

# Child TRENDS FACT SHEET

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## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD: CAN IT PROTECT CHILDREN FROM HARMFUL TV VIEWING HABITS AND BEHAVIOR?

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### OVERVIEW

Analyses using data about more than 30,000 6- to 11-year-olds from the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) have found linkages among a child's television viewing habits, parental involvement, and levels of child behavior problems. Specifically, analyses indicate that children who watched more than three hours of television a day, who did not communicate very well with their parents, and whose parents knew few or none of their friends had greater levels of externalizing (acting out) and internalizing behavior problems. Moreover, we found that children in middle childhood were especially likely to have behavior problems if they watched more than three hours of television a day and had low parental involvement.

### BACKGROUND

School-age children spend more time watching television than in any other activity except sleeping.<sup>1</sup> Although some studies have suggested that watching educational programs can have positive effects on learning and behavior,<sup>2</sup> numerous studies have found an association between television viewing and negative childhood outcomes.<sup>3</sup> For example, guidelines issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics point to numerous adverse outcomes of television viewing, including aggressive behavior, poor educational attainment, and obesity.<sup>4</sup> These outcomes in early childhood can have long-term consequences as children move into middle childhood and adolescence.<sup>5</sup> Given these associations, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting the time children over the age of 2 watch television to no more than two hours a day.<sup>6</sup>

Parental involvement and the family environment, in particular, have been shown to offer "protective" effects for children (that is, to protect children against harm).<sup>7,8,9</sup> For example, research finds that children with parents who are supportive and nurturing have fewer behavior problems.<sup>10</sup> Evidence also suggests that television viewing is a risk factor for children in middle childhood. How, then, are television viewing and parental involvement jointly related to the presence or absence of children's behavior problems? We explored the question of whether positive parenting is a protective factor for the adverse effects of TV viewing using data from the 2003 NSCH. Our study sample consisted of parents of 31,117 children between the ages of 6 and 11 who reported on their child's television viewing habits, parent-child communication, parental knowledge of their child's friends, and their child's behavior problems.

### MEASURES OF BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

#### Externalizing behavior problems (acting out):

Parents responded to four questions in the NSCH describing how often their child:

- Was disobedient;
- Stubborn;
- Argued; or

We created an externalizing behavior problems index ranging from 0-12, with higher scores indicating more behavior problems. The top 30th percentile had scores ranging from 4-12; this is approximately the top quartile for externalizing behavior. We defined these children as experiencing high levels of externalizing behavior problems.

**Internalizing behavior problems (such as depression and anxiety):**

Parents also responded to three questions describing how often their child:

- Was unhappy;
- Withdrawn; or
- Felt worthless in the previous month.

We created an internalizing behavior problem index ranging from 0-9, with higher scores indicating more behavior problems. The top 24th percentile had scores ranging from 2-9; this is approximately the top quartile for internalizing behavior. We defined these children as experiencing high levels of internalizing behavior problems.

**BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS IN RELATION TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND TV VIEWING**

Families in which parents did not communicate very well with their children had greater proportions of children with high levels of behavior problems, compared with families in which parents reported communicating very well with their children (38 versus 21 percent for internalizing behaviors and 48 versus 27 percent for externalizing behaviors).

