



Mythbusters

A recent *Future of Children* volume explored the issue of children and electronic media. While many of the findings were predictable, there were some surprises that challenge commonly held assumptions.

MYTH: *Television is being displaced by newer forms of media.*

Despite all the new technologies, children still spend a lot of time in front of the television; watching TV programs, videos, and movies on the television accounts for more than half of all young people's electronic media exposure. Rather than newer technologies replacing television, children simply add these other media on to the time they spend watching TV. Television is a central part of the multitasking phenomenon, in which children use several media formats simultaneously.

MYTH: *Children from wealthy, highly educated families engage in the least media use, while children in poorer, less educated families engage in the most.*

A recent survey of eight to eighteen year olds found no relationship between household *income* and media exposure. Rather, differences emerged based on the *education* level of the parents – and in an unusual pattern. Youth whose parents had completed college reported the *most* media exposure, while those whose parents had completed no more than high school reported less but were not far behind. The group with the *least* media exposure was children whose parents had some college education. Because the share of youngsters within each parental education category who used each of the media on any given day did not differ, it appears that although all young people watch screen media, those from low- and high-education subgroups watch for longer periods on any given day.

MYTH: *Marketing to children can never have positive outcomes.*

While advertising is often used to steer children and youth toward unhealthy behaviors, marketing can also be used effectively to promote positive healthy choices such as not smoking or using illicit drugs, reducing obesity, and delaying sexual activity. Researchers, for example, showed that from 1999 to 2002, youth smoking prevalence declined from 25.3 percent to 18 percent and that the American Legacy Foundation's *truth* campaign accounted for approximately 22 percent of that decline. Similarly, the California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness (CANFit) program found that after its 1% or Less campaign in East Los Angeles, whole milk purchases had dropped from 66 percent to 24 percent of overall sales and that the share of low-fat milk sold had more than doubled. Finally, 2004 survey respondents who reported exposure to one or more components of the KNOW HIV/AIDS campaign said that the campaign had influenced their plans for the future, including visiting a doctor or getting tested for HIV and that these respondents were

more likely than respondents who were not aware of the campaign components to indicate that they planned to engage in these healthier behaviors.

MYTH: *Video games have no educational value.*

While research has suggested that violent video games can promote aggressive behavior, many other types of video games promote positive outcomes. Studies have found, for instance, that playing select video games can enhance visual awareness, including greater capacity to pay attention, quicker attention deployment, and faster processing. As with other media, it is the content of the game rather than the platform that matters in assessing the potential impact on children.

MYTH: *Adolescents use online communication primarily to communicate with strangers.*

Recent surveys show that teens mostly use the Internet to communicate with friends and maintain already existing relationships. Although the possibility of teens contacting and being contacted by strangers via the Internet is a cause for concern, it is not the predominant way that the Internet is used by youth. This has not always been the case; in the early years of the Internet, chat rooms were the rage and teens were more likely to be in contact with strangers. Today, with the popularity of instant messaging and social networking sites, youth predominately use the Internet to connect with offline friends. In a 2007 survey, researchers found that an overwhelming majority of teens who use social networking sites do so to keep in touch with either friends they see frequently (91 percent) or friends they see rarely (82 percent). Adults should not be complacent, however; a national survey conducted in 2006, for instance, found that 40 percent of fourteen-to twenty-two-year olds who use social networking sites such as MySpace had been contacted online by a stranger whom they did not know before. Moreover, as new fads – like blogs – are introduced, stranger contact may increase. Finally, even teens who only seek to communicate with friends may do so in inappropriate ways that leave them vulnerable to harassment – posting provocative pictures of themselves, for example, that may be meant for a close group of friends but are available to a very wide audience.

MYTH: *Television is appropriate for all ages, so long as it is educational.*

Although watching educational programming can be beneficial and has been associated with positive outcomes for children of preschool age and older, no research to date has been able to demonstrate benefits for infants and toddlers associated with watching educational television. In fact, research actually suggests that, for very young children watching any television is unlikely to be beneficial and could be harmful. Experts seem to agree that while the content of programming is incredibly important for preschool and older-aged children, with educational viewing being associated with more positive outcomes than entertainment viewing, when it comes to infants and toddlers, there is no research evidence to suggest that watching any kind of television is appropriate or beneficial.

MYTH: *Ratings systems are reliable ways to know the content and appropriateness of a movie, television, or video game program.*

In one study, researchers recruited parents to rate the content of computer and video games, movies, and television programs. Raters felt that industry labels were “too lenient” when compared with what parent coders would find suitable for children. In addition, ratings are rarely well understood by the general public. Perhaps because of ratings’ inconsistencies or perhaps because parents are not fully aware of the information offered by media, many parents do not consistently use the ratings to guide their children. Though 78 percent of parents say they have used movie ratings to direct children’s movie viewing, only about half say they use music advisories, video game ratings, and television ratings (54 percent, 52 percent, and 50 percent respectively). Even among parents who report using industry-provided ratings and advisories, most do not find them to be “very useful” according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey.

MYTH: *Electronic media are keeping kids from reading. If we want kids to read more, we need to limit television, video games, and other such distractions.*

It does not seem that time with media greatly displaces reading or doing homework, largely because American youth spend so little time doing either. When TV first became available, TV viewing replaced “functionally similar” activities, such as listening to the radio, reading comic books, and going to a movie.

Studies have not consistently found that time spent watching television, in general, reduces adolescents’ time spent in school-related activities. Most cross-sectional correlational studies, for instance, have not found a significant link between television viewing and less reading.

Prepared by Ann Cami based on information contained in *The Future of Children: Children and Electronic Media*, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Donahue, eds., Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008 www.futureofchildren.org.

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