

Shalom M. Fisch/Anna Akerman/Melissa Morgenlander/Susan K. McCann Brown/
Susan R. D. Fisch/Bena B. Schwartz/Pat Tobin

The “Mommy Bar”

Getting parents and preschoolers talking

While watching TV, not only the programme content but also conversations between the viewers can have educational value. So as to motivate parents of preschoolers to engage in co-viewing, a running bar was shown at the bottom of the TV screen. This study investigates which text is most suitable to enhance the interaction between parents and their child.

Typically, discussions of the educational value of television focus on the educational content that is delivered through the screen in television series such as *Sesame Street* (e. g., Fisch, 2004). However, the potential educational value of television is not limited to the educational content embedded in television programmes themselves. In some cases, educational value also can be found in the interactions that occur among the people who sit in front of the screen.

Past research has demonstrated that, like joint reading of picture books, co-viewing television provides parents and children with a context for interactions that can contribute to literacy, such as labelling on-screen objects and making inferences about characters’ emotions or motivations (e. g., Lemish and Rice, 1986). Co-viewing has been found to yield other benefits too, such as increased comprehension of television programmes (e. g., Reiser et al., 1984, 1988; Warren, 2005).



Fig. 1: Sample text from the original Mommy Bar and the educationally enhanced version

All of the past research in this area has involved naturalistic viewing. Thus, it has documented the sorts of interactions that *do* occur during co-viewing. However, no prior research has addressed the question of whether television programmes might be designed intentionally to *increase* the incidence of these sorts of interactions during viewing. This study investigates this issue, using material from Cartoon Network’s preschool *Tickle U* programming block. When it premiered in 2005, the *Tickle U* block featured a “Mommy Bar” – a stream of text across the bottom of the screen, aimed at parents. The purpose of the present study is to determine whether such text can be used to stimulate parent-child interaction.

Procedure

The study was conducted with 58 pairs of parents and preschoolers (28 girls and 30 boys) in their homes; 28 of the children were 3 years old, 26

were 4 years old, and 4 were 5 years old. Of the 58 children, 28 % were minorities (African-American, Latino, and Asian), and 72 % were white. All of the families lived in the United States, in the New York-New Jersey area.

Researchers observed, videotaped, and audiotaped each parent-child pair as they watched one of three versions of the same 25-minute *Tickle U* video. All three versions contained the same television segments: *Harry and His Bucket Full of Dinosaurs*, *Yoko! Jakamoko! Toto!*, *Peppa Pig*, and a set of framing segments featuring Marty, the host of *Tickle U*. However, the three versions differed in terms of the text shown at the bottom of the screen (see Fig. 1):

- **No text:** No text was shown at the bottom of the screen.
- **Original Mommy Bar:** The on-screen text presented jokes and (to a lesser degree) general parenting information aimed at parents (e. g., “You’re a preschool parent if ... you know exactly how long it takes

to microwave four fish sticks perfectly”).

- **Educationally enhanced bar:** The on-screen text presented prompts related to the on-screen action, designed to stimulate the sorts of interactions observed in past research (e. g., “Does your room ever get messy?”, “Why is Toto sad?”).

Results

The results of the study confirmed our predictions: increased levels of parent-child interaction were observed among parent-child pairs who watched the version of the tape with the educationally enhanced bar. This difference emerged in several respects: On the broadest level, parent-child pairs who watched the educationally enhanced version spoke more to each other while viewing (marginally significant; $p < 0.1$; see Fig. 2). In fact, the pattern of differences further supported the idea that the on-screen parent text was responsible for these interactions – i. e., that parents read the text of the enhanced bar, initiated the sorts of interactions suggested in the bar, and children responded. Thus, marginally significant differences were observed in parent-initiated interactions and children’s responses ($p < 0.1$ in both cases), but not child-initiated interactions or parent responses.

More narrowly focussed analyses revealed stronger effects as well. As Figure 3 shows, parents who watched the educationally enhanced version were significantly more likely to make comments about characters’ emotions ($p = 0.05$), connect on-screen events to the children’s own lives ($p < 0.005$), and encourage viewer participation with on-screen games and activities ($p < 0.005$). They were also somewhat more likely to ask children to evaluate characters’ actions ($p < 0.1$).

