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Just a babysitter?

Functions of television viewing in the daily life of children up to 5 years old from a parental perspective

When children watch television, it is usually the parents who switch on the set. The findings of a recent IZI study introduced in this article will illuminate what motivates them to do so and what functions television viewing serves within families.

Parents know that compared with other activities television hardly seems the ideal pastime for infants. What children need is a holistic experience of the world – which television denies them. And yet, parents allow their children to watch television from a very early age. Why is that? Public discourse and the press agree: for parents the TV serves first and foremost as an inexpensive babysitter. “Ever more parents buy time by putting a television set in the children’s room so they can have some peace,” can be read in a daily newspaper.¹ Popular journalism places parents within a simplistic schema: “While some mums and dads condemn the TV categorically, others approve using it – often, too – as a babysitter.”² But can the TV really be considered a babysitter? In everyday speech a babysitter is hired in order to be able to get out of the house without leaving their kids unattended. Does the TV take on that role? Why do parents employ the television in the first place, when it is broadly known that it is anything but the ideal activity, especially for infants?

Scholarly research has asked parents about their infants’ television use (Fei-

erabend/Mohr, 2004), but their own perspectives are rarely made the centre of attention. If anything, it is their attitudes towards television which are inquired about (among others cf. Rideout et al., 2006; Rideout et al., 2003; Weber/Singer, 2004; Götz, 2001; Kübler/Swoboda, 1998), or, for example, the TV rules they have established for their very young children (among others cf. Vandewater et al., 2005). How parents use the television in the daily life of their children, however, has been given little attention in recent research studies. As group discussions with Canadian parents have shown (cf. He et al., 2005), parents use the television for various purposes in everyday life: as rearing support, as a babysitter, as a tool to initiate bedtime, as a family activity, as background noise, and as a means to stimulate or relax from physical activity. In focus group interviews in the US, parents emphasise the educational value of television and talked about television as safe activity for children while they themselves care for household or other things (cf. Rideout et al., 2006). The functions German parents attribute to the television, however, are thus far unknown. Within the framework of a study conducted by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) we conducted a study with three steps. Step 1: In the qualitative part we asked parents of infants and preschool children to keep a diary over a period of 10 weeks in order to

document how their children came to watch television in the family’s everyday life. Step 2: In subsequent one-to-one interviews parents revealed their attitudes and their general handling of the television issue, and they explained the function assumed by the device in their daily life. In order to enrich the qualitative data with a frequency assessment of the various functions encountered, we designed a quantitative survey based upon our qualitative findings (step 3) in which we asked mothers of 0- to 5-year-olds on a representative level about the reasons for letting their child watch television.

Method

1) 36 mothers and 2 fathers from Munich with children aged up to 5 years documented their children’s use of the television. They were asked to consider the following aspects:

- What occasion led to the TV being switched on?
- What was the motivation (to the extent that it can be expressed) behind viewing?
- How did it go, and did it have the desired effect?

The parents’ diary reports were analysed by means of a qualitative content-analysis and subsequently classified according to the functions they had ascribed to television viewing. After completion of their logs the in-

dividual parents were interviewed at home about their television-use habits. Subsequent to the qualitative component of the survey, standardised questions were designed which targeted the typical functions of television viewing revealed by the analysis. 2) 459 representatively selected mothers whose children up to 5 years are allowed to watch television specified on a 5-point scale their level of agreement with whether and to what extent a certain function was to be found in their daily family life.³

Why parents allow their children to watch television

Parents' accounts of what leads to their children's use of television are remarkably colourful and varied. Obviously they are given from the parents' perspective, who bring their daily routine into a subjectively meaningful structure. From their accounts 7 functions have been abstracted:

1. Viewing television for togetherness

Watching television as a family activity is often associated with the shared spirit it provides. This observation supports the argument of Kübler and Swoboda (1998) who discern that for preschool children watching television is a family event. Based upon our study 3 aspects can be distinguished. Parents most frequently emphasise the cosy atmosphere during family television viewing because it invites cuddling:

"Family cuddling on the settee all together: dad, mom, Constantin (2), and his sisters. Together we're watching the sweet monkey Charly on TV."

This shared viewing of course gains special significance during the survey period since it coincides with the Football World Cup in the summer of 2006. Many parents describe the way they and their children turn the broadcast into a genuine highlight:

"I and the kids fetched crackers and lemonade. We switched the telly on, painted the German flag on our cheeks, and commented on every kick."