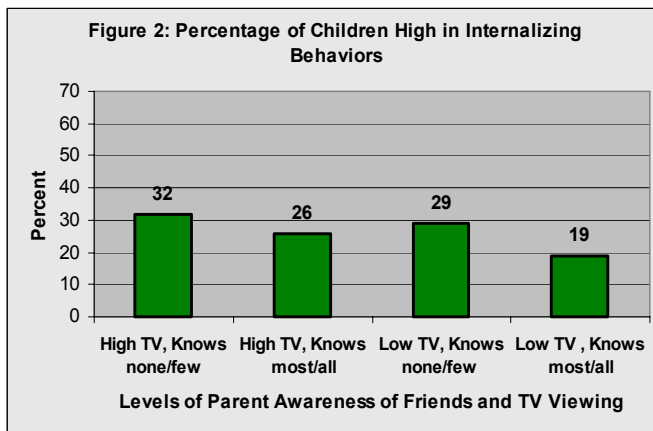
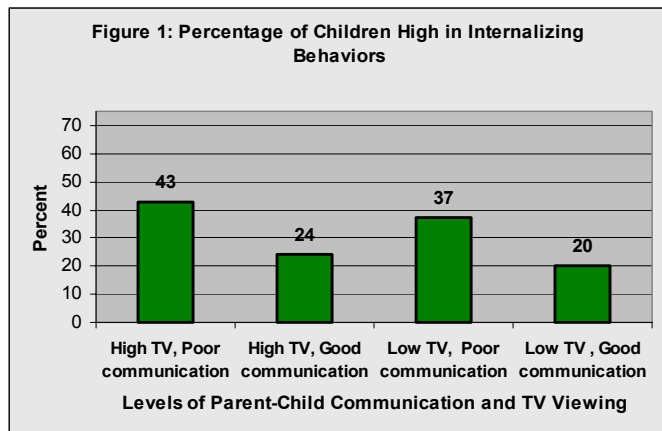
- Families in which parents knew only some or none of their child’s friends had greater proportions of children with high levels of behavior problems, compared with families in which parents reported knowing all of their child’s friends (31 versus 21 percent for internalizing behaviors and 39 versus 26 percent for externalizing behaviors).
- Children who watched three or more hours of television a day were more likely to have high levels of behavior problems, compared with children who watched less than an hour of television a day (29 versus 23 percent for internalizing behaviors and 39 versus 27 percent for externalizing behaviors).

**ARE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND TV VIEWING—TOGETHER—RELATED TO WHETHER OR NOT CHILDREN HAVE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS?**

We examined data on children between the ages of 6 and 11 who met the definition of having high levels of behavior problems, both internalizing and externalizing. We highlight our findings below.

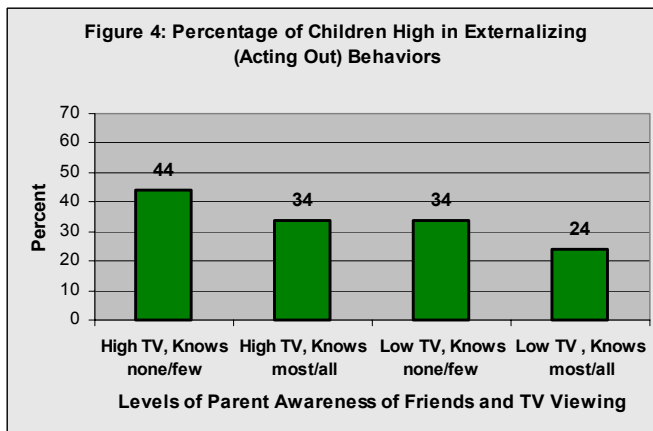
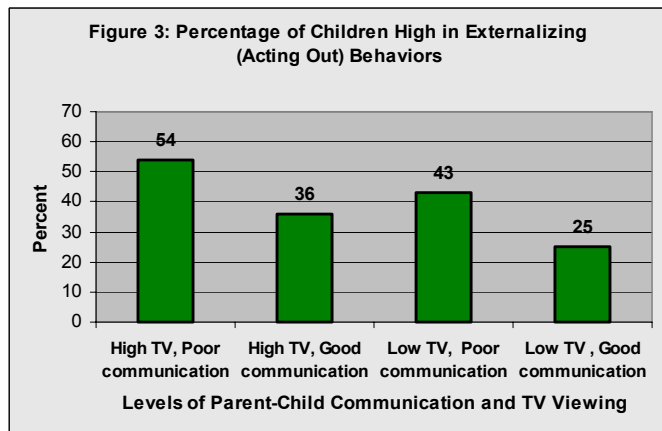
**Internalizing behavior problems:** In the sample as a whole, 24 percent of the children were defined as having high levels of internalizing behavior problems.

The combination of involved parenting and low TV viewing was related to the lowest levels of internalizing behavior problems: 20 percent versus 43 percent for high TV viewing and poor parent-child communication (see Figure 1). The comparable data for parental awareness of their child’s friends were 19 percent versus 32 percent (see Figure 2).



**Externalizing behavior problems:** In the sample as a whole, 30 percent of the children were defined as having high levels of externalizing (acting out) behavior problems.

