle of maximization only makes sense if there is no more than one acceptable solution (op.cit. 29).

Underlying the recommendation that parents should watch television together with their children is the view that continuous guidance is useful, which again is consistent with the principle of maximization. The traditional theory of learning also involves another problem: it sees the child as a passive object of education. This idea is in fact analogous to traditional effects theory in television research, which also takes the child as a passive object. Such elements as creativity are necessarily excluded from this picture.

In order to understand the nature of parental mediation of viewing, we need to have a new frame of reference for studying child development. Valsiner makes a distinction between four types of theories of developmental psychology: intra-individual, inter-individual, individual-ecological, and individual-socioecological. The latter two, Valsiner says, are genuine development theories, containing as they do a context for action and allowing for the conceptualization of creativity. The individual-ecological approach (e.g. Piaget) examines the action of an individual or a group of people in a problem-solving situation which arises in interaction with the environment. The individual-socioecological frame-

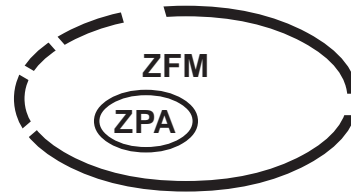
work (e.g. Vygotsky) differs from the former in that it takes into consideration the helping of others in the encounter between the individual and the environment. Within this framework, the individual's action and thinking is seen not as an individual but essentially as a social occurrence. Valsiner emphasizes that children are for a very long time dependent on adults, who throughout their development will help them acquire culturally accepted and successful ways of resolving problem situations (Valsiner 1987, 45-50).

Valsiner's theoretical system is quite complex and detailed. It borrows from and elaborates upon parts of the theories of Piaget, Baldwin, Werner and Vygotsky, and integrates parts of Lewin's field theory. One of Valsiner's basic concepts is that of canalization. From the earliest age, parents will arrange the child's surroundings in such a way that can help to avoid dangers or promote socially preferred aims. Limits are imposed on the child's actions; on the other hand, certain ways of acting or thinking are promoted by teaching these to the child. Boundaries and obstacles direct the child in his or her actions, but not too strictly and closely; rather the boundaries define the area within which the individual can act freely. Valsiner calls this the zone of free movement (ZFM).

Despite its 'physical' nature, the ZFM and its boundaries are applied broadly; physical boundaries will in fact only be used for the very smallest children (such as gates to prevent them getting to staircases). The area can also be expanded to thinking and emotions. As the child continues to develop, the boundaries change into internalized psychological phenomena (e.g. beliefs, rules of logic, social norms; op.cit. 91). The child will learn how to create a ZFM in his or her own thinking and feelings. The ZFM now becomes internalized. The ZFM is often constructed on the basis of what the parents think the child can do in a certain situation. It is an object of constant negotiation and change, and the children themselves play an active part in changing the boundaries.

Another field-theoretical concept of Valsiner's is the zone of promoted action (ZPA), by which he means measures aimed at developing new abilities. Together, the ZFM and the ZPA work as a mechanism which organizes the canalization of the child's development (op.cit., 101). This organizing can be illustrated with the following figure, which also shows that the child's ZFM does not have to be closed on all sides. It may contain clear and firm boundaries for some areas of life (for instance,

*Figure 1. Schematic Illustration of Valsiner's Zone-Concepts*



watching horror movies), but elsewhere the boundaries may be weaker or altogether undefined.

Valsiner's theoretical system has here been used as a general framework that helps to shed new light on the empirical phenomenon in question. In most Finnish families, early-evening television programmes belong to the ZFM, once the parents are convinced that their children can watch them without problems. It is interesting that even in problem situations parents are not likely very easily to shift the limits of the ZFM (although they may sometimes try that as well). One of the main reasons for this is no doubt the will of children (from their point of view, there is no problem). This means that parents will try to resolve problem situations by strengthening children's skills and competencies and chances to operate within the current boundaries.

Valsiner emphasizes a new kind of concept of the nature of learning and development, which are not based primarily on constant guidance. Valsiner's concept is based, on the one hand, on children's active learning, experimenting and independent thinking, and on the other hand, on the boundaries imposed on children's activity. This also includes that the actions of children are monitored and if necessary, the boundaries will be changed and the children's various capabilities will be developed. As described above, these kinds of measures can be intensive periods in family history, which are later remembered as important milestones. According to Valsiner, rare but subjectively important events can have longer-term impact upon people's future lives, whereas the majority of recurring behaviour or life events become automatic and lose their canalizing relevance for a person's development (op.cit., 223).

The paradox of parental indifference addressed in this article has drawn our attention not only to what parents say about how they regulate and control their children's viewing behaviour, but also to the area of cultural meanings. On the basis of the discussion above it may perhaps be concluded that

parents seem to do their best to make their children competent viewers. The paradox remains, however, because in the light of current knowledge they still seem to be doing the wrong things. The reasons for the slow progress made in research are quite deep-rooted. One of these reasons, it seems, is that all parties have been content with the results obtained – all for their own reasons. The studies have produced the right findings for experts concerned about media development, for professional educators and par-

ents. At the same time, the findings have not made anyone feel guilty. When they read the results, all parents can sigh with relief: at least they do not belong to the great majority.

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