Parents' Attitudes About Children's TV Use

TrueChild

Let Every Child Shine.

Introduction

Children's lives are increasingly dominated by media. *Children's media* once meant network television: mostly on weekend mornings after-school.

No longer. New media—cable TV, cellphones, video games, websites and DVDs—now make mass communication images and messages available 24-hours a day.

Media has quietly morphed into the *main* waking activity in children's lives—more time than they spend in the classroom or talking with their parents *(Kaiser Foundation, 2005[i])*

The media may be "new," but the images and messages are not. New media often recycles the same, old binary stereotypes—strong, aggressive boys in the lead and super-thin, pink-clad girls worried about their appearance as followers.

It's not surprising that parents are concerned. We set out to survey 1,000 random parents of young children nationwide. Then we followed up with focus groups to test attitudes in more depth. *[NOTE]*

This report summarizes our findings. We have tried to enliven the data with the voices of parents themselves—young and old, of color and white, gay and straight—by highlighting their thoughts and ideas from focus groups throughout.

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Vice President of Research

"I keep telling myself I am raising my son in a different world than I was raised."

"Letting them start the makeup at an early age leads to promiscuity—I see a direct correlation."

"Makeup means you want to look more attractive, or you want to enhance something. And a four or five, six, seven, eight year old shouldn't even be thinking along those lines."

1 **Parents are aware of their children's high media use, with about one-third reporting their youngest child spends 3+ hours with media daily.**

This number that climbs dramatically with age, just 17% of 1-2 year olds, but 46% of 9-10 year olds spending 3+ hours.

For girls, there were significant differences by race, with Black and Latina/o parents reporting 51% and 60% of girls spending 3 or more hours a day.

For boys, 49% of Black but just 21% of Latina/o parents reported 3+ hours.

Children of color spending more time with media might be linked to average lower family incomes, as TV and media take the place of more costly options like day-care or baby sitters. But in our survey, families making above and below $50,000 all reported similar numbers.

However, familes who earned the most did let their kids watch the least, 43% of those $50k reported their children spent 1 hour a day or less with media.

1/3
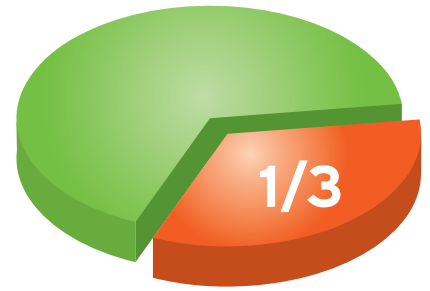
Children spend 3+ hours with media daily

2 **68% of parent are concerned about the amount of media children are watching, with more than a third (37%) very concerned.**

Parents of color were the most worried, with almost three-quarters of Black and Latina/o parents (75% and 64%) saying they were somewhat or very concerned.

"My daughter—we went to the library and my daughter got three books from the Pirates of the Caribbean movie. I'm like, okay, well it is reading, but. Still, it's kind of based on a movie. So that's hard to fight off, the whole marketing assault. And it comes from everywhere."
—*All Souls*

3 **Parents are concerned about images that encourage their girls to be pink princess or thin and sexy, with mothers and fathers about equally concerned.**

Media promotes two basic stereotypes to girls: the pink, sparkly princess focused on being pretty, and—for older girls—the ultra-thin, "sassy," Miley Cyrus focused on boys. We asked parents about both.

More than a third of parents (38%) are concerned about images that encourage them to be pink princesses, with mothers and fathers about equally concerned. As with media watching, Black and Latina/o parents were the most concerned, 50% and 44% respectively.

We found these numbers somewhat surprising, since the pink Princess theme is the dominant marketing message promoted to young girls and is enormously popular. However almost 4-in-10 parents worrying about it may be a sign of growing pushback. More than a third of parents (35%) cited their main reason for concern that the message might "hold girls back."

The image of the beautiful belle who leaves active, masculine things to her beau may be considered part of traditional Southern culture, but we found little difference by region: 41% of parents in the Northeastern states were concerned, but so were 36% of parents in the South.

More than two-thirds of parents (68%) are concerned about images that encourage their daughters to be thin and sexy, with almost half (47%) saying they are very concerned. The numbers included 71% of Black parents, and 63% of Latina/os.

