

“SOON THEY’LL BE KILLING PEOPLE ON THE COOKING CHANNEL”

What Parents Are Saying about TV Today

A Report from Public Agenda for the Family Friendly Programming Forum
By Jean Johnson, Senior Vice President

In the summer of 2002, Public Agenda conducted a detailed study of more than 1,600 American parents with children between the ages of 5 and 17. The study, underwritten by State Farm Insurance Companies, focused on a preeminent challenge of parenting: how to raise children who grow up to be responsible, honest, humane, and considerate adults. It looked carefully at issues facing today’s families, attempting to gauge both what parents say – and what they actually do – about the task of raising children of good character. This fall, Public Agenda issued a report on the research entitled *A Lot Easier Said Than Done: Parents Talk about Raising Children in Today’s America*.

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It will not surprise anyone who follows contemporary discussions about families and children that the topic of TV came up repeatedly. In focus groups conducted prior to the survey, parents often brought up television before moderators even mentioned it. They typically spoke of TV as a teacher and entertainer, for good or for ill. For many in this generation of media savvy parents, TV is undeniably a comfortable and relaxing old family friend. Yet, the parents also believed that TV has changed in recent years, changed in ways that make it far more problematic for their children and far less comfortable for them.

With the support of the Family Friendly Programming Forum, Public Agenda was able to explore TV issues at some length in our research, and some of the findings are discussed in our overall report on parenting, *A Lot Easier Said Than Done*.

Here, we focus on television in more detail, and using a question-and-answer format, lay out what the research reveals about its role in today’s families.¹ Not everything we report is new – after all, parents have been saying many of the same things about television for decades. Yet the research offers some surprising insights into how different families handle TV, and it presents a compelling picture of the reality parents face when pundits suggest that they merely turn the TV off.

Question 1: Is TV really that much of a worry? Aren’t there a lot more important things for parents to worry about today?

Public Agenda’s recent work confirms what surveys have shown almost since TV’s inception: parents continue to voice concerns about what their children see on TV. But a major new theme emerging from the current research is that today’s

parents have a growing list of worries about raising children. They see a wide range of serious dangers and negative influences encircling their children’s lives.

Public Agenda found that large majorities of parents worry about protecting their children from drugs and alcohol (79%); about the negative influences of other kids (76%); about poor quality public schools (66%), and even that someone might harm or kidnap their child (76%). The research was fielded during a period of intense media coverage of a series of child murders and abductions, and this was no doubt on the minds of many parents surveyed. But earlier Public Agenda research has unearthed equally powerful fears among parents about whether their children are safe from predators. A year 2000 study of child care, for example, found that 63% of parents of children 5 and under are very concerned that their child might “suffer physical or sexual abuse” in day care.²

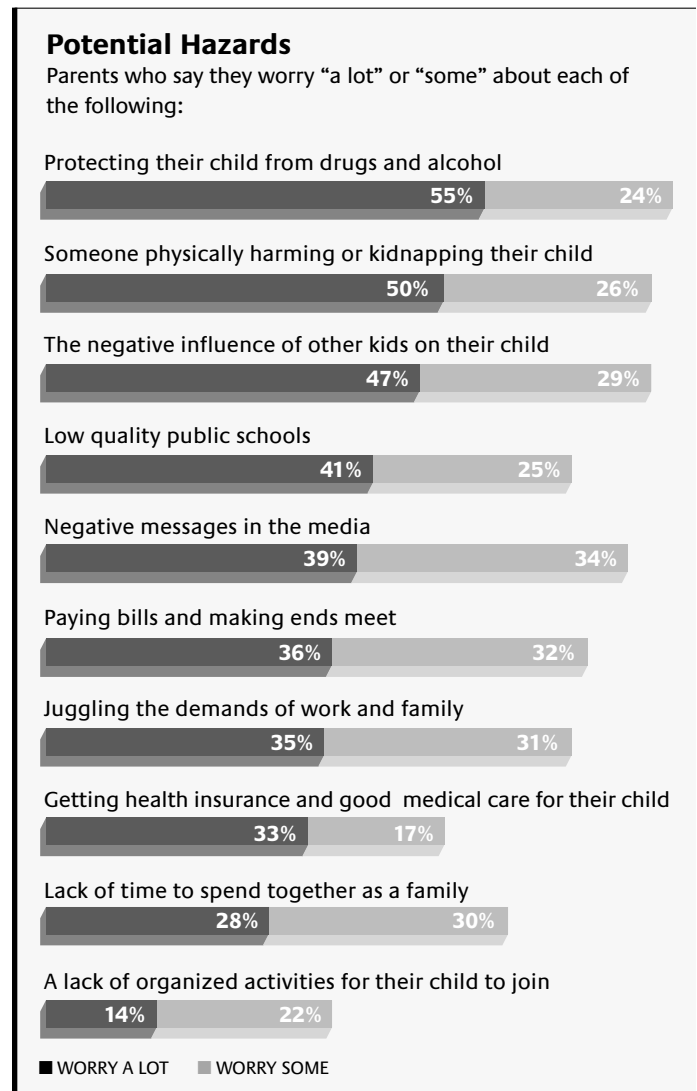
In focus groups conducted for the project, parents frequently talked about the weight of their responsibilities and anxieties – their need to be constantly vigilant, to account for every hour, to check out every friend, to filter and counter pernicious lessons from the world “outside.” Many parents spoke longingly of the comparative innocence and freedom *they* enjoyed as children, memories that seem to contrast sharply with their own children’s more closely supervised lives. For today’s parents, the society that surrounds them often seems treacherous and inhospitable. Today’s America often seems an unsafe, unhelpful environment for raising children.