However, the communal spirit experienced in front of the TV may also relate to mutual interests, in which case it is not the atmosphere of the situation but the content of the broadcast that matters. A musical family enjoys watching televised opera together, and one father views car programmes with his son. In families with a migration background television is also used to sustain the offspring's cultural awareness of a parent's country of origin, e. g. by watching DVDs of their national fairy tales.

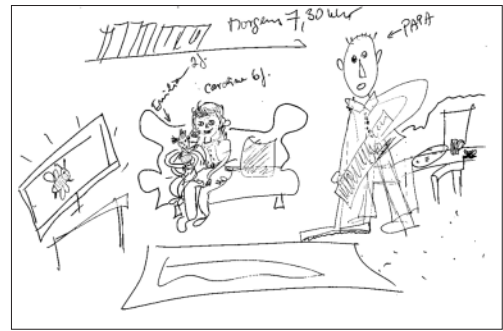
In the representative survey "viewing television for togetherness" emerged as the most frequent reason. Only 9 % of mothers claim this was at no time their motivation for allowing the use of the television.

2. Watching television as an emergency expedient

Parents readily admit that the television at times provides a temporary solution, occupying children when alternatives are unavailable due to certain circumstances. The most often cited example for such a situation is bad weather:

"It's pouring down with rain. The boys had been asking for days to watch *Bob the Builder* and I kept responding 'some time when the weather is real bad.' Well, and now the day had come and after breakfast Florian and Felix both think that because it's raining so hard they can now watch *Bob the Builder*, right?"

The representative survey shows that bad weather is stated as a motivation especially for full-time employed mothers. While only 1 in 4 stay-at-home mothers claims this at least to be a frequent reason, among full-time employed mothers it is 1 in 2. Another situation in which parents often tend



III. 1: Television as part of the family ritual in the morning

to regard television viewing as the only pastime activity is illness:

"Fiona (2) got ill over night. She had a rash. She didn't want to play at all. She was just vegetating listlessly on the settee. The one thing she seemed to enjoy was watching TV. So she watched *SpongeBob SquarePants* with Peter (3)."

Further motivations to allow toddlers to view television are the lack of friends to play with, long-lasting train journeys, or situations in which children are compelled to refrain from playing in order not to wake up other family members.

3. Viewing television creates free space

Parents report various situations in which television serves to occupy children, so that the adults can use their time according to their own needs. This is usually when chores around the house need to be done:

"Martin watched several programmes on KI.KA on his own today (i. e., for about half an hour) because I was tidying up the flat and put him in front of the telly so I could do this in peace. This was somewhat of an exception, but I think I was just so irritated today that I needed a little rest and peace for a while."

According to the representative survey 2 in 3 mothers of children up to the age of 1 who are allowed to watch television in the first place (cf. Götz in this issue) report using it for this reason at least occasionally. Among the 2- to 3-year-olds this percentage



Ill. 2: The sick child is watching TV (child: "Now I'm feeling better!", mother: "Finally, I'm able to iron the laundry!")

rises to 84 %. Only 10 % of the parents with 4- to 5-year-olds claim never to use the television with this motivation. This function features more prominently when there are more siblings in the household. Sometimes parents use this gained time for professional responsibilities or for social networking, for instance in order to have undisturbed talks with their acquaintances. In some cases parents simply have a desire to unwind and to "have a break". Depending on the situation they are either in the same room with their child who is viewing television, or they are in a different room checking from time to time. It does occur, however, that parents leave their toddlers alone at home in front of the running television. In this case the television assumes, in everyday language use, the function of a babysitter.

"First day of the holiday, Anita (4) is ill and can't go to kindergarten. My husband goes to work a little later, while I start very early. The children (4 and 6) are alone at home between 9.30 a. m. and 10.30 a. m. They watch KI.KA so they won't do silly things."

The statement "I let my children watch television, because I need to run out-of-house errands" is answered with a categorical "no" by 80 % of mothers whose children are up to 1 year old. Among the 2- to 3-year-olds it is still 67 %, and among the 4- to 5-year-olds the percentage goes down to 46 %. Thus, the television does indeed feature in a babysitting

function, though mainly among older preschool children and even then rather irregularly.

4. Viewing television as a ritual

In some families the procedure of television viewing is an integral part of daily routines.

About 1 in 3 families with children aged at least 2 considers watching television (especially *Our Sandman*, KI.KA) a permanent feature of their evening rituals. Among children younger than 2 this is hardly the case. Presumably it is after the 2nd birthday of the infant when many families establish a ritual that children find familiar and expect to be part of their permanent, daily structure:

"We get home, take a bath, put on the pyjamas, have dinner, brush teeth, and watch *Our Sandman*. The little ones dash to the settee putting the remote control in position for me and opening the TV cabinet. [...] Afterwards it's off to the kids' bedroom without discussion, but not necessarily off to bed immediately."

