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Parents, Children, and Television

This essay, like many others, is concerned with the effects of television on children, but what is different is the consideration of the role of parent within child-medium interaction. Paul Messaris deals with some intriguing issues such as the role of television in shaping our perceptions of reality and the role of parents in shaping our perceptions of television reality. Think of your early childhood experiences with this medium. How did you learn to distinguish the make-believe from the real, the commercial from the program, the drama from the news? Can you remember at what age? Are you still sometimes unsure? Did your parents use television characters and situations to teach you about the "real" world? Professor Messaris tells us the answers given by mothers to these and similar questions.

One of the things that make the effects of television on children so complicated to study is the fact that children don't respond to television in a social vacuum.[1] A child's social relationships—in particular, the relationship between parents and children—can influence the child's response to television in a variety of ways. For example, parents' opinions about violence have been found to make a difference in children's reactions to violence on TV. On the other hand, relationships between parents and children may themselves be influenced in several ways by television. In particular, as we will see below, situations and issues that a child has been exposed to on television can become important topics of parent-child discussions. In view of these complications, perhaps the most adequate way to summarize the situation is to say that what a child gets out of his or her relationship with TV depends on a broader set of relationships including not just the medium and the child but also, at the very least, the child's parents. The aim of this chapter is to investigate some consequences of the parent-child-television relationship.

This investigation will be divided into two parts, corresponding to two kinds of things children may learn as a result of their joint relationship with television and their parents: on the one hand, how to perceive the world; on the other hand, how to behave toward it. More specifically, our first concern will be with the various ways in which parents and television together may contribute to a child's developing stock of knowledge about

the real world and, in particular, the child's sense of the nature of society and social relationships. Second, we will sift through some of the evidence on a question that many writers about television have examined: To what extent can children's imitation of violence or other kinds of behavior seen on TV be influenced by their parents?

In addition to drawing on past research where appropriate, our discussion of these issues will be based to a great extent on a recent study whose aim was to find out what kinds of things parents and children talk about in reference to television.[2] The study consisted of a series of exploratory, open-ended interviews with mothers of grade-school-age and younger children. A total of 119 mothers were interviewed, all of them residents of the Philadelphia area. Each interviewee was asked some thirty questions about various kinds of TV-related talk. For example: "Do you ever tell your children that something on TV is unrealistic, that things wouldn't happen like that in real life?" "Do your children ever ask you to explain something they didn't understand in a TV program?" "Do you ever find it convenient to use an example from TV to teach your children how they should act— or how not to act?" Whenever a mother said that a particular kind of discussion had occurred in her own family, our interviewers would ask for detailed examples of the incidents in question. In an exploratory study like this one, the examples themselves are what counts, of course, rather than the initial "yes" or "no." Several of these examples will be used to flesh out the discussion that follows.

Parents, TV, and Children's Perceptions of Reality

Through television, a child can be exposed to a constant stream of images about things outside his or her own experience. It is often assumed that these images make important contributions to children's notions of what the world is like. However—contrary to popular assumptions—the learning process involved here may rarely be simply a matter of believing everything one sees. Rather, it seems that parents are often crucially involved in this learning process and that children themselves actively rely on parents in using material from television to construct a picture of the real world. There are at least three important ways in which parents may contribute to their children's formation of television-based world-views: First, parents may have to teach a child the distinction between various categories of programming—e.g., fantasy, "realistic" fiction, news, documentaries, etc.— each of which has a different kind of relationship to the real world. Second, once a child has learned this general distinction, parents may be called upon to perform a more specific task: since there is wide variation within program types in the degree to which any one program accurately reflects

some aspect of reality, parents may play the role of validators of specific portrayals. Finally, a parent may supplement information provided on television, by giving the child background data, pointing out connections between events, and so forth. We will examine each of these three possibilities separately.

Categories of Programming and Their Relationship to Reality

One of the mothers in our interviews described the following problem: Her five-year-old son had noticed that actors who "die" in one TV program often "come back to life" in other programs, commercials, or reruns. So, when one of the family's dogs was killed in a fight, the son wanted to know when the dog was going to come back. By her own account, this mother had found it very difficult to clear up her child's confusion. The reason for this difficulty may perhaps be clear: merely telling the child that in real life people or animals don't return from the dead could not have been enough to "set him straight" on all aspects of his misconception of the situation. Unless a child already knows that there is such a thing as a distinction between "real life" and "fiction," the statement that a particular event doesn't occur in real life must be meaningless. Learning this distinction itself, then, may be a prerequisite to any discussion of whether something observed on TV can occur in real life or not. But there is also another aspect to this child's confusion. As the example makes clear, the child did not understand the distinction between one program and the next or between fiction, commercials, etc. Consequently, a blanket statement about the difference between "fiction" and "reality" would also have been bound to mislead him, since it is more than likely that he would have had no notion of which aspects of TV are fictional and which are not.