While 73% of the parents surveyed say they worry a lot or some about “negative messages in the media,” conversations in focus groups also make it clear that TV is just one source of worry among many: TV, films, popular music, popular magazines, sports, computer games, all of these can contain the questionable, sometimes shocking content that parents say they worry about. One mother talked about the cascade of violence, selfishness and irresponsibility she sees in popular media. “Nothing is safe. Look at the commercials. I worry more about the violence. I am concerned about the sex also, but [it is] the general violent attitude and the immediate gratification . . . The video games and all that stuff encourages all that. Violence in a lot of the CDs and on the radio . . .”

Indeed, the overall message from parents is that they often see themselves fighting an uphill battle. They want to teach their children to be responsible, respectful, and honorable people. Yet, from every direction, today’s popular culture seems bent on emphasizing the violent, irresponsible, and squalid aspects of life. In fact, nearly half of parents (49%) say they worry more about “raising a child who is well-behaved and has good values,” than about providing for their child’s health and

physical well-being (23%), although a quarter (25%) of parents say they worry about both. As one Connecticut mother put it, “What’s hard is . . . keeping the world at bay until you’ve formed these kids, so that they can learn to make their own decisions and live in the real world.”

In some ways, what parents say about television is probably no worse than what they say about other forms of popular media. Still, there is no question that TV’s omnipresence in American homes and its accessibility to even the youngest children put it in a special category. After parents in a Connecticut focus group spent nearly an hour trading stories about the complexities of dealing with television in their families, one father said: “We’ve been talking about it almost the whole time. It’s such a force in our culture.”



Question 2: Do parents believe that TV itself is the problem? Do they think children would really be better off without TV?

The vast majority of parents today are comfortable with TV, and very few believe that getting rid of it is either desirable or

feasible given the role it plays in modern life. In this study, 99% of the parents surveyed say that they have at least one TV in their home while 56% say they have three sets or more. A mother in Nashville described a not atypical situation in her own family: “[There’s] one in the living room, one is in my room, one is in my son’s room, one in my daughter’s room. If I have something I want to watch, and I don’t want them to watch, then I can go in my room and watch it...I don’t like to fight over the TV or remote. There are four TVs in the house. It’s not a big issue.”

The Public Agenda research confirms what other research has shown. TV is easily available to children and for most, it is a routine part of their lives. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children aged 2 to 18 typically spend about 19 hours a week watching television. Nearly half (47%) of youngsters aged 8 to 18 say the TV is on in their homes most of the time even if no one is watching, and nearly two-thirds (65%) report that the TV is usually on during meals.³

Clearly, most parents do not have a problem with the concept of children watching TV per se. Over nine in ten (93%) say that “TV is fine for my child as long as he or she is watching the right shows and in moderation,” with almost three-quarters (73%) saying this comes very close to their view. Eighty-five percent say that “there’s nothing wrong with my child relaxing for a while in front of the television.” Relatively few parents have “seriously considered getting rid of the TV” altogether. Just 11% think this statement is very close to their view; another 12% say this is somewhat close to the way they feel.

In focus groups, parents often described TV as virtually impossible to get away from – a cultural phenomenon so widespread and so widely referred to that it is nearly unavoidable. One father who was trying to limit his own children’s TV viewing described what he encountered: “I mean, you go to [your] relatives’ house...they have a TV in every room. They have a TV in the kitchen. They have a TV in the bathroom, and all of them are on...It drives me crazy. My kids are there and...when they pass by it they get sucked in. They see it and they’re like, ‘wow.’”

For some of the parents, avoiding TV entirely seems not only useless, it seems almost bizarre. One mother began raising her child without television but had second thoughts about her approach as her son got older. “Zachary was too different from everybody. He has 11 cousins, and nobody could relate to him. He felt like he was on the outside....he just wanted to be like everybody else, and he kept telling us, ‘I need to be like everybody else ...’ Last year at Christmas, we bought

a television, a VCR, and a Gameboy... my son is so happy... he’s on the honor roll. He makes As and Bs. He watches wrestling. He thrives.”

