Television and Children

David A. England
David A. England teaches in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. The author of numerous articles on television and children, England serves as a contact for Action for Children’s Television, was a charter member of the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Media, chairs that group’s Committee on Television Literacy, and has been a consultant to several groups involved in television education. He has appeared frequently on programs of national conferences as an advocate of responsible uses of television at home and in the schools.

While teaching at West Virginia University, England and Sandra DeCosta developed a four-hour graduate course for teachers that dealt with the problems and potentials of television in the lives of children. That course was one of only a few known to address both the constructive and negative influences of commercial television.

In addition to his work in television education, England contributes to his major field, English education, co-directs a summer language arts camp for children, and admits to enjoying television occasionally with his wife and three daughters.

Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson
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by

David A. England

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Why All the Concern About TV and Kids?

From the beginning, there is television. Though she did not know it immediately, TV was a conspicuous part of the world our youngest daughter first entered five years ago. Jessica’s home was not unlike most of the others around it. An entire room, appropriately referred to as “The TV Room,” was dominated by a gray-faced deceptive piece of furniture around which other furniture was arranged. Within hours of Jessica’s first coming into our home, that box clamored for someone’s attention, beguiling us with a colorful and noisy life of its own. Very early on, then, my wife and I had to decide whether TV would raise Jessica, be her best friend, broaden her experience, or steal her youth.

Yes, TV was there from the beginning, just as it is there from the first days of virtually all our nation’s children. A special little magazine called TV Guide is part of the home environments for most of our children as well — a magazine that changes every week and is in the homes of more people than any other magazine. We bring our children into rooms with spindly and awkward TV trays — trays first to crawl under, later to trip over, and only slightly later to eat from in front of the TV. Often, there is a second, smaller TV in a bedroom; and I confess that my wife and I have been known to share an occasional TV dinner from our TV trays, and sometimes even TV snacks later on in the same evening. However, I do not consider myself a TV addict, nor do my three children display signs of being raised as vidiots. But I do watch some TV, and so do our children. Consequently, I think I am in a better position to talk about both TV and children — better than if I, like too many writers on TV and children, neither watched TV nor had to deal with it in the lives of my own children.
TV is enticing, free, and available without exception. Its attractions are not bound by region, age, or socioeconomic level. It is accessible to our very youngest children, to our very oldest citizens, to the deaf, and to the blind. And even the very few in our society who do not watch TV still know a surprising amount about TV, for no one of us is unaffected by or unaware of it.

Consider, for example, the cultural event that was made of the last episode of “M*A*S*H” in 1983. Even without having our TV sets on once that week, how many of us could have escaped pictures of the M*A*S*H cast in newspapers and magazines, or the M*A*S*H theme song on the radio, or M*A*S*H memorabilia for sale in stores, or perhaps even people dressed in M*A*S*H T-shirts heading for M*A*S*H parties? I missed seeing the last episode of M*A*S*H, but I was certainly not unaware of its broadcast.

One of my favorite activities with young people (high school students are best for this) is to ask if there are any in a group who watch little or no TV. I ask the one or two who invariably take the bait if they have heard of Kojak (they have), and if they can describe him (they do). I ask them to provide words missing in such titles as “I Love ______,” “Mork and ______,” and “The ______ of Hazzard.” Most are three for three on these. And sometimes I ask them if they can select J. R. Ewing’s picture from a group of 10 or so photos. Again, no problem for these non-viewers. The point that we do not have to watch TV to know about TV is clearly and dramatically made with young people.

Many adults think children watch too much television. The statistics on just how much TV they do watch vary according to different studies; but whether one over- or under-estimates the statistics, most would agree that American children watch too much TV. My guess (based on an informal synthesis of several estimates and surveys) is that American children “watch,” on the average, five or six hours daily, with younger children watching somewhat more than older children. I will have more to say about what I mean by “watch” later. For adults, four hours a day is a reasonable estimate. To me, the most frightening implication of such statistics is that they are averages. Assuming the averages are accurate, for every light viewer (an hour or two a day) there must be a corresponding number of very heavy viewers out there.
Why is it that children and adults spend so much time in front of a TV set? Again using what I have observed in my own children is illustrative. Even before Jessica was a year old, she was attracted to TV. Left alone to roll around on the floor when the TV set was on, she rolled toward it, turned toward it, and watched. There were toys on the floor and other people in the room to entertain or to divert her. But she was captivated by TV’s bright, colorful moving pictures and seemingly delighted by its sounds.

I believe she watched because she liked what she saw and heard, and realizing that frightened me a good bit. But it also helped me understand a fundamental truth about why so many adults also watch so much TV. They, too, find it captivating and compelling; they, too, like what they see. We must realize that there are some very talented and very intelligent people who are getting better and better at figuring out what people will watch, and those people who decide what we will be offered are very good at determining what we will tolerate. More about this later.

My older daughters have also helped me realize why so many children watch so much TV. To them, turning to TV is a more appealing thing to do than anything else they can come up with. Like many parents I suffer through the vicissitudes of early adolescence with my two older daughters and know they tend to watch more TV when they are bored, depressed, or not feeling well. (Those who are experiencing or have experienced the challenges of raising adolescents may share my notion that an adolescent can feel all the above in an hour, along with alternating boundless energy and joy!) It is not that children always turn to TV — often they are turning away from and tuning out something else in their lives. Our youth turn to TV for a few hours instead of turning to other means of occupying their time, of filling their days, of spending their youth, and of living their lives.