The general point that this example should make clear is that a child's mastery of the relationship between TV and reality must begin with the formation of categories: one kind of program must be distinguished from another, and, for each type, the appropriate distinction between its contents and reality must be learned. How does this learning occur? On the one hand, the child's general cognitive development appears to play a role.[3] On the other hand, the specific intervention of parents—or older siblings, when they are available—also seems to be a crucial part of this process.

From our interviews with mothers, it is possible to derive a rough estimate of the stages that children go through in learning about these matters. There are obviously many distinctions to be learned, but all of these can be subsumed under two overriding principles, namely, that TV as a whole is distinct from reality and that TV programming itself can be subdivided into various categories. Our interviews indicate that these two general principles are frequently learned in connection with the following more

specific distinctions: first, an initial distinction between the "fantasy" part of TV and the real world; second, within TV, a distinction between fictional and "reality" programming (news, documentaries, etc.).

The first of these distinctions appears to be the earliest one that parents try to impress on their children, and the reasons for its urgency are clear: first, parents are often anxious about the possibility that a child will hurt himself or herself by trying to imitate some of the impossible feats shown in "superhero" programs or cartoons. For example, one mother told us that she was repeatedly trying to impress on her children (ages two and five) that, "in real life, you could never run over someone with a car and they bounce back up, you know, after being flattened like a pancake." Another made the following familiar point: "I'm always telling him that Spiderman and Superman can't fly because I don't want him leaping out of any windows on me. 'If your daddy can't do it, it can't be done!' " (The child in this case was a five-year-old). A second reason for parents' concern over the TV-reality distinction is the frequent need to soothe children's fears of monsters, vampires, and other nonexistent creatures. In the following case, for example, a mother explains how she and her husband tried to deal with her six-year-old son's fear of the Wicked Witch's cackle in *The Wizard of Oz*, which the child had seen on TV:

> So what we would do is cackle. You know, try to, uh, show that it's—it's just, um, a play put on or an act, that there aren't any witches, you know, around, that *I* can cackle and make myself look like a witch just like she can. You know, we try to deal with it that way.

The crucial lesson that a child presumably derives from such discussions is that the things shown on TV are of a different kind from the rest of his or her experience. Much remains to be learned, of course, about the precise nature of the relationship between these two realms, but this basic distinction seems to be the starting point for all subsequent learning. However, a second essential building block is also necessary for this kind of learning, namely, the notion that TV programming itself is divided into various categories. From our interviewees' accounts, it appears that the way in which this second notion is introduced is frequently as a partial "retraction" of the lesson that children derive from the kinds of discussions cited above. In other words, what seems to happen is that children are often left with the impression that *all* of TV is fantasy or fiction, so that the first step toward distinctions between programming types is the realization that some of TV is not fictional at all. This situation is illustrated in the following example of a mother's reminiscence about an event that occurred when her oldest child was about six or seven and her youngest about two or three:

I remember during the Viet Nam war getting very upset: We were watching
television, the news, while we were eating dinner. And they were showing the
children and women dead in the village and I—I started crying, and I couldn't
eat my dinner. And the kids got very upset. It wasn't the thing to watch at
dinnertime, actually. . . . I explained to them that everything that you see on
television isn't make-believe. The news is real. And . . . it hit cold to them
that this was real that they were looking at. And it upset them terribly.

In ways like this, then, children learn that there are different categories
of TV programming, each with its own relationship to the real world.
Many specific distinctions have to be constructed on the basis of this gen-
eral principle; and, in view of the subtlety of some of them (for example,
"docudrama" vs. "regular" drama vs. documentary; "live" broadcasts vs.
videotapes[4]), it is probably safe to say that at some point many parents
are themselves faced with situations that they don't fully comprehend.

The Accuracy and Representativeness of TV Portrayals of Reality

Once a child has grasped the basic notion of a distinction among catego-
ries of programs, a different kind of problem presents itself to him or her.
This is the problem of the degree to which a specific program or portrayal
is accurate or representative in its depiction of reality. In other words, the
issue is no longer one of constructing categories but, instead, that of judg-
ing specific items within any one category. For example, a child may want
to know whether conditions under slavery were really as bad as shown on
Roots; whether big-city life is really as dangerous as it seems to be on
various police shows; and so forth. According to the mothers in our inter-
views, questions of this sort are a frequent topic of parent-child discus-
sions. By providing answers to such questions, parents may play a signifi-
cant role in their children's use of television as an instrument for exploring
the nature of the real world.

