

Parents' presence when TV viewing with child affects learning ability

January 4 2017, by George Watson



Many parents use a video as a babysitter. Credit: Texas Tech University

Parenting today, for many, has become nothing more than sitting a child in front of a television or handing them a device that plays their favorite video. But it's much more than that.

Studies show, however, that kids become more interested in activities when their [parents](#) are involved. And it's not just being a coach for their [child](#)'s youth sports team or attending the school play. It could be as simple as watching TV with the child instead of treating the device like a babysitter.

Eric Rasmussen, an assistant professor of public relations and Justin Keene, an assistant professor of journalism and electronic media, both in

the Texas Tech University College of Media & Communication, led a study examining the physiological behavior of children who watched television with a parent and those who watched alone.

Utilizing the college's facilities in the Center for Communication Research, Rasmussen and Keene discovered a definitive change in a child's heart rate and skin conductance, which measures how well the skin becomes a conductor of electricity when stimulated, when that child watches a program with the parent as opposed to watching it with the parent out of the room.

That physiological change is an indicator of how much effort is put into learning from the program as the brain-body connection relates the importance of the program to the parent's presence.

"I think this is the first time that anybody has looked at the question of why kids seem to learn better from TV when their parent watches them," said Rasmussen, whose research focuses on children and the media and discusses the topic through his blog, [ChildrenAndMediaMan](#). "All of the other research we know of looks at what happens to children's learning patterns when the parents are in the room. This is the first time I know of that people are exploring what might be the reasons why children learn better when the parent is in the room."

Measuring learning

The impetus for this research stemmed from the desire to discover from where the motivation for children to learn while parents are in the room originates. Some theories suggest the kids determine the program's importance by the parent's presence, and others theorize the children determine the program must meet the parent's approval if they are watching with the child.

Regardless of the motivation, the results were clear –parents who want their children to have a better understanding of the programs they are watching need to be present with their child, sitting next to them, watching the program. It's known as co-viewing.

"If parents are watching with them, they should know the kids learn things more if they watch with them, whether it's violence, sex, language, whatever," Rasmussen said. "This really suggests that parents need to be more aware of their influence because parents have that influence whether they think they do or not. Just being there is making a difference."

For this study, parents and their children were brought into the center and shown a video, either a clip from the television show "Man vs. Wild" or a whale documentary, each clip about 11-12 minutes long. The kids were hooked up to a heart rate monitor and a skin conductance monitor, which measures how sweaty their palms become and thus become a good electrical conductor.

In some of the instances, the parent watched the clip sitting right beside the child on a couch. In other instances, the parent was completely out of the room, out of sight of the child. The [heart rate](#) and skin conductance monitors clearly showed an increase of both when the parent was in the room with the child as opposed to when the parent was out of the room, thus indicating a heightened indicators of the effort to learn by the child.

"Researchers have shown that kids are more interested in activities in which the parents are involved, whether that's at school or reading or whatever," Rasmussen said. "It makes sense then that kids would be more interested in TV if the parent is more interested in that as well. I think parents being involved in a kid's life means a lot to kids whether they know it or not."

And, maybe, the results of this research are as much of a wake-up call to parents as it is an indication of the behavior of the child.

Lost parenting

As an expert in children and the media, Rasmussen has heard it hundreds of times, that this generation of children is different and that society is losing this generation to the media and the bad things portrayed in it.

But these research results only serve to solidify Rasmussen's belief that it's the parents who are lost and not the kids, that the influence parents have in their child's life is misunderstood.

"They're just relying on rules or teachers or whatever to media-parent their kids when the parent actually needs to be sitting there parenting for themselves, being involved and having conversations," Rasmussen said. "I think our focus needs to be on raising a generation of media-literate parents in order for them to make the difference for [children](#) that we really want to make."

Rules given to kids in terms of what they are allowed to watch are a good start, Rasmussen said. But too many parents allow the rules to do all the parenting, which takes it too far.

This research and its results could be a good start to reversing that trend. The next step will be a study that monitors the parents in the co-viewing environment to determine if there are any physiological changes in them as well as the child. Rasmussen said they are hopeful to begin that study this spring or summer.

"We want to see if the parents' brain-body connection changes when they are watching TV with the kids," Rasmussen said. "We want to know what is going on in the parent's mind when watching TV with kids. We

learned a little about the kids and there is still so much more to learn, but we want to know what is going on with the parents as well.

"Parents parent. The more I learn the more I'm convinced of that. It's about helping [kids](#) know what to do with that content once they encounter it and how they process it."

Provided by Texas Tech University

Citation: Parents' presence when TV viewing with child affects learning ability (2017, January 4) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

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