TV serves many functions in a typical child’s life. It is a popular babysitter for kids, making no demands on anyone. It is a constant playmate that is entertaining and non-threatening. TV can help children and adults relax, escape, and tune out. It soothes and calms but can also involve us in the lives of others so much that we forget the troubling or unpleasant parts of our own lives. TV can be a background for anything
else children do, another voice in an otherwise silent house, and security for latch-key children. TV provides what is wanted and at the same time makes children want what it provides. TV is able to respond to different needs with a cartoon, a game show, a soap opera, a talk show, a detective series, or a situation comedy.

The poor quality of TV programming concerns many adults. A consensus of critics of TV is that most of what is on television is really not very good for anyone to watch, and certainly not very good for children to watch. I agree with the consensus. The best way to gather mass audiences is to shoot for the low middle and to play it safe. Evidence that the TV industry has learned how to be successful with mediocrity is verified by the push of a button.

We are offered large amounts of TV every day — 18 hours of programming to fill 365 days a year — by competing networks and cable suppliers. If we think of how much TV there is, perhaps it is unreasonable to expect what is on TV to be very good. After all, most books written in a year are pretty bad, and most of the music and art produced in a year is somewhat less than memorable. Nevertheless, the fact remains that TV is ever-present and ever-available in the lives of our children, and they find it very attractive. Regardless of what reservations we have about program quality, children watch alarming amounts of TV every day.

What Are Teacher’s Concerns About TV and Children?

Teachers share parents’ concerns about the pervasive nature of TV, about its ability to attract and hold audiences, and about the quality of its programs. Beyond these general concerns, however, educators see television as a problem in the lives of children in more specific ways, ways related to learning and thinking. Elementary teachers, in particular, complain that children just cannot sit still these days, that the attention span of young people is much shorter than it used to be, and that children are harder to control and manage in the classroom than ever before. Whether these claims are valid is worth discussion, as is the extent to which TV should be blamed.

Only a few teachers I meet realize the children whose in-school atten-
tion spans seem so short are the same ones who can watch TV by the hour. Certainly, school tasks demand a type of attention different from what TV viewing requires. And, as I sometimes find myself explaining to teachers, no one expects them to compete with, or to become, Big Bird. Nonetheless, if children are less attentive today, such behavior may have nothing to do with their capacity to be attentive. And, even if we could establish through research that children do have shorter attention spans than children used to have, proving that TV was the cause of pervasive change in children's behavior would be difficult. This is a phenomenon that, to the degree it does exist, is perceived as a problem for teachers. A popular and convenient way to explain such a problem is to blame TV. Teachers who blame TV believe they are faced with circumstances beyond their control and hence feel unable to address the problem.

A second concern of teachers is the effect TV viewing has on school performance. Beginning as early as the 1950s, a long succession of studies has explored the influence of TV viewing on school performance as measured by school grades or standardized test scores. My own view is that the findings of these several studies are remarkably unremarkable. Perhaps more noteworthy is how the results can be interpreted and used in various ways depending on whether the data are analyzed by the Television Information Office, the Educational Testing Service, or government panels and commissions.

To say that boys and girls who are heavy and regular TV viewers do not perform quite as well in school as boys and girls who view considerably less television is a safe, but hardly surprising, generalization. Would we be as surprised to find that boys and girls who spend six hours a day talking on the phone do less well in school than boys and girls who spend little time on the phone?

I believe most educators would agree that school performance is declining somewhat. But simply to blame television, or to place so much of the blame on television, is spurious reasoning. What we have is a case of an observed phenomenon in search of an explanation. TV viewing may partially explain declining school performance, just as excessive TV viewing can be cited as a contributing factor to many other problems, both in school and out. What should concern us, however, are those
who believe that if TV were eliminated, such complex problems as declining school performance would be solved.

What would happen if television were suddenly withdrawn from the homes of our most addicted school-aged viewers? Would the TV room be remodeled into a book-lined study? Would National Geographic replace TV Guide? Would parents who have relinquished control over their children and abandoned them to CBS, NBC, and ABC suddenly regain authority and provide direction to their children? Without TV, would our heavy viewers turn to school tasks and, on their own, engage in more intellectually stimulating activities? Or would the boys and girls who have been allowed to offer themselves up to television still be free to do what they choose to do? Can we reasonably argue that without TV children would do better in school? Does it make much sense to blame TV for declines in school performance, however tempting, convenient, and comforting it may be to do so?

Teachers are likewise concerned with TV’s impact on the way boys and girls think, as well as on what they think. I shall deal with the TV’s impact on what children think in a subsequent section. Here, I wish to consider teachers’ concerns with what TV viewing reportedly does to the way boys and girls think.

