

**PARENTS' DECISION MAKING ROLE AND TELEVISION INFLUENCE
ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN
BENUE STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This study evaluates influence of television on young children's learning and cognitive development in Makurdi, Benue State, with a view to identifying the decision making role of the parents in their children's television viewing habit. The study is anchored on Social Learning Theory, complemented by Social Development Theory. Using the survey method with questionnaire as the instrument, 150 respondents were sampled. Findings from the study reveal that all homes sampled have television sets and the children, both below 2 years and above 2 years of age devote some amount of time to watching television. Majority of the respondents feel that television offer positive learning environment to children of all ages but at the same time, agree that it affects their academic performance. Findings also show that parents select the programmes their children watch and they co-view with them, mediate as well as tune to only children's channels. The study recommends among other things that for the benefits of children television programmes to be fully realized, the parents need to understand the learning capabilities of their children and always monitor what they watch and set viewing limits to ensure that their children do not spend too much time in front of the television.

Keywords: Television viewing, Children Television Programming, Learning, Cognitive development, Decision making.

Introduction

Television, as a medium of mass communication, is an important tool for most people, young or old, as most information today are delivered to the public via this technology in the most relaxing manner. People turn to television for information, education and more interestingly, for entertainment. Compared to other media, TV offers the public the above mentioned functions more readily and so many people have access to the television set.

Just as the adults benefit from watching programmes on television, the young ones have equally found television as their companion. Jusoff and Sahimi (2009)

note that “the use of television by young children particularly, has raised debates and concerns by many organisations, and researchers (Griffiths and Machin, 2003; Anderson and Pempek, 2005) due to the boundless access to various types of information which could affect their development, behaviour, health and learning” (p.151).

Expressing concerns about the amount of time children spend viewing the television, American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2001 provided guidelines for media exposure. Referring to the AAP guidelines, children older than two years old should watch no longer than 1 to 2 hours of quality programming, and children under two years old should not have any television viewing, as the first two years of life is a critical period for brain development. In addition, no media should be in the child's room, especially young children.

The concern now is what role do parents play as the children view programmes on television or what decision do they make to help enhance children learning and cognitive development as they grow? This study is interested in revealing the negative and positive influence of television on young children's (particularly 0 – 6years) learning and cognitive development and providing a guide to parents in their decision making as it concerns television viewing by the children.

Statement of the Problem

Electronic media, particularly television, have long been criticised for their potential impact on children. How this early media exposure influences learning and cognitive development is one area for concern. Although research, as Kirkorian, Wartello and Anderson (2008, p. 39) note, “clearly demonstrates that well-designed, age-appropriate, educational television can be beneficial to children of pre-school age”, studies on infants and toddlers suggest that these young children may better understand and learn from real life experiences than they do from video.

Moreover, some research suggests that exposure to television during the first few years of life may be associated with poorer cognitive development. What role do the parents and care givers of these young children have to play in television viewing habit of the children; and how much do the decisions they make affect the children's development? This study seeks to find out.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be answered to meet the objectives of the study.

1. How much of television do young children in Benue State watch?
2. To what extent does television viewing affect learning and cognitive development of the children?
3. What role do parents play in television viewing habit of their children?

Conceptual Clarification

Television viewing

Television makes possible the transformation of information in both sight and sound form, and so, serves as a significant medium for individuals, families and groups to relax, get informed, educated and entertained. Watching television is an experience

shared by the vast majority of children and adults. It is convenient, inexpensive, available, and attractive. Television viewing is a major activity, and can be enormously entertaining for children and can teach them some things, but too frequently it is used as a substitute for other activities.

Learning

Learning is the activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, experiencing something new. It does not happen all at once, but builds upon and is shaped by what we already know. Learning is an activity that begins right from the womb. According to Goswami and Bryant (2007, p. 1) "the foetus can hear through the amniotic fluid during the third trimester, and memory for the mother's voice is developed while the baby is in the womb. Then when the baby is born, he learns from the people around him and what he sees in the environment." It could be learning by imitation, learning by analogy or causal or 'explanation-based' learning. What a child watches on television and how he is guided by his parents have great influence on his learning abilities.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive development is a field of study in neuroscience and psychology focusing on a child's development in terms of information processing, conceptual resources, perceptual skill, language learning and other aspects of brain development. Cognitive development is the emergence of the ability to think, understand and solve problems.

