

## CHILDHOOD, WITH OR WITHOUT TELEVISION

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### Abstract

*The advent of television and other technological innovations have generated significant changes in people's way of living. In a relatively short time, television has penetrated most houses triggering significant modifications and occupying an increasingly common central space. Thus, many viewers have come to regard television as the safest source of information, and life is, or should be, as we are shown in the various TV shows. The easiest to influence are children, as their personality is not formed yet and the need to follow a model is very important. Adults know what kind of people and models are being promoted by television nowadays. Values are starting to gain a different shape and feelings such as honesty, sincerity or kindness are beginning to fade on the scale promoted by television. Thus, the distorted picture of the role of the school presented on television, as well as the latter's specific mode of communication, has succeeded in influencing the children's motivation for learning and their attitude towards school, to an increasing negative extent.*

**Key words:** attitude towards learning, learning motivation, television

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### 1. Brief analysis on the impact of television upon the development of lower-elementary pupils

The advent of television has constituted a real explosion of the audio-visual broadcasting means, generating major mutations in the evolution and development of society, with serious changes also being felt in people's lifestyles. Television manages to stay in the top preferences regarding the use of the mass-media, due to the fact that it ingeniously combines images and sounds. The fact that the price of TV-sets has decreased significantly, opens the possibility for most families to be able to afford at least one television apparatus.

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Due to its ability to store and broadcast information worldwide by using a simple and universal language, the television proves to be the most often used means of information. It has rapidly turned into the most important means of information, outrunning by far newspapers and magazines, due to the fact that this broadcasting means appeals to such senses as seeing and hearing. But the speed at which information is broadcasted also places it on top.

One aspect that may be regarded simultaneously as an advantage and disadvantage is the fact that television has the ability to form and develop various skills, opinions, values and to impose behavioral models. This is an advantage if the broadcasted shows present educational aspects, information and situations related to life which may help build positive attitudes, openness towards the learning process and the various aspects of daily life. It may equally present a serious disadvantage if the broadcasted shows highlight violent scenes, an unhealthy lifestyle and negative behavior. All these play a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviors of television viewers, irrespective of age and, even a greater impact the younger the age. Television has penetrated most families, soon becoming the information means with the widest national coverage. Available 24 hours a day and providing a wide variety of programs and shows, the television succeeds in satisfying a vast range of needs, covering the most diverse lifestyles, from that of the unemployed to those who are pressed by work or those working three 8-hour shifts.

By combining amazing images, sounds, color and movement, the television manages to please most of the viewers, also especially due to the fact that it induces the appearance of eliminating stress and loneliness. Hearing dialogues, talk-shows, watching programs and actions create the sensation that we are not alone and time passes more easily, as if when performing an interesting and enjoyable activity. On the other hand, many TV programs have the ability to educate, especially intellectually, but also aesthetically, morally or technologically. By presenting certain categories of shows (food, clothes, hygiene, arts, sports), they create the possibility of a systematic educational effort towards a healthy, balanced and harmonious lifestyle.

A special case in which the role of television proved highly efficient was that of a nine-year-old boy from the USA who got lost in the wilderness. He survived for 24 hours due to the surviving tips that he had learnt while watching a documentary on Discovery channel (<http://www.ziare.com/lifeshow/magazin/06-24-2009/un-baietel-a-supravietuit-in-salbaticie-aplicand-ce-a-invatat-pe-discovery-797128>, Web 11.01.2012). Due to the growth and diversification of TV programs, but also to the shifting of television's general goal from broadcasting information and the possibility for enlightenment to increasing the audience level, there has been a visible modification in terms of the role and use of certain programs and shows.

Viewing TV programs without being able to choose a channel, unwillingness to turn the TV off are the first signs of addiction. This effect also occurs when the viewer identifies with what he watches on the screen in terms of opinions and ways of acting.

The addictive effects may lead to physical and/or mental diseases such as obesity, diabetes, as well as different depression moods. Obesity may occur because many of those watching TV programs refuse to have their daily main meals at fixed hours, replacing them with snacks and fast-food products eaten while watching. The Romanian researcher Virgiliu Gheorghe argues that during watching, the prefrontal cortex is affected, therefore, the voluntary activity decreases, causing passivity in planning and performing various activities. The operation and development of the two hemispheres of the brain in terms of cognitive activities are different. The left hemisphere mediates logical, deductive thinking, analysis and synthesis. Good use of grammar, as well as syntax, is controlled by it. The right hemisphere represents the processes connected to imagination, emotions and colors.