Some observers argue that television is, in fact, changing the way children think, as well as the ways they are able to think. Teachers report that today’s child thinks differently and express concern that children are less able and less willing to think in ways valued in schools. To argue that TV has changed the way children think, and hence has changed the way they may be able to learn, is to assume that several prior questions have been definitively answered. Initially, and in order to make any subsequent claims, we must be able to set forth just how it is that children think and how it is that the thinking of children of the past is different from that of children today. We must also be able to explain how it is that learning takes place, that is, just how children go about processing context-specific and medium-specific information from their environments.

It is plausible to argue that on all of these and on a score of related questions there are competing theories. In reading instruction, for example, educators proceed from any one of several theories of just how it
is a child learns to read and then goes about reading. Still, education research has provided good insights into how children at some point in their development think about and learn some things. But I am far from certain we are ready to agree on just how it is thinking takes place. I am not sure we know as much as we ought to know, or need to know, about how children learn. Therefore, I am even less certain, much less certain, we are on firm ground when we generalize about changes in the way children think and learn. Moreover, what we do know about thinking and learning in children is that it is dependent on several interrelated variables, the most obvious being the content to be learned and who is doing the learning.

I would argue, then, that any global assertions about how thinking and learning processes are changing for children in general should be viewed suspectly. To move from what I take to be suspect general assertions to causal explanations, as has been done by those who claim that TV influences how children think and learn, is to go well beyond the evidence and perhaps beyond reason.

All this notwithstanding, many teachers fear that TV is “rotting the minds of youth.” I would certainly not claim that today’s TV generation is not different from pre-TV generations of children. But even after acknowledging some obvious differences, I would not feel comfortable attributing any such differences to a single cause. To do so would be short-sighted, and ultimately unproductive. For if today’s children are, in fact, different in their capacities for thinking and learning and if, in fact, television is a primary and negative influence, then we would be far better off spending our time doing the research that would help teachers deal with those differences.

Instead, we blame TV and attribute all manner of teaching and learning problems to the tube, that damnable tube. In so doing, educators turn their backs on and close their minds to factors they have not thought enough about. One day we may decide to tune back in and to stay tuned for the equivalent of station identification. We may discover that we do not know children as well as we think we know children, and we will certainly discover that we know far less about how TV affects a child’s ability to think and learn than some observers already claim to know.
With more objective and open-minded analysis of and thinking about TV’s impact on children, we may one day even discover that TV is part of the solution to helping today’s children learn. To see TV in the lives of children as only a negative and debilitating force obviates that potential.
Understanding TV in Our Culture

If educators are to consider TV in the lives of children, they should begin with some understanding of how television is perceived in our culture. How we think about TV enables us to deal more effectively with its challenges. As one who considers himself to be a "TV educator," when I stand before PTA groups, teacher workshops, and classes of students, I am among the very first to admit most people do not think about TV very much at all. And, when we do think about TV, it is far too often in general terms, biased, and poorly informed.

We tend to generalize, for example, that "there is nothing good on TV these days." Granted, by any reasonable standard, the contemporary television industry is hardly inundating American viewers with quality programs. Yet, to say, and worse yet, to believe, "there is nothing good on TV" is at once unfortunate and telling. To buy into the generally accepted view that there is no quality on contemporary television decreases one's chances of discovering, appreciating, and profiting from quality programs that are broadcast, however infrequently.

We must remember that the same medium that brought us "The Gong Show," "Three's Company," "The Dukes of Hazzard," and "The Price is Right" has given us "Roots," "Sixty Minutes," "All in the Family," "M*A*S*H," and "Hill Street Blues." Nor should we forget that the same medium that presidents have used to lie to a nation enables everyone in that nation to look deep into those presidents' eyes, and perhaps into their souls. We must acknowledge that the same medium that overwhelms us with trivia can unite us in the dramatic history of our own times as we see a man on the moon, grieve at an
assassinated leader’s funeral, and share in the joy of another nation’s royal wedding.

If it is educators’ responsibility to bring balance and perspective to discussions of program quality, why is it so many readily say, “There is nothing good on TV”? Several explanations are worth brief consideration. First, most of us grew up valuing reading. Reading is culturally sanctioned; and when we say we are well-read or act as if we read a great deal, we feel good about ourselves. But TV viewing brings opposite feelings — denials, guilt, and quick changes of subject, usually attended with such brush-offs as, “I don’t watch much TV; there’s really nothing good on.”

Second, because we assume TV only appeals to the masses, our expectations for it are not very high. This might explain why we so seldom object to, or express outrage over, how little quality we do find on TV. Expecting only unbroken mediocrity leaves us disinclined, or unable, to recognize and acknowledge excellence when it does enter our homes. All of which is to say, most TV viewers do not “see” the excellence TV can bring and hence do not know how to “see” and judge quality when it is presented to them.

Finally, to admit that there are quality programs on TV is to suggest that, yes, some of what is on television is good. Such admissions draw long looks and silences at cocktail parties, curious glances among educators, and coolness in any circle of refined and cultured thought. And to me, there is something sad, something amiss in all that.

By believing that “TV is TV is TV” and “all TV is the same,” we free ourselves from viewing critically and selectively. But if we acknowledge that there is a wide diversity of quality programming on TV, we begin to look for it selectively. Dismissing all TV as not worth watching denies one of many rewarding viewing experiences. And although the negative generalizations about TV prevail, educators should take more responsibility for counteracting sweeping negative generalizations about TV programming that result from cultural blindness.