Decision Making

Decision making can be regarded as the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief and/or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Every decision making process produces a final choice that may or may not prompt action. For effective decision making, a person must be able to forecast the outcome of each option as well, and based on all these items, determine which option is the best for that particular situation. As it concerns this study, parents ought to know when television viewing would benefit their children and the amount of exposure they need to help them develop properly.

Review of Related Literature

Young Children's Television Exposure

Since the invention of television and its popularity in homes, Kirkorian, Wartella, and Anderson (2008, p. 40) assert that "observers have voiced recurrent concern over its impact on viewers, particularly children." Researches conducted over the years show that children younger than two should not be exposed to electronic media, considering the video deficit of infants and toddlers in which they learn better from real-life experiences than they do from video.

With the advancement in technology, children are now, more exposed to television content than it used to be. In Nigeria today, almost all the television stations we have show children programmes from about 4:00pm to 6:00pm on a daily basis. Sometimes these are programmes locally produced by the stations, but in most cases, they are replay of foreign programmes like Barney and Friends, Sesame

Street, Ben 10, Power Rangers, Tom and Jerry, Telebubbies, Bob the Builder and the likes.

Some of these programmes may be educational, others may not. Analysts like Singer (1980) regard television viewing, particularly by young children, as being cognitively passive and under the control of salient attention – eliciting features at the medium such as fast movement and sound effects. Singer formalized this theory, proposing that the “busyness of television leads to a sensory bombardment that produces a series of orientating responses that interferes with cognition and reflection. As a result, children cannot process television content and therefore cannot learn from it.

Several small, experimental studies from the 1970s and 1980s found, as Zimmerman and Christakis (2005, p.622) recall, “negative associations of infant television viewing with subsequent cognitive and language development.” An analysis of data from The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child (NLSY, 1986) has shown that each one hour increase in television viewing before the age of 3 years is associated with modest decreases in Peabody individual Achievement Test reading recognition (-0.31 point) and reading comprehension scores (-0.58) at age 6years.

Observational studies of language development as conducted by Friedrich and Stein (1973) suggest varied effects of infant Television and video viewing, depending largely on the content viewed. In one study, viewing specific programmes between 6 and 30 months of age (Dora the Explorer, Arthur) was associated with improved language skills at 30 months, whereas viewing other programmes (Sesame Street, Telebubbies) was associated with reduced language skills at 30 months.

Despite the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)’s recommendation that families limit children’s television viewing, a study by Ride out and Hamel (2006) found that 83% of children under the age of two use screen media (television, videos, DVDs) on a typical day and 66% of children aged six months to six years watch television every day. While many studies focus on how much children’s programming children are watching, Diehl and Toelle (2011) have noticed that others are also starting to emphasise that children are exposed to significant amount of adult television because the TV is often on in the background. All in all, Television and Videos are quite common in the lives of young children and can influence their development.

Potential benefits of TV viewing by young children.

Television, like other media technologies, has brought about a substantial change in the experience of childhood in our society. These changes leave many parents unprepared for the challenge on how to regulate their children’s time with media technologies. Television has been applauded for contributing to children’s knowledge about certain things and their academic abilities. In early childhood, television can provide children with a broader range of life situations and possibilities to explore through their play.

According to Pitman (2008, p.1) “children can use media to increase their understanding of the world around them as well as teach positive social behaviours.” These benefits can last through to adolescence. Television viewing has been studied in children who are academically gifted, with results suggesting that selective viewing can promote academic abilities. Furthermore, parents of gifted children are more likely to see the potential benefits of educational Television Programmes and make more selective viewing choices.

When well done, television programmes can stimulate a child’s imagination and open up the infinite opportunities that life presents. When these programmes are well produced, children will watch them repeatedly as they grow older, learning different things each time because they can engage quality content in increasingly sophisticated ways.

Weber and Singer (2004, p. 34) lent their voices by saying “programmes such as Barney and Friends, Sesame Street, Blue’s Clues, Dora the Explorer and others claim to combine more than 100 potential teaching elements and enhance children’s performance in social skills, imagination, singing and dancing through active engagement with programme content.” Cognitive gains include numbers, letters and vocabulary; social learning such as taking turns, sharing and cooperation; physical improvements in small and large motor skills; and emotional lessons in dealing with anger, disappointment, feeling sad or happy.

Issues in Television viewing by young children.

Research as conducted by Anderson et al (2001) had shown that children’s exposure to television during the preschool years is predictive of academic outcomes during adolescence. What is notable about this research, however, is that it is the kind of television that really matters. For example, adolescents whose parents permitted them to watch more educational programming when they were young are more likely to have higher grades, read more books, place greater value on achievement, and show more creativity.