The representative survey points out a significantly more frequent use of television as part of the evening ritual in East Germany compared to the western part of the country. Yet, television is scarcely used to assist the child in falling asleep. Only about 15 % of mothers report using the set for this purpose always or most of the time. This percentage is higher, however, for families with a migration background and for families with very low household income. Television use as an integral part of the daily morning ritual, however, is rare among German families. Families with a migration background are more often to be found using television for this purpose. The question whether the television is running during meals is answered in the affirma-

tive by 9 % of German mothers, while in households with a migration background this percentage is doubled.

5. Support of parental care

While the motivations dealt with so far can be found in public discourse on the matter, there are further reasons why parents allow their children to watch television reported in their journal entries. One of these is the use of TV as a support in taking care of infants, for instance, as a calming measure during medical treatment: regular inhalations, appliance of the irksome anti-lice shampoo, or the prescribed post-surgery rest.

"Niklas had adenoids surgery yesterday and as a consequence had to stay out of sunlight and water as well as generally taking things easy for a week. In hospital they advised us to watch a nice television programme with him."

Aside from these medically-related exceptional cases parents also report everyday situations in which they employ television as a lure to distract kids from potentially dangerous or harmful activities.

6. Viewing television to manage moods

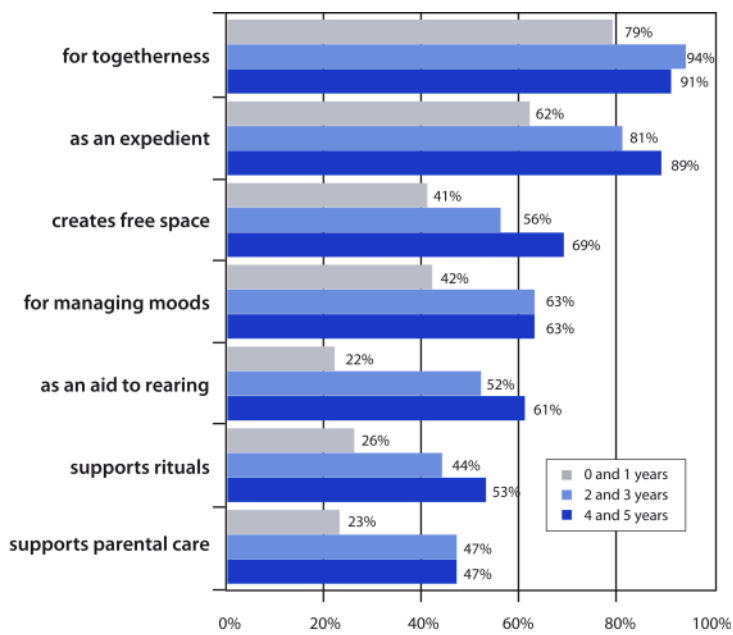
In some cases parents use television to regulate their children's emotions, for instance when they suffer a bad mood, are whining, or when they bicker:

"Bathing trip to Lake Tegernsee. On our way back Luis fell asleep and since he's awake he's been whining, nagging, and simply obnoxious. *Vicky the Viking* helps us to pacify him."

Television is sometimes used for consolation, as a distraction from aches and pains, or to calm children when they are over-excited from an activity.

7. Television as an aid to rearing

There are some parents who look at television as a means of child-rearing support. This is the case when they want to encourage the child to do something it is inherently resistant to



Source: IZI mother survey 2006, answers from 459 mothers

Chart 1: Why parents allow their children to watch TV – at least infrequently

do. In such cases the child is either promised a “TV reward” if it adjusts its behaviour according to parental wishes, or it is threatened with the removal of its TV privileges. This measure is used, for instance, to make an annoying English lesson more appealing, to incite tidying-up efforts, or to encourage good manners.

“Our relatives will visit us today and Tom (5) has been teasing me playfully all day long saying ‘I hate ... Grandma!’ (Grandpa, Uncle Heinz, and so on). I promise he can watch a film if he is a good boy and doesn’t insult the relatives. I can hardly believe that, indeed, he – and also his brother (2) who usually repeats everything his older brother says without thinking – behaves beautifully. As a reward he is allowed to watch *Lars the little Polar Bear*.”

Regarding the under 2-year-olds, one-third of surveyed mothers use watching television as a reward at least sometimes, in the case of the 4- to 5-year-olds it is 74 %.