- Similarly, the combination of involved parenting and low TV viewing was related to the lowest levels of externalizing behavior problems: 25 percent versus 54 percent for high TV viewing and poor



parent-child communication (see Figure 3). The comparable data for parental awareness of their child’s friends were 24 percent versus 44 percent for knowing of friends (see Figure 4).

- Parent-child communication was more strongly associated with whether children had behavior problems than was the number of hours children watched television daily. As seen in Figures 1 and 3, children were less likely to have high levels of behavior problems if they watched a lot of television but communicated well with their parents, compared with children who watched less television but did not communicate well with their parents.

## DISCUSSION

Most parents reported that their children watched fewer than three hours of television a day and that their children experienced low levels of behavior problems. However, parents reported greater proportions of children with high levels of behavior problems among those who watched three or more hours of television a day than among those who watched less television. Similarly, parents reported greater proportions of children with high levels of behavior problems in families in which parents did not communicate very well with their children than among parents who did.

In addition, analyses of data on parental involvement (parent-child level of communication and parent's knowledge of their child's friends) jointly with data on a child's television watching habits suggest that high levels of behavior problems are associated with a combination of low levels of parental involvement and watching more than three hours of television a day. Our analyses further suggest that parent-child communication may be the most important of the measures examined here.

Although the findings from this research are compelling, they do have several limitations. The data we used are cross-sectional. They provide a snapshot of information captured only at one point in time. Further, our analyses are descriptive. They simply describe what we have found from our examination of the data and do not enable us to move beyond these findings to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Also, these analyses do not take television program content into account, and some studies have found that the type of television viewed is an important predictor of children's outcomes. For example, numerous reviews of qualitative and quantitative studies on the effects of television content have found associations between violent content and aggressive behavior.<sup>11,12</sup> Other studies have found associations between educational TV programs and increased knowledge and more positive racial attitudes among children.<sup>13,14</sup>

In addition, the data presented do not account for numerous media that today's children are increasingly exposed to or using, including the internet, videos, movies, video games, and audio.<sup>15</sup> Data on children's exposure to this full array of media show total exposure to all forms of media peaks at approximately ages 11-12 years old with total exposure at over 8 hours daily.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, children are increasingly multi-tasking, using multiple forms of media at the same time,<sup>17</sup> complicating causality when assessing the effects of media use and exposure.

Our findings, however, *are* supported by additional analyses using logistic regression (not shown), a statistical method that takes account of potentially confounding factors like family, social and economic status. Similar patterns are found in a logistic regression model that controls for a child's age and gender, household income, parent's level of education, and race/ethnicity. All findings remained statistically significant. Additionally, using an alternative measure of parenting (parental closeness to the child) led to conclusions that were similar to those based on the parenting measures presented in this fact sheet.

## CONCLUSION

Low levels of parental involvement and watching more than three hours of television a day are each associated with higher levels of both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems among children. Moreover, the combination of frequent TV viewing and low levels of parental involvement is related to particularly elevated levels of behavior problems.

## DATA SOURCES AND DEFINITIONS

### **NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S HEALTH (NSCH)**

The first **National Survey of Children's Health** was a national telephone survey involving 102,353 interviews completed between January 2003 and July 2004. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau, in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics. A second NSCH was fielded in 2006-2007.

### **MEASURES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

#### **1. Parental awareness of friends**

Parents were asked if they had met their child's friends. Responses ranged from having met all of their child's friends to not knowing any of his or her friends on a 4-point Likert scale. Most parents reported having met all (40 percent) or most (41 percent) of their child's friends.

#### **2. Parent-child communication**

Parents were asked how well they could share or talk about important issues with their child. Responses ranged from very well to not very well at all on a 4-point Likert scale. Four out of five parents reported that they could communicate with their child very well (80 percent).

### **MEASURE OF TELEVISION VIEWING**

Parents responded to a question asking them how many hours their child watched television, watched videos, or played video games on an average school day. Most parents (57 percent) reported that their child watched less than an hour of television a day. Twenty-eight percent reported that their child watched one-to-two hours of television a day, and 15 percent reported that their child watched three or more hours a day. We defined watching three or more hours of television daily as a high level of television viewing.

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