A Member of the Family

% OF PARENTS WHO:

Have a TV set in the home (n=1,606)	99%
Say TV is fine for child as long as he/she watches the right shows and in moderation (n=819)	93%
Say there’s nothing wrong with child relaxing in front of the TV (n=1,078)	85%
Have seriously considered getting rid of the TV (n=820)	22%

Question 3: But if parents are so comfortable with TV, why are there so many complaints about it? Aren’t people being pretty inconsistent?

The parents we interviewed see positive and negative aspects to television today. Most have grown up with television and enjoy watching it themselves. Still, the vast majority say that too much of TV has begun to cross the line. Unless they stay continually on guard, parents say, TV will put humanity’s seamiest and most frightening tendencies right before their children’s eyes.

Nine in ten (90%) of the parents surveyed say that “when it comes to bad language and adult themes, it seems like TV programs are getting worse every year,” with 70% saying this comes very close to their view. Seven in ten (71%) say they themselves have been “shocked or offended by something [they] saw on TV” in the past year. Only 29% say this has not happened to them.

Comments in the focus groups were often detailed and specific. One Nashville mother talked about what happened to her son when he began watching music videos: “My son just went crazy. I think it was the music and...the dancers were virtually naked. They were vulgar. They moved vulgar, talked vulgar. He thought it was okay, so he started talking vulgar...He’s at that point in life where he’s trying to figure out what is the good thing to do...Watching those videos, he thought, he was cool. ‘Tight’ is his word.”

Mothers in Nashville focused on TV wrestling, with complaints ranging from “the fighting and the slamming down” to the “screaming back and forth and cussing.” A Virginia dad complained about what he saw as sexual innuendo even in children’s cartoons. “All the female figures are half-dressed. Digimon wears skintight clothes with cleavage. The shorts

that are [not] always...there. This is what sells to kids.” Another father summed up his sense of what things were coming to: “Soon they’ll be killing people on the cooking channel. Now they’ve got this very sexy woman.”

Question 4: What do parents think about profanity or crude language on TV?

TV’s broad acceptance of saltier language came in for repeated criticism. A Los Angeles father was typical: “Just the language on television. You can say everything on television now... on regular TV. I’m pretty sure when all of us were coming up, it wasn’t like that. Maybe Archie Bunker, that’s about it. The exposure, the things they’re exposed to now...”

Parents in a Connecticut focus group echoed this view. When one mother commented that she was “amazed at the language they can use during prime time,” another immediately chimed in: “It’s allowed on day time TV [too].” Then a father added that his “three-year-old started saying, you know, ‘f – you.’ He was three. He said it really good.”

But the parents’ comments were not confined to the well-trodden categories of sex, violence and vulgarity. Some complained about in-your-face sitcom humor that, in their view, glorified disrespectful, smart-mouthed kids. One mother talked about the prevalence of what she saw as “a very disrespectful and angry attitude, like ‘Everybody else is garbage, and I’m going to do what I want.’”

Parents do not seem to be alone in having more wide-ranging concerns about the content of contemporary TV. A recent Public Agenda study documented widespread unease among the general public about the decline of courtesy and consideration throughout society. In that study, 43% of those surveyed said that they often come across “rude and disrespectful people” when they are “flipping through the channels on TV”; just 20% said such behavior was rare.⁴

Still, the nub of the problem may not be that TV has some material that is inappropriate for children or that its content can sometimes be crude, violent or boorish. For many parents, it is more the volume and ubiquity of this material that seem so overwhelming. Almost half of parents (47%) say that wherever their child turns they see “crude or sexual messages in the media.” A Nashville dad had pretty much given up on television for his young daughters: “My kids will never have a television in their bedroom. It won’t happen at my house. . . . you don’t know what they’re watching. There’s so much junk; there’s probably 95% garbage. There are some things that are good, [The] Learning and History Channel[s] that are educational. All the other stuff is either rude and obnoxious or mind-numbing. They get tuned in and don’t see anything. . . . They’re hypnotized.”

Ultimately, the problem is not just the irritating, but hardly life-threatening chance that children will mimic smart-mouthed TV sitcom characters (although teachers sometimes complain about this in focus groups too). More important perhaps is research by Kaiser showing that nearly half of parents (48%) believe exposure to sexual content on TV contributes “a lot” to kids becoming involved in sexual situations before they’re ready. Almost as many (47%) say exposure to violence on TV contributes “a lot” to violent behavior in children.⁵

Still, it would be completely misleading to suggest that most parents see TV as a “vast wasteland” without redeeming characteristics. More than eight in ten (82%) report that in the past year, they have watched “a TV program that was helpful in getting a good message” across to their child. Research by Kaiser buttresses the parents’ contention that TV can be a powerful tool for teaching youngsters responsibility and good values. Sixty percent of teenagers surveyed by Kaiser report that they learned how to say no to a sexual situation that makes them uncomfortable from watching TV, and 43% say they learned how to talk to a partner about safer sex. In fact, a third of older teens (33%) say they have had a conversation with one of their parents about a sexual issue because of something they saw on TV.⁶

TV: The Good, Bad, and the Ugly	
% OF PARENTS WHO:	
Say TV programs are getting worse every year when it comes to bad language and adult themes (n=1,107)	90%
Have found themselves shocked by something on TV in the last year (n=1,600)	71%
Say TV programs that air between 8 and 10 in the evening often have themes inappropriate for children (n=1,583)	65%
Have watched a TV program that was helpful in getting a good message across in the past year (n=1,597)	82%

Question 5: But what about the parents’ responsibility? How well are parents doing monitoring their children’s TV viewing?