As one might expect, children seem particularly likely to ask their par-
ents questions about images that have troubled them in some way. Por-
trayals of evil characters, of human or animal suffering, of various kinds
of dangers were often mentioned by our interviewees as topics of chil-
dren's questions. However, the things that children found disturbing
weren't always negative in themselves. Quite frequently, children also
seemed threatened by images of wealth or happiness that contradicted their
own circumstances in life. In cases like these, too, parents would be asked
to comment about the accuracy of the troubling image. We will look at
some instances of this kind of situation first, before discussing how parents
deal with more negative portrayals.

Many observers have pointed out that the population of the "television

world" tends to be wealthier than its real-life "counterpart"[5] and that less well-to-do TV viewers, in particular, may be confronted with a considerable disparity between their own life-styles and what they see on the screen.[6] Furthermore, aside from the issue of wealth, the quality of parent-child relationships in many family shows—especially the calm rationality of parents—can also be enviably different from the real-life home environment of many younger viewers. Accordingly, many of our interviewees described instances in which they had felt the need to emphasize to their children that such images are exaggerations and that one shouldn't expect real life to be as glamorous, pleasant, etc. For example, one mother described her reaction to hearing her eleven-year-old daughter wish for a life and a job like that of the "bionic woman":

> I do remember then going into a discussion of, you know, things always being pretty nice and the jobs on TV always being famous and adventurous and that, and I told them that, you know, that that just is not so all the time. Everything looks glamorous on TV, but in real life it's not like that every day.

The program our interviewees mentioned most often in this vein was *The Brady Bunch*, which was being shown in reruns every weekday afternoon during the period in which these interviews were being conducted. These are some of the things mothers said about this program:

> You know, like the Brady Bunch . . . it's so, uh, gingerbready, that show, you know. They don't make—really make it real, you know. Everything is like fluffed over, like Ozzie and Harriet. The father's always in a suit and the mother's always dressed up with her hair done. I mean, who does their housecleaning like that, you know? And you try to point out to them that that's not really real life.

> Their rec room was so clean. There were never any dishes in the sink. You never see anybody vacuuming. You never see anybody wearing old clothes, jeans, and a sweatshirt.

What seems to be happening in these cases, then, is an attempt by mothers to dampen possible unrealistic expectations that a program might create for a child, although a touch of resentment also appears to be operating here, particularly in the *Brady Bunch* examples. Both of these ingredients are apparent in mothers' comments about how their children respond to programs like *The Brady Bunch:* "I think that at one point he must have felt very deprived because he wasn't living in a house like the Brady Bunch." "The children seem to feel that that's reality and what they're living in is somehow a mistake." Whether these perceptions on the part of the mothers are accurate or not is, of course, an open question, although mothers did say that their children ask them such things as "How come you don't solve things like Mrs. Brady?" or complain that "Mrs.

Brady wouldn't do it like that." In other words, mothers who tell their children that portrayals like that of the *Brady Bunch* are exaggerated or false may be doing more than protecting their children from painful disillusionment with reality. They may also be protecting their own families from the strain that can be caused by a child's resentment.[7]

We can now turn to cases in which parents and children confront the darker side of the world of television: portrayals of evil and crime, suffering and danger. Here, too, mothers' comments to their children about these troubling visions contained a clear element of protectiveness. In these cases, however, this protectiveness typically led to confirmation, rather than negation, of the accuracy of the images in question. In other words, in apparent attempts to warn their children about the dangers of the real world— or, at least, that aspect of it that appears on TV—mothers would typically tell their children that TV's troubling portrayals of a cruel and dangerous reality were true. In both of the examples that follow, the children were entering adolescence:

> Well, when you see, uh, if you'll excuse the expression, a real bastard, um, you know, uh, I guess something like—like that fellow on *Dallas*, not that they watch it, uh, "Well, can people really be that rotten and mean?" And, uh, they've seen it on television and it is true. It does happen. Yeah, we've referred to that. People do get murdered.