Research shows that while watching TV, the right hemisphere is stimulated, inhibiting the activity of the left hemisphere. Therefore, activities such as logical thinking, writing, reading, as well as grammar use, are affected by excessive TV watching. The negative effects have extended and there are discussions about a decrease in intelligence as a consequence of prolonged TV watching because, most of the times, this replaces activities such as physical games or hand work. The decrease of the intellectual capacity is generated by the two hemispheres' lack of coordination (Virgiliu, Gh., 2007). The TV viewing activity also impacts upon the learning process, attitudes towards school, because these affect certain cognitive processes. Children who grow in front of the television-set no longer read books, a fact which applies to adults as well. Children no longer feel the need to read as they are unable to understand and connect the meanings of words in a sentence. Many teachers and parents blame the television for negatively influencing the performance of pupils and for diminishing the children's interest for school. By creating new interests and needs, diverse options for spending one's leisure time, the television has produced deep mutations in the activities performed by nowadays' children and young people.

Ion Albulescu (2003) considers that the television system has a special impact upon the shaping and development of one's personality, enhancing the children's power to revolt against their parents and the restrictions imposed by these. In such circumstances, many children believe that violence is the most efficient way of solving problems. It has been demonstrated that children imitate parents starting with their very first years of life, this being the basis for learning at this age. Thus, in many cases, children have committed murder

without a specific reason, under the influence of certain scenarios from different TV programs. A special case was that in which two brothers from Minnesota copied a procedure from an action movie in killing their parents. The children were sentenced, with the defense equally blaming the television program that had run the respective movie (<http://www.mediafire.com/?r5wuoym5y579fkm> Web 11.01.2012). Therefore, not only parents and school play a key essential part in shaping the children's behavior, but television as well, by constantly and massively penetrating our houses and lives. All people tend to learn from everything they come in contact with. In a subtle way, television manages to become a teacher of norms and standards of behavior, this role being accepted by most viewers. The television system cannot inform without shaping certain attitudes and behaviors, each informative act being, at the same time, a formative one (Albulescu, I. 2003).

Watching a large number of violent scenes accustoms the viewer with these and leads to acceptance of the fact that violence may constitute a normal way of living and a way of solving various problems, without being punished. Prolonged watching of such scenes decreases awareness of the fact that violence causes pain and suffering, as well as of the negative consequences it generates on the long term. By using violence against the negative characters – who deserve to be punished – people feel right to behave in the same way towards others, too. A child under 3 years of age does not understand what he sees, but absorbs, instead, the violence he sees on the small screen, as it represents an inciting and successful model for adult life. In his work entitled *Homo videns*, Giovanni Sartori claims that “the child whose first school is television is a symbolic animal who receives his imprint, his formative pattern from images belonging to a world fully centered on sight”. Hence, the child absorbs and records these images without the power of thought (Sartori, G., 2005, p. 27). A study on the violence generated by television shows how several children who had been watching the famous series “The Power Ranger” committed, once the TV has been turned off, 7 times more violent acts than children who had not watched that series (Herjeu, R., n.d.). Children watching violent movies tend to protest less against certain types of injustice, as they are less attentive to, and affected by, the suffering of others. They orient themselves towards copying the watched scenes and identifying with their favorite characters.

## 2. Presentation of the essential aspects of the research

In agreement with this state of facts, we designed, and conducted throughout the 2011-2012 school year, an ascertaining type of research, which started from the following general hypothesis: Can the attitude of lower-elementary pupils be influenced by prolonged viewing of TV programs?

The specific hypothesis: A lower-elementary pupil who spends most of his leisure time watching TV programs is at risk for shaping a negative attitude towards the instructive-educational process. The basic methods used during the study were the interview, the case study and the psycho-pedagogical observation.

The objectives of the research were the following:

- Identifying the case;
- Establishing the observational indicators included in the observation sheet;
- Elaborating the observation sheet upon which the study relies;
- Systematically filling in the observation sheet;
- Building and applying the questionnaires regarding the relation between TV viewing and the attitude towards the educational process;
- Identifying the time spent by the lower-elementary pupil;
- Detecting the TV programs that are most frequently watched by the pupil;
- Establishing correlations between watching TV programs and displaying a negative attitude towards school.