For those who believe that parents should carefully supervise their children’s TV viewing, the overall results from the Public Agenda research are not encouraging. Fewer than half of parents (47%) say there is always an adult around keeping an eye on the TV when the child is watching; 46% of parents say this is only sometimes the case. Half (51%) also report that their child has a TV set in his or her own bedroom, something child care experts generally discourage.⁷

One Alabama father described the steps he had taken to supervise his preschooler's TV viewing. "There's a few channels I block out of his television . . . the four-year-old. He has his own television, own VCR, and the remote, and he knows how to use it. The channels that you would think of are not in there, of course. But I don't monitor . . . what he watches. Sometimes I go by and I hear something. I tell him, 'Whoa, you're not watching that.' That's a channel I forgot to take off." Researchers at Kaiser asked youngsters whether their family had any specific rules about watching TV; 61% of 8-18 year olds said that their family does not.⁸

Whether they rely on specific rules or other, less structured forms of monitoring, parents of younger children are significantly more likely to supervise TV viewing carefully. Almost three-quarters (73%) of parents with children under 10 say that there is always an adult around when their child watches TV. Parents of younger children are also less likely to report that their child has a personal TV set, although 40% of them do allow this. In focus groups, parents seemed to think that it is more essential to keep a handle on TV viewing when children are younger. They also think that it is far easier to do.

For example, parents often talked about limiting a younger child's viewing to channels that featured age-appropriate programs such as PBS or Nickelodeon. Some seemed to depend on videotapes of movies or TV programs designed expressly for the younger set. It may also be that children at this age are less likely to seek out problematic programming fare – they're just not all that interested in "adult" shows.

The picture for youngsters aged 13 through 17 is less reassuring. Nearly 6 in 10 parents with teens (58%) say their youngster has a TV in the bedroom; just 30% say there is always an adult around when their teen is watching TV. Furthermore, a recent Kaiser study reports that children aged 8 to 18 watch TV with their parents only 5% of the time.⁹

This fall-off in parents' level of supervision and involvement when children become teens is something educators complain about. In part, it reflects the judgment that the time has come for children to be more independent.¹⁰ Eighty-two percent of parents agree that "as kids get older, parents have to ease up and give them more freedom." A Nashville mom seemed to exemplify this line of thinking: "When my son was younger,

I watched and monitored what he watched, but now he's 17. Since the time he was 15, I basically let him [watch whatever he wants] . . . It's like he told me, 'Mom, I know if it's good or bad. You've taught me.' "

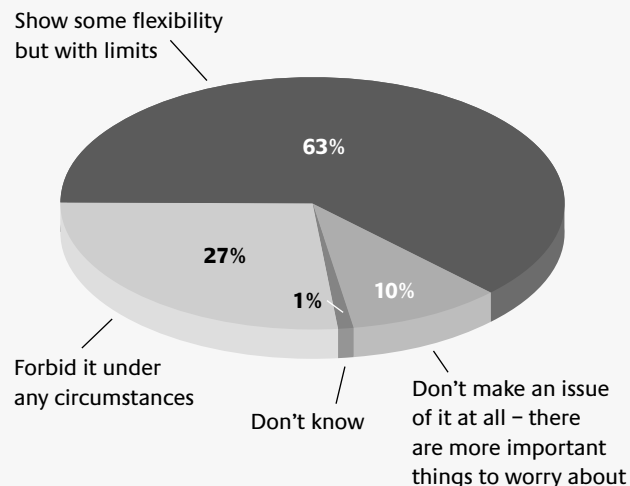
It may also be that parents – now facing a long list of challenges relating to dating

% OF PARENTS WHO SAY:	PARENTS OF 5-9 YEAR OLDS	PARENTS OF 10-12 YEAR OLDS	PARENTS OF 13-17 YEAR OLDS
Child has TV set in bedroom	40%	50%	58%
There is always an adult around when child watches TV	73%	53%	30%