38%
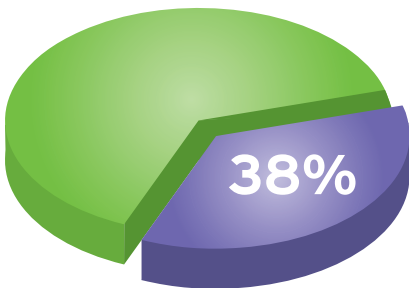
Parents concerned about images that encourage girls to be pink princess

68%

47% *very concerned*
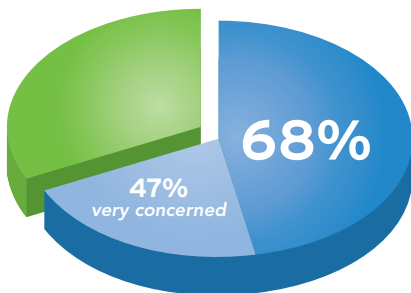
Parents concerned about images that encourage their daughters to be thin and sexy

"I also worry about [my daughter liking] Barbie. She wants anything Barbie. We went to the store and all she wanted was Barbie books. We purged all her toys this week. She kept everything related to Barbie and nothing related to Elmo…And Barbie is scary. Barbie scares me." —*All Souls*

Among those *very* concerned about the thin, sexy image, there was also a notable difference by sex. Almost twice as many mothers as of fathers (56% vs. 31%) were worried.

Again, we found little difference by region and in fact Southern parents were the *most* worried. 52% of parents in the South said their were *very* concerned, more than the West, Northeast, or Midwest.

Parents gave diverse reasons for their concern over pushing sexy images to girls: 30% because it was morally wrong, 25% because they thought it could hold their daughters back or hurt their chances of success, 17% because they thought it make lead to their being sexually active and 19% because they might develop eating disorders.

> "Because I will definitely not say—man up, don't cry. But also the swords and the guns and all of that—that's definitely not going to be introduced to him, that hyper-aggressive type of thing that I want to control."
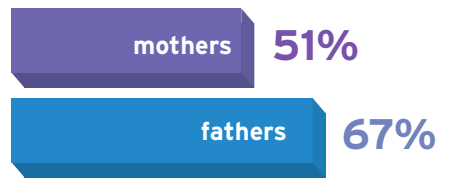
4 **60% of parents are concerned about images that encourage their sons to be "tough and aggressive" with 34% very concerned.**

Black parents were by far the most concerned, almost 4-in-5 (79%).

Fathers (51%) were markedly less worried than mothers, more than two-thirds of whom were concerned. (67%)

mothers **56%**
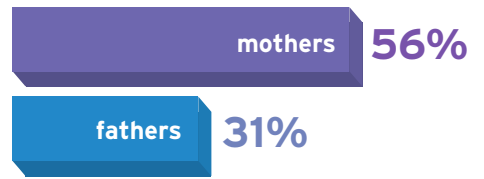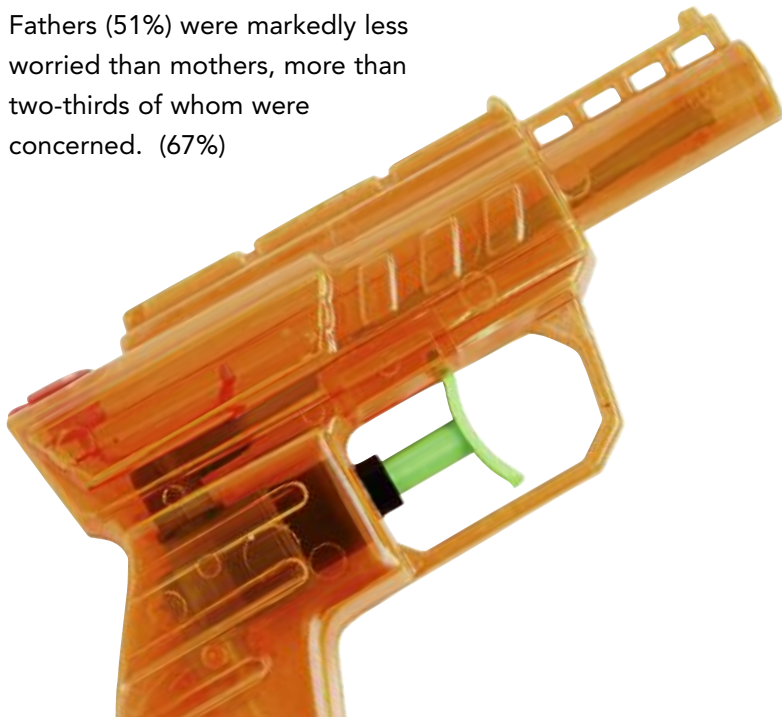
fathers **31%**