The research conducted covered the following stages:

- *initial evaluation*: performed during July-August 2011; a semi-structured interview was applied to the child regarding the alternatives for spending one's free time and the attitude towards the start of the first school year, with a second application of the interview at the end of the first school day;
- *formative evaluation*: performed during October 2011 – April 2012; the observation sheets were systematically elaborated (for the learning activities carried out at school, as well as at home) and the semi-structured interview on the child's attitude towards school and TV viewing was applied at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester;

- *final evaluation*: performed during the month of April 2012; a conclusion was drawn concerning prolonged TV viewing and its possible impact upon the pupil's attitude towards the educational process. This was achieved by elaborating the case study and the semi-structured interview.

In realizing the case study, we started from developing some observations and the systematic filling in of the observation sheets, both during school classes, 2 hours per week, and at home, 2 hours also, while homework was being done, as well as from applying a semi-structured interview on how one spends one's leisure time and the child's attitude towards school. Here are some of the conclusions drawn throughout the study only by means of the method of observation. After systematizing the observations, we have found that the TV had been occupying an increasingly important place in the child's life. Watching TV programs had been the free time filling activity, at times acting like an alarm clock and, at times, like a sleep inducing device. The favorite programs of the pupil M. C. L. are cartoons. As we watched these cartoons together with the pupil, we noticed a certain change in his behavior. The language used by the characters and the images shown are inappropriate for his age due to their violence, and the models presented are easily assimilated by the child. The cartoon characters' violent language was quickly assimilated by the pupil, as was physical aggressiveness, regarded as the ideal solution in solving problems.

Our observations led to the conclusion that a prolonged viewing activity may generate modifications in the pupil's attitude towards the people around, too, as he may become more hostile and nervous when he is not allowed to watch TV. Following these observations, we believe that excessive TV viewing at a young age can lead to certain negative effects both in the mental and physical development of the child.

Comparing the results obtained during the two semesters, it results that the pupil was initially enthusiastic and happy about starting school and the learning process, did his homework eagerly and was motivated to learn. During the second semester, the situation gradually changed, the pupil eventually showing unwillingness for going to school, solving exercises or reading, he went to school indifferently and was no longer attentive in class. One of the causes which led to the change in the pupil's attitude towards school was the excessive watching of cartoons. In the initial evaluation, the pupil had claimed that he watched cartoons for approximately 3-4 hours a day. In the final evaluation, the time dedicated to watching TV had decreased, but the pupil found various levers to turn the TV on. For example, visiting his

grandparents is an opportunity for him to sit in front of the TV, but when at home, the TV is constantly on as well.

This activity has generated consequences in the development of the brain and its normal functioning. One of the consequences is an attention deficiency and a modification in the attitude towards various things. Deficient attention, agitation, inability to focus upon the lessons, low learning motivation, superficial solving of tasks was observed in relation to the pupil. His parents were forced to beg him to do his homework and the pupil refused or postponed this activity for as long as it was possible, instead asking for, or wanting to, watch cartoons.

### **3. Conclusions**

We may appreciate that prolonged cartoons watching can contribute to diminishing the motivation and modifying the attitude of the pupil towards school. However, the change in the pupil's attitude towards school is not entirely due to viewing cartoons or different TV programs. In this respect, there are other possible factors which may be involved, such as rigidity of the educational process, lack of teaching materials which may render the lessons more attractive, the context of conducting the educational process in simultaneous conditions (a fact which hinders the learning processes of a pupil with attention deficiency, who is not constantly monitored by the teacher due to the fact that the teacher has to manage two different groups of students).

To the same extent, a significant part is played by the parents, who should give more attention to their child, spend more time with him, discussing, carrying out common activities, diminishing his time dedicated to watching cartoons, especially viewing TV programs late into the night. In conclusion, viewing TV programs, cartoons, may generate negative changes in the attitude as well as the motivation of the child regarding school. Besides prolonged TV watching, there are other factors which lead to diminished motivation and to modifications in the child's attitude towards the instructive-educational process.

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