Since we think so little about TV in our lives, it is difficult for us to realize how the history of TV has influenced what TV is today and how emerging technologies will influence what TV becomes tomorrow. As
Erik Barnou so capably argues in his excellent histories of the TV industry, TV had its genesis in radio, and radio had its genesis in vaudeville. It is little wonder, then, that TV entered and has since permeated our culture as an entertainment medium. This is not to say TV only entertains us, but rather that our culture has used TV primarily for entertainment. Understanding the history of TV helps us realize that the expectations for a medium that is "mere entertainment" are understandably low. And yet, the potential for that same medium may be quite high in ways not yet fully recognized.

As educators we must also encourage thinking about the future of TV. TV programming and TV delivery systems are undergoing rapid and unprecedented changes. Satellite and cable transmissions, the new home-recording capabilities, new uses for TV screens and TV signals, interactive TV applications, better sound, better and larger pictures, greater programming variety than ever before, and, perhaps most importantly, better audience research are among current developments that will influence TV in this decade. If we fail to educate a society in the ways TV will be used differently in the future, we will render a nation of viewers under-informed and ill-prepared.

Two other ways we think about TV are worth brief consideration. First, most of us believe TV is primarily a visual medium. Consequently, we discount or discredit the fact that we receive far more information from what we hear on TV than we do from what we see on TV. To test this claim, watch 15 minutes of a news program or situation comedy with the volume on, but the picture contrast turned to black. Then watch several minutes with the picture visible, but with no sound. Determine which means of receiving information provides the best sense of what the news or situation comedy was about. We understand TV quite incompletely and imperfectly if we allow ourselves to believe TV is a merely visual medium. In so doing, we may dismiss its verbal messages and overlook its sometimes excellent writing.

Second, most of us believe we are powerless to affect the nature of TV programming. We act as if there is nothing we can do to influence the giant corporate monoliths that control television. I am always surprised to note the looks of revelation in many audiences when I stop dramatically in a TV talk to say, "I have never seen a TV set without an
ON/OFF switch.” Many parents who complain about what and how much their children watch are visibly jolted when they realize the TV can be turned off and left off for any length of time.

Viewers who find TV offensive, deplore its excesses, and rail against its mindlessness have the collective power to change television. Again, as educators, we are responsible for helping our society understand television’s powers. Just as important, however, is what we do to help TV consumers activate their audience powers and prerogatives. The most powerful and influential message we can send to the TV industry is, “No! This is not acceptable. I will not watch it. My children will not watch it.” That message is received more loudly, more clearly, and more directly than any other. And that message can bring almost instantaneous results in the form of midseason cancellations.

That the crassly economic base of our TV industry is not recognized as its ultimately redeeming and reforming virtue is unfortunate. The industry must respond to public dictates and demands. And, at the risk of sounding like an industry shill, I might point out that the TV industry has done far more to give the public what the public wants than the public has done to clarify and specify what is acceptable and what is not. And what are we saying about educating TV consumers when our nation’s parents must be told about the ON/OFF button?

Assumptions About the Effects of TV

Many researchers, teachers, and parents believe TV affects the behavior of people. There are, for example, several studies that purport to show how TV induces violent behavior in children. Then, there are the many studies that purport to show how specific programs make us respond or think in a given way. I have trouble accepting what is offered as evidence and have difficulty with much of the reasoning used to prove TV’s power over and influence on individual human behavior. Educators should consider such claims most carefully.

There is, of course, much violence on television. We certainly live in what can be justifiably called “violent times.” I wonder, though, if I have missed the evidence that proves that these violent times are more violent than they would have been if there had never been a single TV set
in an American household. I grow uneasy with research that claims correlations between TV violence and anti-social behaviors, to say nothing of the studies that claim TV is the direct cause of violent behavior.

Consider the highly violent nature of Japanese TV and the proportionately low incidence of violent and aggressive acts on Japanese streets. I worry when youths kill people and then have their defense lawyers argue straight-faced and perhaps sincerely that these youths, their families, and their cultures are not to blame — TV is to blame. Why have we been so slow to realize that, for virtually every crime we see committed on TV, we also see a TV criminal character apprehended and quickly punished, however unrealistic such quick justice may be. Why have we not seriously considered contemporary TV as a deterrent to crime and then conducted research to see if it is, in fact, true? Why have researchers expressed so little interest in exploring how the many acts of warmth, kindness, and compassion on TV may be resulting in observable and verifiable reciprocals in our society.

As I argued in discussing TV’s influence on school performance, we feel compelled to attribute blame to something or to someone when we observe unpleasant cultural, societal, or educational phenomena. While I acknowledge that a heavy diet of a particular type of TV program at some point in a particular child’s development could be a contributing factor in subsequent acts by that child, I would also argue that TV may not have had anything at all to do with that child’s actions. To go from tentative speculation to the unquestioning acceptance of “research says” TV does this or TV does that to children is to go far beyond what is reasonable or wise.