Teens and TV and Beyond

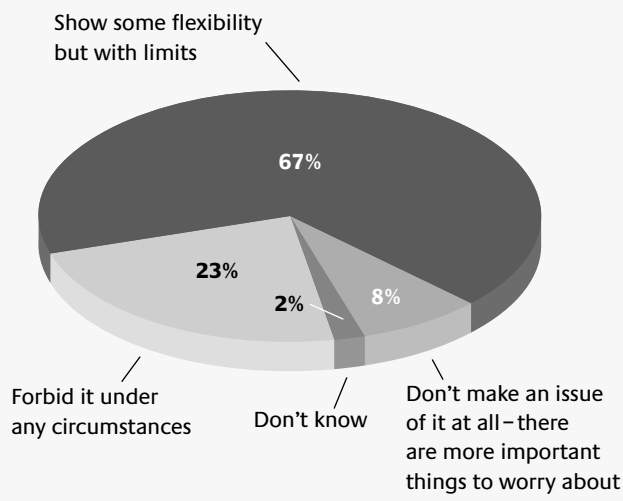
If teenagers do each of the following, what should parents do?

If teenagers want to listen to music with bad or crude language



Base: Parents of teens (n=426)

If teenagers want to wear sloppy or revealing clothes



Base: Parents of teens (n=565)

and driving and the whole “teen scene” – have decided that they need to pick their battles and cut the kids “a little slack.” The Public Agenda survey, for example, asked parents of teens what they would do if their teens wanted to listen to music with bad or crude language or to dress in sloppy or revealing clothes. Just 27% of the parents said they would “forbid” the questionable music; just 23% would lay down the law on the sloppy clothes. In both cases, most of the parents said that they would “show some flexibility,” but with limits. (63% for music; 67% for sloppy clothes).

Question 6: Are there any important differences in the ways different families handle TV?

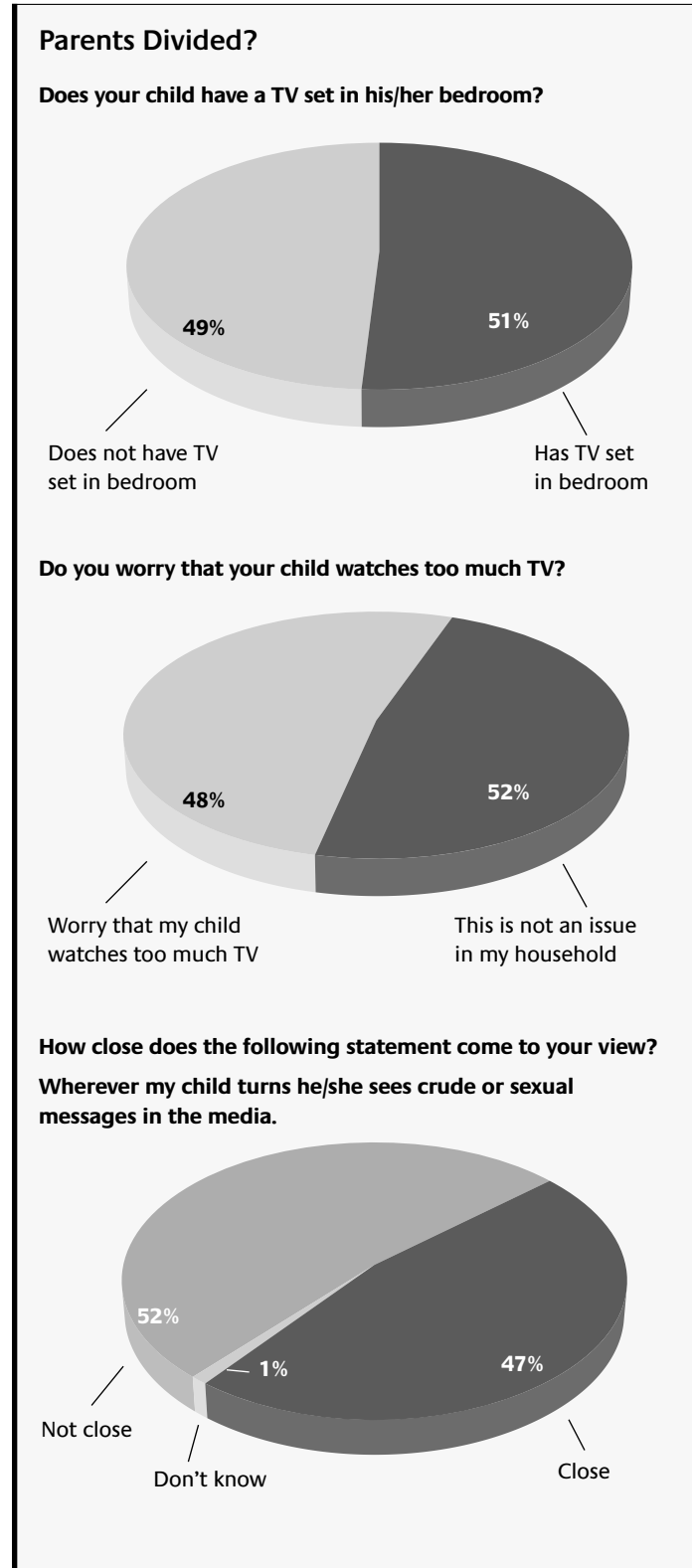
An initial glance at the findings might suggest that there are merely two camps of parents, some pretty worried and others considerably more relaxed. For example, there are roughly half-and-half divisions on whether parents allow their child to have his or her own TV and whether they allow them to watch alone. There is also a split among parents on the degree to which they believe that their children are routinely exposed to crude, sexual content in the media. Finally, nearly half of parents (48%) say they worry that their child watches too much TV, while the other half (52%) says this is not an issue. It is possible of course that some parents are worried because they are not doing a very good job supervising TV, while others are more relaxed because they actually have the situation well in hand.