Jusoff and Sahimi (2009) have noted that television viewing among young children has raised issues and concerns to many researchers and professionals. As television series can be affectionate to watch, it could glue children on the couch, continuously watching one programme after another. The effects of television viewing on young children might differ as they pass through a certain stage of age. But some noticeable issues or problems associated with early and excessive television viewing include:

a. Attention disorder

Early television exposure is now a common scenario, where babies as young as a few months old are exposed to either foreground and background television. Studies conducted by Christakis (2006); Anderson and Pempek (2005); Healy (2004); show that there is an association between early television viewing and later symptoms of attention disorder.

b. Learning

Studies have not been consistent about the effect of television viewing on school achievement, partly because of the different ages considered. Several studies have found that television could promote positive development and learning outcomes for younger children and negative results on older children, and vice versa.

A number of studies done by researchers like Carew (1980), Anderson and Pempek (2005), Linebarger and Walker (2005), show that children younger than two years old have problem with learning and cognitive development as a result of television viewing. This is because most of the programmes were produced for children above 24 months old and probably because very young children are sensitive to the sequential and linguistic comprehensibility of video to at least 18 months of age, and also that very young children have difficulty using a symbolic representation as a source of information about an existing situation which explains that they are most likely not developmentally ready to receive information or learn from the television.

c. Aggression

One of the most worrying behaviours that parents faced with their young children today is the tendency to manifest aggressiveness. When young children continuously watch aggressive actions from the television, there will always be a tendency for them to imitate the actions, thinking such actions as part of their play, which could lead to actual aggressive behaviour.

d. Health problem

Obesity is now one of the major health problems for children with its lifetime risks of ongoing obesity and associated health risks of type 2 diabetes. Generally, obesity results from an imbalance between calories eaten and calories expended through activity and exercise. Television upsets this balance through:

- Reduced metabolic rate when watching TV or engage in other electronic media activities.
- Reduced activity because of what they are not doing whilst they are interacting with the media. Children who watch more TV play less sports.
- Increase food and calorie consumption which may be influenced by advertising or result from “snacking” opportunities.

Keneshiro (2012), among other problems listed, also said television may take the place of reading in a child's day, which may contribute to poor school performance and delay literacy. Watching television may also take the place of social interaction with friends and family, depriving children of sharing ideas and feelings with others, and preventing parents from learning more about their kids.

In agreement with what other researchers have said, expressing ideas about undesirable effects of the media on children, McQuail (2010, p. 484) provide the following as negative effects attributed to media:

- An increase in social isolation;
- Reduction of time and attention to homework
- Increased passivity
- Reduced time for play and exercise (displacement)
- Reduced time for reading (due to television)
- Undermining of parental authority
- Premature sexual knowledge and experience
- Unhealthy eating and obesity
- Promotion of anxiety about self-image leading to anorexia
- Depressive tendencies.

Parental Decision Making about Children's TV viewing

Parents are regarded as the persons who care for and know most about a child. A parent's involvement in the development of a child is pivoted to what the child becomes in life. Because children lack experience and perspective, parents have the responsibility and authority to make decisions on their behalf in whatever area, and this include the right to accept or refuse that they watch TV or certain programmes on TV at certain times.

Diehl and Toelle (2008) agree that parenting is a major factor in determining both television viewing patterns and educational outcomes because parents who encourage their children to watch educational programmes are more likely to value education and support early learning in a variety of other ways as well. Before parents can actively make decisions for their children about what they watch or do not watch on television, it is important for them to understand their children and know what is best for their development. Parents ought to know that interaction, reading, and play activities are important to a child's brain development and learning. These types of activities are preferred to passively watching television. They matter in the healthy development of social, emotional and intellectual skills.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Social Learning Theory and Social Development Theory. The basic idea of Bandura's (1986) social learning theory as posits by McQuail (2010) is that we cannot learn all or even much of what we need to guide our own development and behaviour from direct personal observation and experience alone. We have to learn much from indirect sources, including mass media. Bandura's model posits four basic processes of social learning that occur in sequence: attention, retention, production and motivation. Our attention is directed to our content of potential relevance to our lives and personal needs and interests. We may then retain what we have learnt and add it to our stock of prior knowledge. The third stage – that of production – refers to the actual application in behaviour of lessons learnt, where it may be rewarded (reinforced) or punished, leading to greater or less motivation to follow any particular path. Parents of young children can actively participate in selecting what their children watch in order to maximize the benefits they can derive from watching television.