> Like these, this thing they had on the runaway kids: We had a big discussion about that because I told him that, you know, the kids, like, they do run away, they do get in trouble, and, you know, they do get in things like this white slavery stuff. You know, I said they do abuse them and all, you know, like we've had a good discussion about that. . . . Well, he wanted to know if it was really true there, you know, if that does really happen to kids. . . . I told him that stuff is true, that, you know, boys, they do get into, you know—or they sell their bodies. I said, I call that white slavery that you have to do things for other people, you know, with sex and all. I says, it's not like you're cleaning, you know, it's that kind of thing. I said, and this stuff really does happen when kids run away.

As this second example shows, warnings of this kind may also contain implicit statements about the advantages of one's own family life. This element is present more explicitly in the following example, from the mother of a ten-year-old girl:

> They had a special on child abuse and, uh, I let them watch it, you know, and—I mean, this really sounds terrible, but, like, I told her, I said, "You are really lucky, 'cause there are parents that treat their children like that." You know, so I mean, I have done things like that, which probably sounds cruel to you.

In other words, these comments also seem to have the double element which we saw in parents' dealings with "positive" programs like *The Brady*

Bunch: One the one hand, the parents appear to be trying to make sure that their children will develop adequate images of the good and bad sides of the outside world. At the same time, however, the parents also appear to be concerned with strengthening their own families, either by playing down a threatening difference between TV and their own circumstances or by playing up a difference which is to their advantage.

Parental Supplementation of TV Information

TV programming is typically designed to be compatible with even the most impoverished stock of information on the part of the viewer. Nevertheless, younger TV viewers are bound to encounter situations with unfamiliar premises from time to time. When that does happen, parents are likely to be the ones turned to for an account of the "background" information that the child doesn't have—although older brothers or sisters are also pressed into this kind of service. In our interviews with mothers, this kind of TV-related discussion—providing supplementary information—turned out to have been a very common experience. Four-fifths of the mothers described detailed incidents of this sort.

The kinds of information that mothers said they had provided in connection with TV varied widely, but it is possible to make a rough distinction between two general categories: on the one hand, information that all—or almost all—people acquire as they grow up; and, on the other hand, more "specialized" information, either of a "scholarly" kind (historical, scientific, etc.) or having to do with specific occupations, ethnic groups, etc. The first of these two categories includes such issues as human reproduction (where babies come from, how they are born), death, sex (and rape, adultery, prostitution, venereal disease, etc.), marriage and divorce, illness and drug addiction, delinquency and crime, etc. For example, one mother told us that, when a program on childbirth had been shown on television, her seven-year-old daughter had watched it with her and "she literally asked me everything from beginning to end about the show." Another mother remembered that, after her children had seen a funeral on television, "they wanted to know, you know, 'Does everybody die? When do they die?' " and she had to "explain it all to them." A third mother told us that her children had assumed, because of the prevalence of divorced parents on TV shows, that divorce is a standard part of marriage and wanted to know when their own parents were going to get divorced.

Naturally, parents vary in the degree to which they are willing to answer questions on some of these topics, especially when sex is somehow involved. Whereas one mother told us that her ten-year-old daughter's questions about sex on TV were always answered fully ("We don't hide any-

thing or hold anything back"), another described the following "non-answer" to a sex-related question:

> Once he saw a comic show and there was a line that said something like, "Sex is like peanuts. Once you start eating them you can't stop." And everyone laughed. . . . He repeated it a couple of times . . . "peanuts . . ." and he asked me, "What does that really mean?" And I said, "I can't really explain it but it's as being though something you start and it's hard to stop. It's like when you start eating a cracker. Sometimes you want to keep eating some crackers." But that's as far as it went.

What difference does it make how a parent answers this kind of question? More generally, what is the consequence of children's questions and parents' answers on these "adult" topics?[8] At first blush, it might seem that, to the extent that parents do in fact give their children full details on such topics, they are "speeding up" the children's entry into the informational world of adulthood. From this point of view, one could say that television, by injecting these "adult" topics into parent-child discussions, is causing children to "grow up" before their time.[9] However, one should be cautious in drawing such a conclusion. Once children are in school, information (and misinformation) on sex and other "adult" topics can be transmitted "horizontally" among children of the same age, so that any one child's reliance on information from "above" (parents, older siblings, "adult" media) is lessened considerably. In this kind of situation, a parent's refusal to deal with a certain topic at home may be of little consequence to the child's stock of information on that topic. This situation is illustrated in the following quotation from our interviews:

> I told her that it was something I didn't think she was old enough to understand or really comprehend. And I said, there is so much in some of these sex movies . . . the shame of it is they leave nothing to the imagination. I think it's a mystery that should be left a mystery to some people. Leave a little bit to be desired. They show everything. I just said I didn't think at that time she was old enough. She thought I was ridiculous. She said she understands and other children have seen it and her friends watch this and that. . . .