How mass audiences perceive or “think about” particular programs is also worthy of educators’ attention. Although we may respond to the same stimuli, there is little to suggest that two people really ever “receive” the same TV show. By way of analogy, we can look to certain theories of how we respond to literature. Many would argue that no two people really “read” the same book, given variations in background, expectations, world view, sophistication, and so forth. Hence, when we talk about how a particular TV program influences us, we should be mindful of the vast variability of human beings. It has been said that TV is the medium whereby millions of people can laugh simultaneously at
the same joke and still be lonely. This does not suggest, however, that these people are laughing for the same reason or that they are lonely for the same reason.

My point is, even though TV is broadcast to and for mass audiences, predicting the specific responses of that audience is not easy, if possible at all. We may watch the same program for different reasons, and we watch with various degrees of attention and insight. If we understand this, we will view with caution the unsubstantiated and suspect claims about the "effects" specific TV shows have on society.

I recall, for example, my own family's response to an especially moving episode of "All in the Family," when Edith dies, and we witness Archie's gradual, ultimately cathartic acceptance of her death. At a critical level, I was curious to see how the episode would be written; at a much more personal level I expected to be involved in how my long-time friend Archie would accept his wife's unexpected death. My wife and I had grown to love and admire Edith over the years. But, anticipating the emotional nature of the episode, my wife flatly refused to watch. She tends to prefer TV fare of a lighter nature, so she chose not to sit through what she knew in advance would be an emotionally upsetting episode. Thus I was left to view the program with my older daughters, then nine and ten years old.

I had touted this episode as something special, something we might enjoy together and perhaps profit from. My nine-year-old had consented to give it a try. But Kelli is really not much of a TV viewer — never has been. Fifteen minutes into the episode, she was out of the room, having become disinterested in the story. Not so with my other daughter Kerri. By program's end, we wept, sometimes together, and sometimes privately, too. Since we both seemed to feel a need for sorting out our feelings, a walk around the block promised respite from the emotional tension of the TV room.

Knowing my daughter Kerri as I did (or thought I did), I was confident that once we began to talk about Edith's death and Archie's acceptance of it, she would be able to articulate the major theme and intent of the drama: that Archie was unable to talk to anyone about Edith's death and, hence, was unable to reconcile himself to it; and that only at the story's end, when he allowed himself to weep, could Archie accept his
loss. But when I tentatively asked Kerri what she thought the story had been about, she responded, “It was supposed to show how bad Archie felt when Edith died because of the bad way he treated her most of the time.” Each of us viewed the program to the end, and each of us had some previous knowledge of the characters. Still, we attended to different aspects of the program and interpreted what we saw differently—each of us according to our respective personalities, maturity, experiences, values, and fears.

I ask the question, How could one begin to generalize about the way this one program was “viewed” by four persons, all members of the same family, viewing (or choosing not to view) in the same environment? And, if generalizing about this sampling of four appears to be difficult, what does it suggest about making generalizations about the effects of specific programs on a mass audience? Once we begin analyzing what we see on TV and how we see it, many assumptions about TV being a “mass medium” will have to be reconsidered.

In a class I teach on television, I solicit response statements from students who have shared a common viewing experience. Although 15 or 20 of us may have seen the same episode of “Hill Street Blues,” for example, seldom will any two people agree on what the single most compelling scene was, which single line of dialogue stands out most, or which expression captured on a performer’s face was most memorable.

As we engage each other in dialogues about what we see on TV, we become more skillful in helping our children and our students ask and answer both critical and subjective questions. I will have more to say about TV’s potential for expanding and extending experience in a following section. But the point to be underscored here is that our responses to TV are as complex and individualistic as the variability of human experience itself. Talking and thinking about how we perceive TV leads to that conclusion.

Without such talking and thinking, it becomes too easy to believe that TV causes people to do things. When correlations are observed, however weak they may be relative to other correlates of behavior, we have a propensity for seeking causes. When social problems are observed, sociologists, especially, look for explanations. Now consider: We live in a society seemingly addicted to a medium that provides steady
doses of programs we tend to feel a bit guilty and defensive about viewing. Conditions then are right, just right, for blaming that medium for all manner of complex social ills. As I see it, such are the circumstances today, as educators discuss the effects of television and produce even more "evidence" based on the same tenuous assumptions. When desire for proof transcends reason and objectivity, there is little hope for increased understanding.
TV the Time-Stealer

Parents and educators alike are concerned about the time children spend watching TV. This concern is understandable, given how much TV we know children watch and given what we assume to be the consequences of all that viewing. In discussing TV as a time-stealer, I shall move beyond these general concerns to discuss the following four questions: 1) Who controls our children’s time? 2) How do children watch TV? 3) How can watching “better” TV decrease TV viewing? and 4) How much TV viewing is enough?

Children who are left with too much undirected, unmonitored time will turn rather easily to TV. As soon as they do, their attention, or a portion of it, is expertly snared and skillfully maintained. Such phases as “Don’t touch that dial, we’ll be right back,” or “Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion,” or even “Stay where you are for these messages” are undoubtedly influential. Moreover, TV programming itself is designed to keep viewers “glued to the screen.”