Among those parents *very* concerned about images that encourage their daughters to be thin and sexy, twice as many were mothers than fathers

mothers **51%**

fathers **67%**

Fathers were makedly less worried than mothers about images that encourage their sons to be "tough and aggressive."

5 **Gay parents are especially concerned about the promotion of aggression and toughness, and that it might force boys to hide who they are.**

"It's a loss of innocence too early. I had to teach him when he was young. You're here explaining to a little kid that sometimes you take your true self and you hide it a little bit to protect yourself. So he wouldn't get his feelings hurt all the time. I mean, why do you have to teach a kid that?"

More than half of the parents in our LGBT focus group shared stories of their children being teased or harassed because of some gender violation of the 'Boy Code' of being strong, silent and aggressive.

Gay parents were especially worried about their children having to hide their "true natures" - something they had experienced this themselves as children. One parent summed it up as, "The pressure forces them to deny their real nature, which we know from personal experience is very painful. If my son feels that he can't do his dance class anymore because he'll be teased, even though he enjoys it, that will be a loss for him and for me. If he can't express himself in the way he wants just because of some notion of proper gender for boys, that's sad."

"My son is pretty sensitive right now. And I love that about him. And I want to nurture that in him. And I wonder if that will be something he'll feel is a liability at some point."

"I have a family of all brothers so they were horrified that my son had a pink little doll he slept with. And he loved her. It was his little friend, and she was the first thing he'd smile at in the morning. And they would say, Oh God, just please call it a pink action figure. They couldn't stand the fact that he had a toy like that. And I hope he was too young to understand what they were saying. But as a parent, you just can't fight these battles all the time."

[NOTE] About the poll

The survey was conducted in summer of 2009 for TrueChlid by SurveyUSA using random number dialing. SurveyUSA uses professionally recorded questions, rather then live interviewers. Out of approximately 3,300 adults reached, 1,000 said they had children age 12 or under and were willing to participate. They were about evenly split between males and females (48%, 52%), with fully two-thirds (66%) aged 18-34. Where respondents had multiple children, we asked them to repond about their youngest. About half (53%) had very young children ages 1-3.

About a quarter of respondents were Black or Latina/o—a population size too small to draw conclusions with high reliability. Nonetheless, because there is so little new data on this population and children's media, we thought it was important to include. We have broken out responses from these sub-populations where they varied strongly from the average. We also probed these parents' attitudes in focus groups.

Respondents were not asked to provide their sexual orientation, since survey answers supplied to this question can be unreliable. Rather, we tested the attitudes of these parents in focus groups as well.

Focus groups were conducted in several cities, including Chicago, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. To ensure we sampled diverse reactions, we also conducted specific focus groups with LGBT parents, with Jewish parents at DC's Jewish Community Center , and with Black and Latina/o parents at All Souls Unitarian Church in DC. We would specifically like to thank the Center and the Church for their cooperation. Some focus group responses have been edited for readability.

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[i] Kaiser Foundation
[ii] TrueChild TV Index
[iii] We asked about "television, playing video games, or on websites," but did not ask about cellphone apps or DVDs.

"I'm thinking gender—all the toys are for boys or girls. It's the marketing. I don't think it's so much trying to say 'make boys this way and girls this way.' It just works to market to them that way. So now, my 6 year old is saying he doesn't like purple, because it's a girl color. It's not even just pink, now it's purple too. And he plays at lunch— his free time at school with other boys with the Legos. And I ask him like— what do the girls do? Oh, they play with dolls. And this is, I try to counter it as much as I can."

"Pop culture is so hypersexual. I have a little boy and I'm always seeing like the scantily clad dolls on the shelves and things like that. I don't want him to prematurely come into that sexuality. But you see it just earlier and earlier."

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