In cases of this sort, then, television and the parent may not be important sources of information on a particular issue. This is not to say, of course, that the nature of the interaction between parent and child is a trivial matter in such cases. As the above example suggests ("She thought I was ridiculous"), such interactions can have important consequences for the parent-child relationship itself.

Aside from asking TV-inspired questions about "adult" topics, children also question their parents about matters that are unfamiliar in a different way: distant times and places, unencountered religious practices or ethnic groups, scientific principles and findings. For example:

I was watching *Dr. Zhivago* and my eleven-year-old son was with me, and he was discussing—he wanted to know how they could do certain things, uh, take over their houses in Russia and capture him and take him to the army, and I had to explain to him the difference in cultures, and what democracy is and what communism is, and he understood what I was telling him.

Other mothers described discussions of such things as the American Western migration (in connection with *Little House on the Prairie*), the economic system of the South under slavery (in connection with *Roots*), the meaning of the Jewish Seder (in connection with *Holocaust*), etc.

This kind of parental involvement in children's television viewing is often encouraged by people concerned with the educational potential of television. Experiments in which an adult watches television with a group of children and supplies interpretive commentary suggest that children absorb televised information better under such circumstances than when they are viewing alone.[10] But the benefits to the child of this kind of behavior may extend far beyond the specific information gleaned from a particular program or set of parental comments. It can be argued that, when a parent responds positively to a child's request for this kind of "specialized" information about a TV program, two "lessons" are being conveyed to the child: in addition to gaining the specific information requested, the child is also being reinforced in his or her use of TV as a "springboard" for the intellectual mastery of new areas of knowledge. Indeed, this reinforcement can probably occur even if the parent does not have the information herself, so long as the child's intellectual curiosity is rewarded. A good example of this in our interviews was the case of a mother who watches *Nova* with her grade-school son and helps him dig through the encyclopedia for explanations of things which neither of them may have understood. To the extent that it successfully reinforces a child's tendencies for intellectual exploration, parental behavior of this kind must have far greater consequences for a child's view of the world than any specific item of knowledge would be likely to have. What this behavior can cultivate in the child is a view of the world as a realm to be conquered through the exercise of one's mind. Few particular aspects of reality can be more important than this general view.

Research in progress by several scholars indicates that the kind of TV-related behavior described above is most likely to be found, not surprisingly, in families in which there is a more general tendency to support intellectual flexibility and an uncompromising pursuit of knowledge.[11] Related work by other researchers has also supported a connection between this kind of family environment and a more information-seeking (rather than entertainment-oriented) approach to television.[12] It is also worth noting that sociologists concerned with the ultimate consequences of this gen-

eral style of parental behavior have argued that it is particularly likely to facilitate achievement in children's later lives, since the pursuit of intellectual mastery is an adaptive trait in a society which places high value on professional occupations.[13] However, these broader implications of the behavior we are examining here are mere speculation at this point.

Parents, TV, and Children's Behavioral Learning

Do children learn to behave in one way or another by imitating what they see on television? This question has occupied communication researchers for some twenty years. Most of this research has dealt with the imitation of aggression, although investigators have increasingly been looking at the subject of "prosocial" behavior too: helping other people, sharing things, etc. The most common interpretation of all of this research is that television can indeed—at least in principle—affect children's behavior, although the actual extent of this effect may not always be large and is, in any case, difficult to measure. As for the possible influence of parents on children's responses to TV, the consensus seems to be that parents can modify or block the effects of TV if they make an active effort to that end,[14] but that otherwise children are "at the mercy" of the medium. In the following discussion, however, a somewhat different position will be presented.[15] What will be argued here is that the common view of these matters may have got things the wrong way around: In other words, it may be the case that imitation doesn't occur at all unless parents (or other people) have previously encouraged a child—knowingly or not—to engage in the kind of behavior being imitated. According to this position, then, parental involvement is a prerequisite for imitation, rather than simply a possible modifier of its occurrence. Although this position certainly represents a minority view, there is much evidence that points in its direction.