The major theme of Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. The potential for cognitive development depends upon the "zone of proximal Development" (ZPD): a level of development attained when children engage in social behaviour. Full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction. The range of skill that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone. Vygotsky's theory is complementary to Bandura's work on social learning. Vygotsky believes that social learning precedes development, thus, the fact that television can influence children's cognitive development. His emphasis on the need for more knowledgeable other (MKO) to guide the children stresses the need for parental decision making in order to maximize the benefits of television viewing and minimize the negative effects.

Methodology

The survey research method was employed to generate data for this study. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The researchers administered 150 copies of the questionnaire to parents of pupils from three nursery and primary schools in Makurdi, Benue State. The schools include: The Shepherd Heritage Academy; Our Lady of Perpetual Help Nursery and Primary School and NKST Primary School. These three schools were purposively selected by the researchers to represent private, mission and public schools.

The population of parents for the three schools stands approximately at 1800, but not all parents bring and pick their children from school. The researchers took note of parents that do this exercise daily for three days and got the average of 100 parents for each of the three schools. Purposive sampling was first employed to select the three schools out of the schools in the low level area of Makurdi, Benue State. Since not all parents could wait to fill a copy of questionnaire, the simple random sampling technique was used to choose the parents who formed the sample. One unit interval was used to select 50 samples each from the parents of children in the three schools, giving a total of 150 parents. The researchers administered the questionnaire, containing 11 closed ended questions to the respondents face-to-face during resumption and dismissal time of their children for five days.

Data Presentation and Interpretation.

Sex distribution showed that majority of the respondents (92%) were female while the rest 8% were male and 70% of them were self employed as against the (30%) that were either civil or public servants. This explains the reason they had time for school runs. The other questions asked to help answer research questions are presented on tables as follows:

Research question one:

How much of television do young children in Benue State watch?

The following tables provide answers to this question.

Table 1: Access to Television

Question 1	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Do you have Television set?	Yes	150	100
	No	00	00
	Total	150	100

Table one above shows that all parents who responded agreed that they have television set at home.

Table 2: Time devoted to watching TV

Question 2	Option	Frequency	Percentage
How long do your children watch television per day?	1 -2 hrs	80	53.33
	3 – 4hrs	62	41.33
	5 – 6hrs	08	5.33
	No television watching	00	0.00
	Total	150	99.99

Table 2 shows that majority (53.33%) of the children whose parents answered the questionnaire view television between 1 and 2 hours daily while 41.33% watch between 3 and 4 hours. Very few spent up to 5 to 6 hours.

Research question 2

To what extent do TV viewing affect learning and cognitive development of the children?

Table 3: TV viewing by children below 2 years

Question 3	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Do you think children under 2 years should watch television?	Yes	148	98.67
	No	02	1.33
	Total	150	100

As shown on Table 3 above, almost all the parents 148 (98.67%) out of the 150 respondents think that children under two years should be exposed to television while a very negligible 1.33% said no.

Table 4: Whether TV offers positive learning environment for children below 2 years

Question 4	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Do you believe that TV offers positive learning environment for children under 2 years?	Yes	150	100
	No	00	00
	Total	150	100

Table 4 shows that all parents believe that TV offers positive learning environment for their children who are not yet 2 years of age.

Table 5: Whether TV offers positive learning environment for children above 2 years

Question 5	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Does TV offer positive learning environment for children above 2 years?	Yes	148	98.67
	No	02	1.33
	Total	150	100

Table 5 shows that almost all the parents 148 (98.67%) think that television offers positive learning environment for children who are above 2years of age.

Table 6: TV and school performance

Question 6	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Does TV viewing affect their school performance?	Yes	94	62.67
	No	56	37.33
	Total	150	100.00

Table 6 above shows that out of the 150 respondents, 94 (62.67%) think that television affect the school performance of the children while 56 (37.33%) do not hold such opinion.

Research Question 3

What role do parents play in the viewing habit of their children?

Table 7: Kinds of programmes children watch on TV

Question 7	Options	Frequency	Percentage
What kind of programmes do your children watch?	Infant and toddler programmes	83	55.33
	Children programmes	65	43.33
	Preteen Programmes	02	1.33
	Adult programmes	00	0.00
	Total	150	99.99

Table 7 shows that children are exposed to a number of programmes. Out of the 150 respondents, 83 (55.33%) said their children watch infant and toddler programmes, while 65 (43.33%) said their children watch children programmes, only 2(1.33%) said their children watch preteen programmes. No respondents admitted that their children watch adult programme.