So it is that control of children’s lives is wrested from parents. What saddens me most is how willingly or unwittingly parents have turned their children over to ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS. And once control is relinquished, it can be very difficult to reclaim. TV is enticing. And TV can keep children “occupied.” On Saturday morning, when parents want to sleep late, cartoons occupy the children. Parents going out to shop for an hour or two leave children with the TV on. Consequently, in these and similar acts, children are directly or indirectly told to watch TV. As a parent, I have myself experienced these same temptations. The point is, once parental sanction, however implicit or explicit it might be, is granted to TV’s unique enticements, our children will do as they are told. In this manner, TV viewing can quickly become habitual.
Most would agree that TV networks' control of children's time is frightening. Regardless of program quality or content, children who view six, or even three, hours of TV daily are being robbed of what most of us would consider a normal childhood. Although we do have parents who have abandoned children to TV, the TV industry is in no way freed from meeting its social responsibilities more fully and more often. Still, irrespective of what a network may decide to broadcast, if parents did control how their children spent their time, it may not matter. The point here is that regardless of program quality, parents need not be threatened by the impact of excessively violent or sexually suggestive programming on their children. Parents who are in control would simple refuse to let their children watch programs that parents deem harmful, of inferior quality, or otherwise objectionable.

How do children watch TV? Children I have observed watch TV just like children do anything else children do — in a variety of ways. If we observed children watching TV, we would see all manner of simultaneous activity by some. I have observed young adolescents eating, talking on the phone, drying their hair, thumbing through a magazine — and watching television — all at the same time. The only way to ascertain that they are "watching" TV is to move toward the set as if to turn if off. The response, "Hey! I'm watching that!" always leaves me wondering how I could have overlooked the obvious. Another young viewer watching the same program may appear to be totally involved and, when spoken to, will respond with a quick hand movement and a soft, intent "SHHHH..." Still other young viewers will appear to be highly involved but will immediately shift their attention to whoever might enter the room.

Certainly, how children (or adults) "watch" television will depend on many contextual, program, and personality variables. But my point is that not all of what is on TV commands (nor deserves) full attention. Still, our children have the TV "On" and, to a lesser or greater degree, they are "watching." It is this disengaged viewing time that should concern us most.

TV as a constant companion, TV as background, TV as a time- killing diversion, and TV as the object of a child's oblique attention — in all these ways TV has made steady encroachments into the lives of our
children and youth. TV becomes habitual and, perhaps, addictive. And therein lies the sad mindlessness of what parents and educators have allowed to happen: TV is there. TV is almost always on. And someone, in most of our homes, is always watching something — more or less.

I contend that if TV is worth watching, it is worth watching well. If children are allowed to watch TV, they should be directed to watch some programs, but not others. Just what programs children should be allowed to watch is best left up to parents, though teachers are in a good position to help with these decisions. But once better TV viewing habits are developed, once discriminating, selective, and engaged viewing begins to take place, many of the problems associated with excessive TV viewing will be eliminated.

Our goals should be to help children manage TV in their lives so their viewing will, over time, become less continuous, more active, and much more selective. The concluding section of this fastback offers suggestions to parents and teachers who would pursue such goals. But first, I want to discuss how good TV habits can replace bad TV habits.

As a teacher of literature, I find that readers of Jane Eyre are not readers of Harlequin Romances. (I remember that my children’s first groans about ‘‘Hamburger again...’’ came only after they had eaten steak.) We all recognize and value quality experiences in life, though such experiences are much harder to come by than the pedestrian, prosaic, and passionless fare most of life offers. But, through attending to excellence and quality, whether in art or food or fine china, it is less likely we will ever be satisfied with the daily run of mediocrity in life. The same, I believe, is true of children and TV.

I can best use personal experience to explain why I feel as I do. Over the last 15 years, I have grown much more aware of my own and others’ uses of TV. I admit I have always enjoyed TV. But the more I think about what I see, the less I am inclined to view it. And, the less I view, the more I expect to ‘‘get from’’ and ‘‘see in’’ each viewing experience. Conventional TV fare offers me little to provoke thought, little to arouse emotion, little to sustain attention, and little to inform me or to otherwise make me more humane. As a result, I grow very impatient with TV, refusing to watch most of what is on, or at least refusing to watch the silliest shows more than one time. My expectations are high.
I am, nonetheless, very frequently moved to thought and just plain "moved" by "Hill Street Blues." Norman Lear's "All in the Family" has been very satisfying and has helped me mature in my understanding of others. The TV movie "Masada" moved me to tears. And the witty writing of the old "Mary Tyler Moore Show" made me laugh, as do the scripts and characters in a similarly lively and clever new program, "Family Ties."

To expand my sample population of one to include a few of my adult acquaintances, I find that those who view reflectively and discriminatingly watch little TV. Like me, they tend to see a good bit in and expect a good deal from what they do view, frequently talking about what they see. However, I have never heard these adults talking about "Three's Company," "Loveboat," or "Laverne and Shirley," although I know millions of adults do watch those shows, and will grant that there may be things to say about them I am just unable to identify.

Finally, I want to briefly turn to the "How much TV is enough?" question. The answer to that question depends on who we want to raise our children, what we want our children to become, and on what role we want TV to play in our lives. If we watch mediocore programs and allow our children to watch them, we at once condone and perpetuate mediocrity. To determine how much TV is good for children, we should begin by exploring how much good TV there really is for children to see. I cannot answer that question for all American households. I would, though, suggest that just raising the question is a positive, and long overdue, first step.