In examining this position, we will be drawing primarily on findings from past research, rather than on the interviews that we have used up to this point. In particular, because of the considerable detail that has been covered in research on aggression, we will focus our discussion on that aspect of imitation, with the understanding that what is said about aggression should be taken to apply, in many respects, to other kinds of behavior as well. The starting point in any discussion of visually mediated aggression is usually the work of Albert Bandura and his colleagues.[16] In a series of experiments beginning in the early 1960s, these investigators demonstrated that children who have seen a small-screen, TV-like film of a man assaulting a Bobo doll in various ways are more likely to do the same kinds of things to a Bobo doll themselves than children who haven't seen the film. The conclusion that is usually drawn from these experiments is

that the children learned the aggressive behavior from the film. In other words, it is concluded on the basis of this kind of evidence that children can pick up behavioral patterns purely from visual presentations. The implication, of course, is that, unless parents intervene, children who watch a lot of violence on TV may turn into violent people themselves.

One of the reasons for the stir caused by findings of this sort is that they seem to go against a long- and widely-held psychological principle according to which children cannot learn new forms of behavior unless their environment actively reinforces what they are learning.[17] The experiments described above appear to contradict this principle, since the children in the experiments seem to be learning to be aggressive without any environmental reinforcement: a TV or movie screen cannot respond to them, no matter what they do. However, this contradiction may be an illusion. To begin with, we must remember that the children who participated in these experiments obviously had past histories, which would have included their parents' responses to previous aggression on their own part. To what extent did these past experiences with aggression influence their behavior in the experimental setting? Many violence researchers would argue that such previous influence couldn't be operating in the experiments, because the kinds of aggression that children were being tested on (lassoing a Bobo doll with a hula-hoop, for example) were too unlikely to have occurred in a child's previous experience. But this argument is less impregnable than it may sound: it could well be that the learning of one kind of aggression carries over into another kind too—in other words, that what one learns is "aggression" in general. It is worth pointing out, for example, that in experiments in which children were tested on forms of aggression that were deliberately different from what they had seen on TV, strong relationships between exposure and subsequent aggression were found all the same.[18] In order to find out what role prior experience could have played in these experiments, then, we must go to studies that have examined these things directly.

One set of studies has looked at the connection between a child's past history of aggressiveness and his response to aggressive TV in an experimental setting. These studies did not examine the role of parents in the children's previous experiences with aggression, but it is probably safe to assume that, where parents did exist, they were an important source of influence in the development of the child's aggressive tendencies.[19] In any case, what these studies show is that a child's pre-existing aggressive tendencies appear to make a considerable difference to the child's response to an aggressive TV "diet." The less aggressive a child was initially, the less likely he was to respond aggressively to the televised aggression—and, in fact, in some cases the less aggressive children didn't respond aggressively

at all.[20] What this tells us, in other words, is that previous environmental reinforcement does indeed seem to be necessary for imitation, and that the movies or TV programs used in these experiments were probably triggering behavior that had already been learned, rather than teaching children something new.

As to the role of parents in the development of the tendencies that a violent TV program can then operate upon, several studies provide relevant evidence. Each of these studies has looked at the influence of family environment on the relationship between adolescents' real-life aggressiveness and their real-life exposure to aggressiveness on TV. In each case, what has been found is that this relationship becomes weaker or stronger depending on various aspects of parental behavior: for example, how strongly parents emphasize nonaggression,[21] how clear a picture they have conveyed to their children of their stance on aggression,[22] what kinds of means (aggressive or otherwise) they use to discipline their children,[23] and so forth. These studies give us grounds for concluding, therefore, that children's aggressive responses to violence on TV depend on tendencies developed in the course of a child's interactions with his or her parents.

More generally, the thrust of this whole argument has been that parents are probably much more intimately involved in their children's imitative responses to TV than most people think. Whereas the typical assumption is that parents influence their children's imitations only when they make a deliberate effort to do so, the position outlined above is that prior parental reinforcement of behavior may be indispensable to subsequent imitation from TV, regardless of any deliberate parental intervention in the child's experience with TV itself. In other words, even if a parent's behavior toward the child is never explicitly concerned with television, a child's imitation of television may depend crucially on previous parental influence on the child's behavior. It goes without saying, of course, that these conclusions are tentative, since the findings we have examined were concerned exclusively with aggressive behavior and since, moreover, the amount of space available to us has not permitted us to examine possible counterarguments[24] in detail.