Age-related tendencies

Overall, these functions increasingly apply as the children get older (see

chart 1). Bad weather and cuddling are the most frequent reasons why parents of the youngest children allow them to view television. Thus, the medium takes on the role of creating a shared experience and of functioning as a temporary solution to a problem.

In connection with the 4- to 5-year-olds “TV for cuddling” and “because I need to do chores around the house” are the most frequently mentioned reasons why mothers turn on the set. As the age of the children increases, television provides parents with free space and is more often employed as rearing support and an emergency expedient.

Gender-related tendencies

With regard to parents’ decisions to allow their children to watch television it is only marginally relevant whether girls or boys are concerned. On the whole the similarities outweigh the differences.

However, a few significant differences exist. Little boys are placed in front of the television more often than little girls so that parents can leave

the house. Additionally, when mothers do their chores at home, they also let boys watch television more frequently than girls. Mothers of boys also have an increased tendency to use the television as a pacifier when their child is over-excited. Mothers of girls, on the other hand, more frequently use the set for cuddling or as reward when their child is expected to do something. The most pronounced edge the girls have on the boys, however, is found in the answer “I let my child watch TV so it can join into the conversation with its peers about certain topics.” Thus, the variable “gender” is already reflected during preschool age in the different way in which mothers handle the issue of watching television.

Socio-demographic parameters of the mothers

The mothers’ levels of education seem to exert only relatively little clear influence on the preferences for the television functions. On the whole, mothers with the lowest possible German school-leaving certificate (Hauptschulabschluss) have a tendency to agree more frequently with the various functions – a fact which could point to a less problematic relationship with watching television. With regard to nearly all surveyed dimensions, full-time employed mothers argue similarly to part-time employed and stay-at-home mothers. A significant difference between full-time working and other mothers can only be discerned regarding the question about letting children watch TV when they are ill. The former tend to agree more to this practice. Significant differences can be found when looking at the household income: households with an after-tax income of more than 2,300 Euros per month use television more often in cases of bad weather, in cases of lack of friends to play with, and when the mothers need to regenerate

and relax. Households, however, which have to suffice on an income of 770 Euros differ comparatively significantly from this. For 50 % of those families television viewing is an integral part of the bedtime-ritual. Nearly 30 % employ it commonly or always to encourage falling asleep. Television use motivated "because I urgently need to relax" or "because there are no friends to play with" on the other hand is significantly rarer in those households.

Opportunities for pedagogical intervention

The discussion of the various functions and interview quotes of the IZI study illustrate quite clearly that television is far less commonly used as a "babysitter" by families with infants than we are led to believe by the press. Although parents do not regard watching television as the ideal activity for their children, they "still" allow them to do so. They do not always feel at ease with this decision. Guilty conscience often shines through the descriptions of their daily lives, and naturally the cited functions must also be seen as justification strategies. By the same token it needs to be acknowledged that watching television is a reality for small children because parents let them do so. It is tremendously important from a pedagogical perspective to face those facts. Understanding the motivations from the viewpoints of mothers and fathers is indispensable for a professional evaluation and consultation service for parents. Television viewing creates a communal experience; it facilitates the management of the daily workload, appears to provide free space for parents, establishes rituals, and simplifies looking after children. To a certain degree parents are already well aware of the vulnerability of toddlers, for instance when fear-inducing content on screen is concerned. However, face-to-face in-

terviews also brought forth statements that pointed to an uncritical engagement with the medium. Aside from "cuddling", parents often reported using television as an emergency expedient activity. From the parental perspective this usually means there was a lack of alternative ideas. It will be the challenge for media education to point out specific and practical alternatives of action. Children grow up in a world pervaded by television. Thus, it is important and only sensible for them and their parents to learn to handle the "television fascination" prudently from the outset because for its suitable use and for an appropriate understanding of its contents children need the help of adults (among others cf. Fisch, 2004, p. 122 ff.). The fact that media educational units can contribute to the reduction of television use is illustrated by a study conducted in the USA. 2- to 5-year-old children at a day care centre were subjected to weekly campaigns on the topic of television. The result: the amount of time the children watched television was reduced considerably while the number of heavy users was halved (Dennison et al., 2004). This goes to prove that the efforts of media education pay off. ■

NOTES

- 1 Christian Pfeiffer in: Telemann, Jörg. "Glotze, Babysitter und aggressive Kinder" ("Telly, babysitter, and aggressive children"). In: *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, 15.10.2004.
- 2 Layes, Tina. "Wann sind Kinder alt genug fürs TV?" ("When are children old enough for TV?"). In: *tz München*, 21.06.2005.
- 3 Conducted by iconkids & youth in September 2006.

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