If parents and educators want to have a direct role in helping children develop, they must join together to reclaim children now abandoned to television. And they must plan together so that future children will not be similarly abandoned. As we help children learn to view selectively, actively, and discriminatingly, we will be helping them learn how to view less, and to see more in what they do view. I humbly offer that such a heretofore untried and simple plan does merit a try.
TV and Expanded Experience

When children watch TV, other types of experiences are denied them. A child watching TV is not outside playing, nor reading, nor talking in any meaningful way with others. However, certain types of experiences are available to them on TV. I wish to consider here ways in which judiciously selected TV programs can beneficially expand the experiences of children.

TV can be a window to the world, even if the world seen through that window is not always accurately or sensitively presented. Children can find beauty and truth and culture and compassion on TV. That children do not find more of these kinds of experiences is more a result of what they are allowed to see than it is a product of the window itself.

Consider the times and contexts of John Boy Walton, a central figure in "The Waltons." Viewers familiar with the show are aware of John Boy’s rather idyllic, family-centered, value-engendering life on Walton’s Mountain. John Boy communed with nature, sat at his grandfather’s knee, and had a wealth of rich experiences available to him. And he did not have TV. Until he traveled to New York, he really had no idea of what New York City looked like. He had not seen presidents or a World Series, a symphony orchestra or a desert. The range of his experiences was limited. My own children, on the other hand, have a good idea of what I am experiencing when I go to New York, for they have seen much of New York City on TV. And they have seen their presidents and the World Series on TV; traveled the world through TV; and become knowledgeable about and interested in world cultures, art, and geography because of TV.
Now I would not argue that the quality of their lives is superior to that of the fictional John Boy’s because of TV. But I would argue that their lives have been different — and perhaps experientially richer — because of TV. What they see on TV is not always accurate. Minorities may be under-represented or stereotyped on TV, but my children were neither awed nor embarrassed the first time they saw a person of a different race. My father tells me he was both — awed and embarrassed — and a little bit uncomfortable the first time he saw a man whose skin was not the color of his own. TV provides incidents that make children judge, and we must help them to judge.

Today children can see our greatest symphony orchestras and hear their music in stereo. Today children can see the world’s most accomplished actors and actresses, dancers, and writers display their talents. Today children can meet good and caring people as diverse as Fred Rogers, Michael Landon, and Walter Cronkite. Today TV news acquaints children with the world they live in and with the people shaping their lives. And, through programs like “NOVA” and the National Geographic Specials, they can see the splendor and complexity of life on their planet. Forty years ago children had no such comparable opportunities.

TV contributes to both the enculturation and maturation of its viewers. Like it or not, the younger the viewers and the more they use TV, the more influential TV is in shaping their perceptions. All TV educates, but some TV educates very positively and constructively at times.

What child of 12 would not be enthralled by the TV production of “Les Miserables” if there were some pre-viewing preparation, an adult with whom to enjoy the program, and an opportunity for discussion and reflection after? What five-year-old cannot empathize with the moralistic virtues of Charles Schultz’ “Peanuts” characters? And who among us does not profit, if only a little, from weekly doses of middle-class morality and virtue offered us on “Happy Days,” particularly in the character of Arthur “The Fonz” Fonzarelli?

“The Ascent of Man” was marvelous TV. I suspect a fascination for the universe was awakened in my oldest daughter by Carl Sagan’s “golly! gee whiz!” whirlwind tour on “Cosmos.” Science and the nature of
her universe matter much more to her now because of an experience that could not possibly be matched in the life of a child 40 years ago.

Whatever expanded experiences children have with TV is dependent on adult direction, encouragement, and facilitation. We know that in helping children learn to read, and in guiding and directing their reading, we make books become pathways to knowledge and vicarious experience. We should, I think, proceed in the same way with TV, for TV has much the same potential for expanding a child’s world and for enriching a child’s life. Learning to use TV well is much like learning to use books well. And that is where adults come in, particularly teachers. The values in TV are yet to be realized. The schools must provide TV education for a TV world.

Schools must teach about TV, and they must teach from TV. Teaching about TV should provide background about TV as a business and about the economic factors that dictate what TV is and will become. We must design curricula that help children see TV as part of a comprehensive and interconnected media and communications environment. Both the history and likely futures of TV must be taught, as must ways to make the medium more responsive. The TV curriculum might address such questions as:

1. What technical developments have made TV what it is today?
2. From what forms of entertainment can contemporary TV be traced?
3. How are TV programs selected and developed?
4. Why do competing networks put good programs on during the same time?
5. How does the TV industry determine what people like or will like?
6. To whom can a person write if he or she finds a show distasteful or excellent, and what should one say?
7. How can individuals become involved in local community TV?
8. What decisions will have to be made about TV in the future in terms of new technology and government regulations?
9. What do we know about how TV can negatively influence the quality of individual lives?
10. What do we know about how selective, discriminating viewing can enhance the quality of individual lives?

11. In what ways is television a unique medium of communication?

12. What does television share in common with other forms of communication?

This list is hardly comprehensive, but it does suggest questions about TV that all who use it should be able to answer. At what grade levels and in precisely what ways we begin to help children answer these questions can be easily determined once we become convinced that children should be exploring the implications of TV in their lives.