Yet, there are subtle differences beneath the surface that could have important implications for those working to improve the way families handle TV. For example, parents who say there is always an adult present when their child watches TV appear to be parents who keep a close eye on their children in other areas as well. It is worth noting that every single parent in this group also told us that network programs between 8:00pm and 10:00pm often have themes that are inappropriate for children (perhaps because they actually see them).

These more vigilant parents are also more likely than other parents to say that their child never spends too much time on the computer (59% compared to 43%) and never spends too much time on the phone (66% vs. 51%). Over half of these parents (52%) report that reading is something their child loves to do, compared to just 37% of the rest of the sample. As we noted earlier, parents with younger children tend to be more careful about TV viewing, and the most vigilant parents are more likely to have children between the ages of 5 and 9 (49% vs. 19%).

Some parents – about 12% the research suggests – appear to have somewhat more conservative or traditional views about what constitutes acceptable or wholesome family fare.

These parents worry about negative messages in the media and fear that wherever their children turn, they are likely to see crude or sexual material. Not surprisingly perhaps, parents with these more conservative or traditional views also say they have been shocked or offended by something they saw on TV in the past year. They are somewhat more likely



Private Screenings

% of parents who say their child has a TV set in his/her bedroom:

BY RACE/ETHNICITY		BY INCOME		BY MARITAL STATUS	
African American	71%	\$25,000 or less	58%	Single	63%
Hispanic	59%	\$25,001 to \$75,000	53%	Divorced/Separated	56%
White	48%	Greater than \$75,000	43%	Married/Living as a couple	48%

Supervised Viewing

% of parents who say there is always an adult around when their child is watching TV:

BY RACE/ETHNICITY		BY INCOME		BY MARITAL STATUS	
African American	41%	\$25,000 or less	55%	Single	56%
Hispanic	50%	\$25,001 to \$75,000	47%	Divorced/Separated	44%
White	47%	Greater than \$75,000	41%	Married/Living as a couple	46%

than other parents to be moms (67% compared to 56%) and to take their child to religious services regularly (66% compared to 45%).

The other group of parents that may warrant special attention are those who have made the decision to allow their child to have a personal TV in their bedroom. These parents share demographic characteristics that are well worth noting. Parents whose children have their own TV are more likely to be single¹¹ (63% compared to 48% of married parents), and to have less education and lower incomes.¹² They are also more likely to be minorities. About seven in ten (71%) African-American parents and six in ten (59%) Hispanic parents say that their child has a TV set in his or her bedroom, compared to 51% of parents overall.

It is not clear from the research available here why lower-income, minority, or single parents are more likely to make this decision. One possibility is that low-income or minority parents are more fearful of their children being out in the neighborhood, and so tend to keep them home watching television. Also, minority or low-income families and single parents may be less able to afford other after-school and weekend activities such as music lessons or attendance at cultural, entertainment, or sporting events. It also may be that much of the “consciousness-raising” about the problems of too much unsupervised TV viewing has been directed primarily at middle-class white families.

Question 7: Why don't more parents monitor their children's viewing carefully?

The research suggests several possibilities. One message that comes through strongly is that today's parents believe they

must act on a lengthy and difficult agenda. They are trying to make sure their child is physically safe in what they see as a dangerous world; they are trying to protect children from the dubious messages of an insidious popular culture; they want their children to do well in school; they want them to eat well and exercise; they want them to have friends and develop social skills; they want them to be self-disciplined and independent.

Given the challenges they face – and the threats and dangers they must guard against – the large majority (85%) of parents say that they must “pick their battles – you can't fight your child over everything.” Most (59%) strongly agree that “being too strict can backfire because kids will do things behind your back.” With such a long “to do” list, it may be that many parents see TV as a place to compromise.

Parents by and large reject the “no TV” approach, and yet they see enough problems with what is on television to believe that they must exercise some control. Consequently, TV viewing tends to be an area of continual negotiation and compromise, and many factors might be taken into account on any given day – the age of the child, whether the parent is familiar with the program, whether the parent can watch as well, whether the homework is done, whether the parents are tired, whether the day has already been filled with parental questioning and pestering. In some instances, parents may feel that a little relaxing in front of the TV is appropriate; in others, they may decide that today, TV is the least of their problems. And parents do not give themselves a free pass when it comes to being consistent and exercising follow-through. Half of today's parents (52%) are willing to characterize themselves as “a parent who sometimes lets too many things go.”