Probably as a result of the parent comments, children who saw the edu-

cationally enhanced version were marginally more likely to engage in viewer participation, and to respond to their parents’ comments by evaluating characters’ actions ($p < 0.1$ in each case). Further evidence that these differences stemmed from the on-screen prompts can be found in analyses of specific segments within the video. As Figure 4 illustrates, significant differences in certain types of parent utterances appeared during the individual segments where these specific behaviours were prompted. This included: making inferences about characters’ emotions during *Yoko! Jakamoko! Toto!* ($p < 0.01$), tying on-screen events to children’s lives during *Harry and His Bucket Full of Dinosaurs* ($p < 0.01$), and engaging in viewer participation during the game of “Happy Mrs. Chicken” in *Peppa Pig* ($p < 0.001$). At a glance, nearly all of the preceding charts would seem to imply that parents and children interacted *less* if they saw the original Mommy Bar than if they saw no on-screen text at all. In fact, this difference was not strong enough to be statistically significant, so we must be cautious in drawing such conclusions. At the very least, though, it is safe to say that the original Mommy Bar text (which was not tied to the on-screen action and did not suggest specific comments/interactions) did not prompt more interaction than the no-text version. Indeed, it is possible that the appealing, exclusively parent-directed text in the original Mommy Bar drew some parents’ attention away from the programme. Thus, this

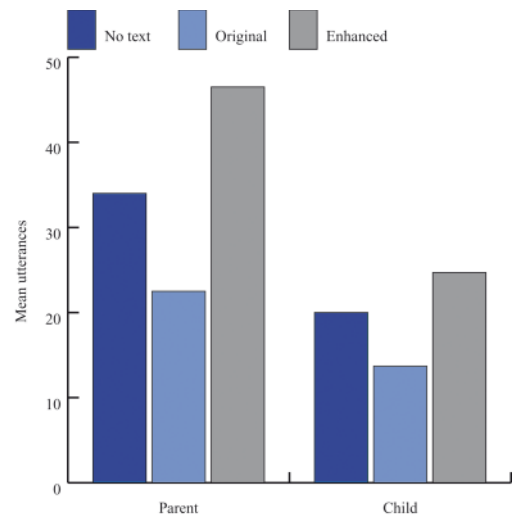


Fig. 2: Total number of parent and child utterances while watching the three versions of the video

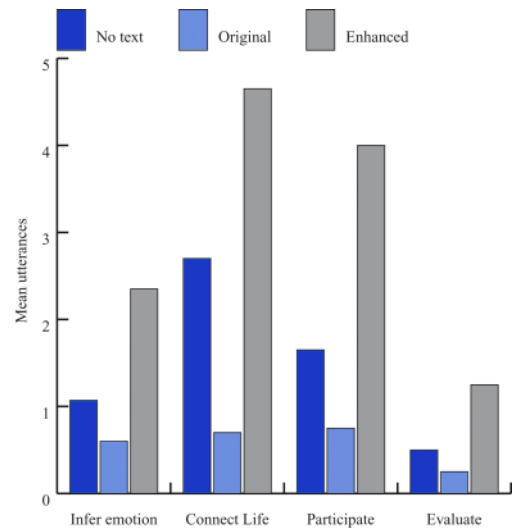


Fig. 3: Types of parent utterances that differed significantly across the three versions of the video

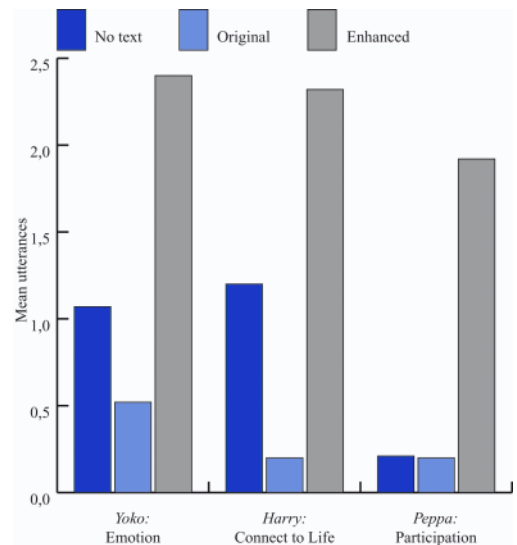


Fig. 4: Types of parent utterances that differed significantly in individual segments

version would be expected to produce less parent-child interaction than the other two – and this hypothesis is supported by parents' comments in interviews after viewing.