The next section of this fastback contains brief recommendations for implementing TV curricula in the schools. But there are some fundamental facts about TV we should all understand. Recently, I was speaking to a community group made up largely of university people. A member of the audience asked, "Why do they insist upon putting two really good shows on at the same time?" This question, and scores like it that I have been asked by otherwise educated people, points to a basic ignorance about the economics of a medium of communication that is a part of all our lives. Even worse is that what most children (and adults) know about television has been "taught" to them by the TV industry. The industry curriculum has taught our children to expect nothing but cartoons on Saturday morning. The industry curriculum teaches us that it is acceptable to have TV news that is more entertainment than substance, more of a personality parade than analytic treatment of complex events. The networks have taught us that it is tolerable to have 10 minutes of commercials in an hour. And they have taught us that even when being well paid for running endless offensive commercials, they cannot possibly make enough money if they air very many programs that transcend banal mediocrity. The American public has learned these lessons well, although there is scant truth in anything the industry has so assiduously and effectively taught us to believe about TV. The pity is, the nation's schools have done precious little to provide their own, less biased, and more honest TV curriculum.

Teaching from television is equally important, and equally beneficial. If what we teach about TV is primarily to develop more in-
formed viewers, teaching from TV has as its primary goal the development of sensitive, appreciative viewers. I am troubled by how much mindless viewing of mindless TV programs there is in our society. What concerns me fully as much is how little there is of thoughtful, critical viewing of the quality programs that are broadcast.

The very best of TV represents a powerful art form. The very best of TV can humanize us. That alone should justify a TV curriculum in the schools. As teachers begin to integrate what can be taught from TV into the curriculum, they will discover how it enhances and extends much of what they are already trying to do. I hasten to add, however, that teaching from TV is no more the panacea that some teachers take it to be than it is the frill that others take it to be. I would hope that one day we would encourage book reading as an approach to understanding TV, just as we more often these days use TV viewing as a way of getting kids into books. When TV can be used as a means to enrich, expand, inform, and enhance the human mind and spirit, the quality of all our lives will benefit.

To be sure, TV poses problems for parents and for teachers. E.B. White perceived both the problems and the promises of television as early as 1938 when he wrote in *Harper's Magazine*:

The news of television, however, is what I particularly go for when I get a chance at the paper; for I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision, we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television — of that I am quite sure.

Whether we stand or fall by TV is yet to be determined, but E.B. White’s sense of TV’s potential impact on our culture was certainly accurate. The lives of our children will either be improved or distorted by the ways they use TV — or the ways TV uses them. What seems most crucial to me is that educators give sane and balanced attention to TV as part of the school curriculum. To do less would allow the question of what role TV will play in the lives of children to be answered by default.

Parents who remain content while TV raises their children need do nothing — the TV industry can do it all by only continuing what it already does so well. By leaving TV’s problems inadequately addressed
and TV's potentials undeveloped, educators will be leaving future generations of viewers in the dark with only dimly glowing tubes, which provide little light in and of themselves but are capable of providing compelling direction and a life full of positive images. In choosing to do nothing, educators will perpetuate the increasing negative effects of television, and the positive potentials of TV will escape us at home and in our schools.
Recommendations for Developing a TV Curriculum in the Schools

1. A sound TV curriculum should provide role models who demonstrate intelligent uses of TV to children. Most children have no appropriate role models for viewing TV.

2. TV education must be concerned with teaching about TV and with teaching from TV. Each is equally important in determining how children learn to use TV.

3. TV education will require TV viewing in schools. You cannot learn to ride bicycles without bicycles, and only a few of us teach ourselves.

4. The TV curriculum should strive to enable students to influence the way TV is used in society. The control we exercise — or relinquish — will be instrumental in determining what will be broadcast.

5. TV education must involve parents. Parents must know as much about TV and how to watch it as their children do.

6. The TV curriculum should be taught by teachers who understand TV. I hope we can find or develop some in a hurry.

7. The TV curriculum should be viewed as an end in itself. TV study as only the handmaiden to some other area of the curriculum is inadequate in view of its pervasive influence in our lives.
Some TV Rules for Parents

1. Make certain children always have a good and specific reason for viewing what they are viewing. If they have no good idea, or no idea at all, turn the set off.

2. Insist that children watch only one program at a sitting. Very rarely are two shows worth viewing back to back. Eliminate continuous viewing!

3. Limit spontaneous viewing and plan viewing for the family in advance. Without schedules, it is very hard to keep track of what and of how much we watch.

4. Have one parent share at least half of a child’s viewing time. This rule alone could revolutionize the use of TV in American homes.

5. Look for at least one good program a week to turn into an expanded experience for children — a trip to the library, a question for a teacher, something to write about, or just a good talk.


7. Do not use TV as a punishment or as a reward. Most children value TV too much already. Why increase its value or their desire for it?

8. Be a good model. Monitor your own viewing. Justify, if only for yourself, the TV choices you make in a week.

9. Encourage TV education in your schools. Chances are very good that there is little attention paid to TV in your child’s school. If that does not concern you, please go back to page one. If it does, and you want help, call me.
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