There is also substantial evidence from the research that television is not the only area where parents have trouble reaching their goals. For example, 83% of parents say that it is “absolutely essential” for their child to learn “self-control and self-discipline,” but of those, just 34% say that they have succeeded in teaching these character traits. Just 28% of parents say they have succeeded in teaching their children to handle money carefully; just 40% feel they have succeeded in teaching good nutrition.

Parents, of course, love and enjoy their children. Virtually all of the parents surveyed (96%) agree that “being a parent is wonderful – I wouldn’t trade it for the world.” But parents themselves acknowledge plenty of room for improvement.

The Success Rate			
Please tell me how essential the following are to teach your kids and whether you feel you have succeeded in doing so.			
	ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL	HAVE SUCCEEDED	= GAP
To have self-control and self-discipline	83%	34%	49
To save money and spend it carefully	70%	28%	42
To be honest and truthful	91%	55%	36
To be independent and do for themselves	74%	38%	36
To always do their very best in school	82%	50%	32
To have good nutrition and eating habits	68%	40%	28
To be courteous and polite	84%	62%	22
To have strong religious faith	61%	53%	8
To help those who are less fortunate	62%	55%	7
To exercise and be physically fit	51%	53%	-2
To enjoy art and literature	33%	51%	-18

The Willingness to Compromise	
% OF PARENTS WHO:	
Believe parents should show some flexibility if teens want to listen to music with crude language (n=826)	60%
Strongly agree parents have to pick their own battles (n=830)	59%
Strongly agree that being too strict can backfire (n=1,107)	52%
Say they’re a parent who sometimes lets too many things go (n=1,599)	52%

Question 8: How have parents responded to tools such as the V-chip and program ratings designed to help them guide their children’s TV viewing?

The record is mixed, and some promising ideas such as the “V-chip” have proven less popular with parents than might have been predicted. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 7% of parents say they have used a V-chip to monitor their children’s television viewing, although 40% of families have a TV equipped with such a device. The Kaiser research strongly suggests that part of the problem may be lack of knowledge since roughly half (53%) of parents who have a V-chip equipped TV don’t know it.¹³

One father’s comment suggests that the technological hurdle – whether it is real or only in people’s minds – may need to be explored more fully. When Public Agenda’s moderator asked him if he had used the V-chip, he answered, “No, we haven’t, but I think it’s a technological thing. I think there’s a lot of people [who] are afraid of technology. . . . First of all, how many people program their VCRs? Everybody laughs about it, but that’s the truth. So this is going to be something else that somebody is going to have to figure out how . . . to get it to work. Forget it.”

TV program ratings have been somewhat more successful. According to Kaiser, a little over half of parents (56%) say they have used these ratings to make decisions about what shows their children will watch.¹⁴ Almost four in ten (39%) say they have stopped a child from watching a TV show because it had a specific rating.¹⁵ Even so, a reasonable number of parents have complaints about the system. Among parents who have used the ratings, 40% say most TV shows are not being rated accurately. Perhaps because they have been around longer and receive more publicity, movie ratings are more broadly used; 84% of parents say they have used them.¹⁶

Most parents are at least somewhat engaged in monitoring what their children see on TV, especially when they are younger. In contrast, very few seem motivated to try to influence what is on TV in the first place. Even among the 71% of parents who say they have been shocked or offended by something they have seen on television in the past year, just 13% say they telephoned, wrote or e-mailed the station to complain. Parents give a variety of reasons for their inaction, but the predominant one is that they didn’t think it would make a difference (42%). Many parents doubt that they could be influential even if they acted in concert with many other dissatisfied viewers. Public Agenda asked what would happen if 10,000 people called a TV network to complain about something that was broadcast. Here, the parents

are split: 49% say executives in charge would pay serious attention, but 47% say they would probably just ignore it. Substantial numbers also say that they didn't complain because they didn't have the contact information (30%), or because they just forgot about it (23%).

Question 9: So what do parents think would help them? What do parents want?

Most parents – and most Americans – seem to yearn for an overall reduction in the amount of profanity, salaciousness, and general boorishness in popular entertainment overall, and perhaps especially on TV. TV may not be the primary or most egregious offender, but it is the medium people invite into their homes and the one that children have access to on a daily basis and at a very early age. Over eight in ten Americans (85%) say there's far too much sex and crude language on TV these days, with over two-thirds (67%) saying this statement comes very close to their view.¹⁷

But the long-standing issues of sex and violence are not the only concern. The majority of Americans say they are troubled by an overall decline in courtesy and consideration and by a corresponding rise in rude behavior and aggressiveness. And TV, according to most of them, is a primary culprit. In fact, when people were asked where they were most likely to see rude and disrespectful people, TV topped the list, beating out stores, airports, even government offices.¹⁸

Parents also seem to want more predictability. Only 19% of the parents surveyed say that TV programs on major networks between 8:00pm and 10:00pm are “usually OK for the whole family to watch;” 65% believe these shows “often have themes that are inappropriate for children (while 15% admit that they don't know enough to say). Parents sometimes cited instances of unexpected explicitness and profanity in the midst of mainstream programming – sometimes in commercials and promos – and many seemed to believe that this trend is on the rise.