Nothing that has been said so far should be taken to imply that parents cannot—or do not—control their children's behavioral responses to TV through deliberate intervention as well—in other words, through comments, advice, etc., referring directly to TV, as opposed to the more general kind of influence we have examined above. Our own interviews with parents yielded numerous examples of attempted control of this sort. Among other things, parents described warning their children not to imitate the behavior of "the Fonz" (in this parent's words, "he's such a creep!"); the fictional character played by Gary Coleman ("that little guy

Gary Coleman is just . . . he's rude. I don't care what anybody says, but if any kid ever talked to me the way he did, he'd be wearing his teeth on the back of his head"); the nose-picking teenagers in *Saturday Night Live* ("you're trying to teach children not to do it and they make a joke out of it"); or the phrase "Watch it, sucker!" from *Sanford and Son*. On the other hand, many parents also described instances in which they had encouraged imitation, rather than the opposite. For example, one mother told us that she often used characters from *Romper Room* as behavioral models for her three-year-old daughter:

> If she'll stick out her tongue or spit, I'll tell her, "Now, do the children in Miss Nancy's classroom spit and stick out their tongues?" . . . Um, I use that a lot with my middle one because on "Romper Room" they're all good. They're all goodies.

Another mother described a long pep talk aimed at getting her son to imitate the hard work which must have been involved in the achievements of a certain winter Olympics champion:

> These people were not born, uh, jumping off cliffs and mountains and, uh, on skates and what have you. A lot of hard work, a lot of desire, a lot of push, and that's the end result.

How effective is this kind of advice in encouraging or discouraging children's imitations of TV? The question has been studied systematically in a pair of related experiments.[25] In these experiments, an adult member of the experimental team would sit with a child during the screening of a violent film and would make either disapproving comments ("He shouldn't do that"; "That's wrong"; "That's awful"), approving comments ("Boy, look at him go"; "He sure is a tough guy"; "That's really something"), or no comments at all. The victim in these films was a Bobo doll, shown being hit with a hammer, kicked around, etc. After the screening, the child would be allowed to play in a room containing, among other things, a Bobo doll and various likely weapons. The object of the experiments, of course, was to determine if the adult's comments had any influence on the child's imitative aggression. The findings turned out to depend on the children's age. With younger children (five-year-olds), the adult's comments seemed to make a difference only if the adult stayed with the child in the playroom during the period in which imitation was being measured. With older children (ten-year-olds), however, the influence persisted even after the departure of the adult "commentator." In both age groups, the direction of the influence was what one would expect: the adult's approving comments appeared to encourage imitation, while the disapproving comments discouraged it.

These results suggest fairly clearly that parental control of imitation

through direct involvement in a child's TV viewing is feasible. In view of the rudimentary "commentary" used in these experiments, it should be added that there is some indirect evidence that more extensive attempts to reason with a child are also effective means of controlling responses to TV in the parents' absence, whereas authority-based commands are not.[26] It need hardly be added, of course, that a fool-proof way of preventing imitation is to block exposure in the first place. Although studies have indicated that parents do not generally exercise much direct control over their children's program choices,[27] some specific programs are exceptions to the rule. For example, many of the mothers in our interviews told us that they prevented their children from watching *Three's Company* because of its presentation of cohabitation and, in one mother's view, the fact that "it's promoting gaiety." To the extent that parents succeed in preventing their children's exposure to such material, they are also by definition precluding the possibility of imitation.

Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to show that parents may play a crucial role in determining what children learn from television. Two aspects of learning were examined: first, the development of the child's perceptions of reality; second, behavioral learning through imitation. With regard to the first of these, the following points were made: (1) Parental instruction appears to be a vital ingredient in the process by which children come to grips with the distinction between categories of programming and with the relationship of each category to the real world. (2) By conforming or denying the accuracy of specific programs or portrayals, parents may add a filter of their own to the world-view that a child extracts from television. (3) Since parents are often called upon to supplement the information provided in a television program, the final lesson that a child extracts from the viewing experience may be a joint product of what was shown on the screen and what was provided by the parent. With regard to children's behavioral learning through the imitation of things seen on television, the following argument was made: there is considerable evidence in favor of the notion that children's imitation of visual images does not occur at all unless the behavior in question has already been reinforced by parents (or other people with whom a child has had a substantial history of interaction). Consequently, previous parental encouragement or discouragement of a certain kind of behavior may crucially determine whether that behavior will be imitated when a child observes it on TV. This encouragement or discouragement may be made with explicit reference to TV, but it need not be explicit to be effective. Both with regard to the perception of reality

and with regard to overt behavior, then, what a child learns from television may in fact be a product of the broader relationship among medium, child, and parent.[28]

Notes

1. For other perspectives on this general point, see Steven H. Chaffee, "The Interpersonal Context of Mass Communication," in *Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research*, eds. F. G. Kline and P. J. Tichenor (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 95–120; J. A. Anderson, P. J. Traudt, S. R. Acker, T. P. Meyer, and T. R. Donohue, "An Ethnological Approach to a Study of Televiewing in Family Settings," Paper presented to the Western Speech Communication Association, Los Angeles, 1979; James Lull, "The Social Uses of Television," *Human Communication Research*, 6:197–209 (1980), reprinted in this volume.