Table 8: Parents and children's programme selection

Question 8	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Do you select what your children watch?	Yes	150	100
	No	00	00
	Total	150	100

Table 8 above shows that all the respondents were involved in decision making about what programmes their children watch on television.

Table 9: Guiding children's TV viewing

Question 9	Options	Frequency	Percentage
How do you guide your children's TV viewing?	By co-viewing	23	15.33
	By mediation	00	00.00
	By tuning to children channels only	82	54.67
	All of the above	45	30.00
	None of the above	00	00.00
	Total	150	100.00

Table 9 shows that majority of the respondents (54.67%) guide their children's TV viewing by tuning to children's channels only while 45 respondents representing (30%) said they do so by co-viewing, mediation and tuning to the children's channels. Then 23 respondents representing 15.33% said they only co-view with the children.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the influence television has on young children's (between the ages of 0 – 6 years) learning and cognitive development. Emphasis was placed also on the decision making role of the parents.

Results from the Table 2 show that all the homes of the respondents had television set(s) which made it possible for the children to get exposure to television content. Majority of the respondents said their children view television for just between 1 and 2 hours per day. The implication of this result is that emphasis is placed on other activities more than television by the children or as a result of parental guidance or perhaps, the unsteady power supply in Nigeria.

From Table 3, it is clear that the respondents think that television exposure do not affect learning and cognitive development of young children and it follows that their thinking is that TV offers positive learning environment for both children below 2years and those above 2years of age. Table 4 reveals the fact that majority of the respondents believe that TV offer positive learning environment for children with (62.67%) of them saying that viewing TV affect the children's academic performance. This, perhaps, is because of the fact that TV viewing takes the time for reading and doing homework by the children

A little above one-third of the respondents said their children watch infant and toddler programmes and this is followed closely by those that watch children's programmes (43:33), leaving only (1.33%) watching preteen programmes. This shows that to a very large extent, parents guide their children and select what they watch. This fact was equally confirmed on Table 8, where all the respondents answered in the affirmative. They do this mainly by tuning to children channels only. This option took (54.67%) while those respondents that selected all the options took (30%). Only (15.33%) co-view with their children.

These findings do not only conform to the basic idea of Bandura's social learning theory (1986) that human beings cannot learn all or even much of what we need to guide our own development and behaviour from direct personal observation and experience based on the real world alone but that we have much to learn from indirect sources as well. This includes the mass media of which television is one. Apart from the family being the fundamental agent of socialization, the mass media today seems to be the most influential. The reason is that even before most children are enrolled in school, they are exposed to the television in the leisure of their parents' home. This position is supported by George Gerbner in his cultivation theory (1973) when he observed that the symbolic media world shapes and maintains our conception and perception of the real world and that television particularly with its ubiquitous nature and presence in almost every home is the common symbolic environment into which most children are socialized.

Conclusion

From the study, it is clear that the benefits of educational programming are not the same for children of different ages. Children under two years of age are less able to systematically learn as much from television as they do from human interaction. While infants may pay attention to video images, most television programmes do not offer the interactive and responsive content that infants need the most. A good understanding of this fact will help parents restrict their children's television viewing at early ages and even for the older children, from three years of age, there is need to co-view and also mediate to help them grab the benefits of the content. In order to limit the negative effects of TV for young children, the parents need to choose positive programmes that provide learning opportunities for children, emphasize learning in all aspects of life; not just television; and create family alternatives to television.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings and conclusion drawn, the researchers recommend that:

1. Parents should monitor the content of TV programming and set viewing limits to ensure that their children do not spend too much time in front of the television.
2. Parents should encourage alternative activities, especially physical activity and promote discipline by turning the television off during meal times, homework time, and other times of the day during which social interaction and learning are going on.
3. Parents should set good examples for their children by limiting the number of hours they (parents) spend watching television and avoid watching programmes containing adult content when their children are in the room or nearby.
4. The Nigerian television stations also need to provide rich television programming dedicated to child friendly content that would contribute to the cognitive development of children instead of showing the foreign programmes alone.
5. As part of their sensitization campaign, the mass media should provide forum where parents would be taught the art of parenting. Parents on their own too, should read more about children, their learning and cognitive development.
6. Parental guide and monitoring should continue until children are old enough to select what is good and disregard what has negative influence on their own. Only then can such parents be said to be responsible or responsive to their children.

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