Even so, it is important to emphasize that many of the parents we spoke with did not seem to be calling for tame, hackneyed or sanitized programming. Several specifically pointed out that they and their families watch some of TV's edgiest programming. One Connecticut mom said: “I have a confession to make. We, as a family, sit down and watch the new show, Ozzy Osbourne. . . every other word is that f---. The entire family sits down. We get such a kick out of that show. It's funny. These people are bizarre. But there's something sweet about it, because what comes through is this family really loves each other.”

A Nashville mother said that she used what is often considered adult fare to introduce her teen son to some of the realities

of life. “Boston Public is a real heated show . . . They cover issues from lesbians . . . to the gay teachers, gangs, all kinds of things. Just real intense, but my oldest son likes to watch it, and I'll watch it with him because it's a prime opportunity to talk about the way other folks live. A lot of things on Boston Public are real. I don't want him so sheltered that he thinks everything is Mickey Mouse.”

When survey takers ask the public who should be mainly responsible for limiting the amount of violence children are exposed to in entertainment media, 70% say the parents, while 11% pick distributors such as TV networks or movie theaters. Mere handfuls look to the producers or to government.¹⁹ This represents a fairly solid social judgment that parents themselves need to exercise more judgment and authority in their own homes.

On an intellectual level at least, most parents seem willing to accept this responsibility, although they do not always live up to their good intentions. And it is easy for pundits to tell parents to just turn off the TV set. For parents leading complicated and harried lives, it may be a far harder thing to do. Clearly, a lot of parents seem to need a little moral support.

Yet however sympathetic one may be about the difficulties of modern family life, it is clear that many parents sometimes fail to do the TV monitoring job that only parents can do – particularly once their children become teens.

More research, especially among single-parent, low-income and minority families, might illuminate why parents make the decisions they do. More exact information about program content might help them make better decisions. More effective guidance from educators and child and health professionals might help them exercise more control. More interesting TV options, particularly for older kids, might bolster parents' efforts to raise teens responsibly. And, according to more than a few of the parents interviewed for this study, some additional family friendly oases – without the profanity, without the innuendo and without the incessant wisecracks – might not be such a bad thing either.

About Public Agenda

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our web site, www.publicagenda.org, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues. Jean Johnson is a senior vice president at Public Agenda.

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Endnotes

1. In this report, we draw on responses from a national random telephone survey of 1,607 parents or guardians of children aged 5 to 17. The research also included 12 focus groups conducted in communities across the country and a review of other recent surveys focusing on television and entertainment media.
2. Farkas, Steve, Ann Duffett, et al. *Necessary Compromises: How Parents, Employers and Children's Advocates View Child Care Today*. Public Agenda, 2000, p. 49.
3. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium*, November 1999.
4. Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, et al. *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*. Public Agenda, 2002, p. 47.
5. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents and The V-Chip*, July 2001.
6. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Teens, Sex, and TV*, May 2002. Older teens refers to children aged 15-17.
7. See, for example, Mifflin, Lawrie. "Pediatricians Suggest Limits On TV Viewing by Children." *The New York Times*, August 4, 1999, p.1.
8. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium*, November 1999.
9. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Kids & Media @ The New Millennium*, November 1999.
10. Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, et al. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools*. Public Agenda, 1999, p. 30.
11. The category of "single" includes only those who indicate they have never been married. The category of "married" includes those who say they are currently married or living as a couple.
12. Two-thirds (66%) of parents with less than a high school education say their child has a TV set in his or her bedroom compared to 41% of parents with a college degree or more. Fifty eight percent of parents with a household income of \$25,000 or less allow their child to have a TV set in their bedroom compared to 43% of parents with an income over \$75,000.
13. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents and The V-Chip*, July 2001.
14. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents and The V-Chip*, July 2001.
15. Kaiser Family Foundation, *TV Ratings Survey*, April 1999.
16. Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents and The V-Chip*, July 2001.
17. Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, et al. *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*. Public Agenda, 2002, p.50.
18. Ibid, p.47. "How often do you see rude or disrespectful behavior – when you are flipping through the channels on TV (43% say often); in stores or shopping malls (34% say often); at work (30% say often); when dealing with a government office (19% say often); at the airport or on a plane (13% say often); in your immediate neighborhood (9% say often)?"
19. *Newsweek* Poll. National telephone survey of 1,019 adults conducted September 2000.