2. For further details on this study, see Paul Messaris and Sari Thomas, "Social-Class Differences in Mother-Child Discussions about Television," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Anaheim, 1981.

3. Leona Jaglom and Howard Gardner, "Decoding the Worlds of Television," *Studies in Visual Communication*, 7(1):33–47 (Winter 1981). See also D. B. Wackman and E. Wartella, "A Review of Cognitive Developmental Theory and Research and the Implications for Research on Children's Responses to Television," *Communication Research*, 4:203–224 (1977).

4. For a discussion of some of the complexities involved here, see Gary Gumpert, "The Ambiguity of Perception," *Et cetera*, 34 (June 1977), reprinted in this volume.

5. B. S. Greenberg, K. W. Simmons, L. Hogan, and C. K. Atkin, "The Demography of Fictional TV Characters," in *Life on Television*, ed. B. S. Greenberg (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980), pp. 35–46.

6. T. R. Donohue, T. P. Meyer, and L. L. Henke, "Black and White Children: Perceptions of TV Commercials," *Journal of Marketing*, October 1978:34–40.

7. On these points, see also Dennis Kerr, "Family Discussions about Depictions of Families on Television," Paper presented to the Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, 1981.

8. For another point of view on these issues, see Catherine E. Kirkland, "Televised Portrayals of Sexual Topics as the Basis of Parent-Child Interaction," Paper presented to the Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, 1981.

9. Joshua Meyrowitz, "Television and the Obliteration of Childhood," Paper presented to the Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, 1981.

10. C. Corder-Bolz and S. L. O'Bryant, "Can People Affect Television? Teacher vs. Program," *Journal of Communication*, 28(1):97–103 (1978); C. Corder-Bolz, "Mediation: The Role of Significant Others," *Journal of Communication*, 30(3):106–118 (1980). See also W. Andrew Collins, Brian L. Sobol, and Sally Westby, "Effects of Adult Commentary on Children's Comprehension and Inferences about a Televised Aggressive Portrayal," *Child Development*, 52:158–163 (1981).

11. Carla Sarett, "Socialization Patterns and Children's Television- and Film-Related Play," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981; Avishai Soudack, "Social Class and Parent-Child Television-Related Interaction," M. A. Thesis, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1981.

12. Steven H. Chaffee, Jack M. McLeod, and Charles K. Atkin, "Parental Influences on Adolescent Media Use," in *Mass Communications and Youth*, eds. F. G. Kline and P. Clarke (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1971). See also James Lull, "Family Communication Patterns and the Social Uses of Television," *Communication Research*, 7:319–334 (1980).

13. M. L. Kohn, *Class and Conformity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

14. A. D. Leifer, N. J. Gordon, and S. B. Graves, "Children's Television: More than Mere Entertainment," *Harvard Educational Review*, 44:213–245 (1974).

15. The author has made the same argument in Paul Messaris, "Family Processes and the Social Functions of Television," Paper presented to the Conference on Culture and Communication, Philadelphia, 1981.

16. For an overview, see Albert Bandura, "Social-Learning Theory of Identificatory Processes," in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, ed. D. A. Goslin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969).

17. B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1953); J. L. Gewirtz, "Mechanisms of Social Learning: Some Roles of Stimulation and Behavior in Early Human Development," in Goslin, *op. cit.*

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21. Jack M. McLeod, Charles K. Atkin, and Steven H. Chaffee, "Adolescents, Parents, and Television Use: Adolescent Self-Report from Maryland and Wisconsin Samples," in *Television and Social Behavior*, Vol. 3, eds. G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972); Jack M. McLeod, Charles K. Atkin, and Steven H. Chaffee, "Adolescents, Parents, and Television Use: Self-Report and Other-Report Measures from the Wisconsin Sample," *Ibid.*

22. J. R. Dominick and B. S. Greenberg, "Attitudes toward Violence: The Interaction of Television Exposure, Family Attitudes, and Social Class," in G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein, *op. cit.*

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trayals," in *Communication Yearbook 3*, ed. D. Nimmo (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979).

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27. P. J. Mohr, "Parental Guidance of Children's Viewing of Evening Television Programs," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 23:213–228 (1979).
28. For a discussion of other aspects of this issue, see Paul Messaris and Carla Sarett, "On the Consequences of Television-Related Parent-Child Interaction," *Human Communication Research*, 7:226–244 (Spring 1981).