Slightly more than 1/2 of the 19 parents who saw the original Mommy Bar referred to it as "distracting", versus only 1 of the 21 parents who saw the educationally enhanced version. Perhaps as a result, parents who saw the educationally enhanced bar liked it better than parents who saw the original bar; approximately 1/2 of the parents who saw the educationally enhanced bar liked it, 1/2 felt it was "okay", and only one disliked it. By contrast, most of the parents who saw the original Mommy Bar said they disliked it, about 1/4 said it was "okay", and a few liked it.

Conclusion

Taken together, these data clearly demonstrate that on-screen text can be effective in stimulating parent-child interaction while viewing preschool television. To some degree, these interactions can occur naturally, in the absence of any prompts. However, they occur more often if the behaviour is specifically prompted on screen. Something as simple as a line of on-screen text can make a significant difference in parents' (and children's) behaviour while watching. Still, not all forms of on-screen text are equally powerful in prompting such interaction. Rather, interaction is more likely to result if the text is tied to on-screen action and suggests specific comments or behaviours for parents to employ, such as:

- Labelling on-screen objects and actions (e. g., "That's a dog", "What's the girl doing?")
- Retelling aspects of the story (e. g., "What happened?", "See, he cleaned his room!")

- Making inferences about characters' emotions or motivations (e. g., "He looks surprised!", "How do you think he feels?", see Fig. 5)
- Evaluating on-screen events (e. g., "Was that a good thing to do?", "What do you think they should do?")
- Tying objects or events to children's own lives (e. g., "That's like the time we went to Grandma's", "Ooh, ice cream! Do you like eating ice cream?")
- Encouraging viewer participation (e. g., "They're singing the alphabet song. Can you sing it, too?")

Of course, it is important to remember that the purpose of the educationally enhanced bar was not to force or trick parents into interacting with their children. As noted earlier, these particular behaviours were chosen because they represent types of interactions that some parents initiate naturally while watching television with their children, regardless of whether any text appears on the screen. Nor was the bar intended to prod every parent into engaging in every behaviour all of the time. Rather, the educationally enhanced bar was intended to serve as a tool that parents could choose to employ – a reminder of the sorts of things they could discuss with their children if they chose to do so (and if they hadn't already thought to say something similar themselves).

In this sense, the data from this study

show that the educationally enhanced bar can be a highly successful tool, from the standpoints of parents and broadcasters alike. If the text is designed appropriately (along the lines discussed above), then on-screen text can successfully stimulate important forms of parent-child interaction – and parents are likely to place more value on the text, too. ■

REFERENCES

- Fisch, S. M. (2004). *Children's learning from educational television: Sesame Street and beyond*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lemish, D.; Rice, M. L. (1986). *Television as a talking picture book: A prop for language acquisition*. In: *Journal of Child Language*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 251-274.
- Reiser, R. A.; Tessmer, M.A.; Phelps, P.C. (1984). *Adult-child interaction in children's learning from Sesame Street*. In: *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 217-223.
- Reiser, R. A.; Williamson, N.; Suzuki, K. (1988). *Using Sesame Street to facilitate children's recognition of letters and numbers*. In: *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 15-21.
- Warren, R. (2005). *Parental mediation of children's television viewing in low-income families*. In: *Journal of Communication*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 847-863.

THE AUTHORS

Shalom Fisch, Ph. D., is President of MediaKidz Research & Consulting in Teaneck, NJ, USA, and former Vice President of Programme Research at Sesame Workshop.

Anna Akerman, Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications at Adelphi University, Garden City, NY.

Melissa Morgenlander is a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University, NY.

Susan K. McCann Brown, Susan R. D. Fisch, and Bena B. Schwartz are researchers at MediaKidz Research & Consulting.

Pat Tobin conducts media research through her company, Relevant Research, New York City, NY.