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Only Two Hours?
A Qualitative Study of the Challenges Parents Perceive in Restricting Child Television Time

Cortney A. Evans¹, Amy B. Jordan¹, and Jennifer Horner¹

Abstract
This study examines parents’ and children’s reaction to the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation to limit children’s television (TV) viewing to 2 hours a day or less. To better understand the challenges faced by parents who would seek to adhere to the guidelines, we conducted qualitative small group interviews with 60 parent/child dyads from each of the following three age groups: 6 to 7, 9 to 10, and 12 to 13 years (N = 180 children and 180 parents). Parents and children were interviewed separately and transcripts were thematically analyzed using Atlas.ti. Results indicate three salient challenges: (a) limiting children’s TV time will cause conflict in the home because of children’s anger at parents’ rules and increased bickering between siblings; (b) replacing TV as an entertainer takes time away from parents and requires monetary and community resources that are not available; and (c) TV is seen as a beneficial presence in the home, offering entertainment, free babysitting, and educational opportunities.

Keywords
children, media, television, parenting

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Television is a ubiquitous presence in family life, and children spend hours each day sitting in front of the TV (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout & Brodie, 1999). Heavy viewing has been linked with childhood obesity (Jordan & Robinson, 2008), and research demonstrates that reducing the amount of time children spend watching television is one way to counteract childhood overweight (Robinson, 2000). Children’s heavy television viewing has been linked to a variety of other problematic outcomes (i.e., Borzekowski & Robinson, 2005; Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGuiseppi, & McCarty, 2004; Hancox, Milne & Poulton, 2005) leading the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Surgeon General (2007) to recommend that parents limit children’s television watching to two or fewer hours per day (AAP, 2001)—a recommendation that is widely cited in policy reports (e.g., Krishnamoorthy, Hart, & Jelalian, 2006) and teacher education initiatives of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as part of a movement to mobilize adults to be proactive in limiting the amount of time children spend in front of the television.

Although asking parents to reduce children’s television time does not seem an impossible request, parents may face challenges in meeting this recommendation. Such challenges can be understood through the lens of family systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which acknowledges that multiple interrelated systems guide the routines, patterns, and interactions associated with family life. Garbarino (1982) explains that these embedded systems are characterized as microsystems (i.e., everyday routines, settings, people, etc.), mesosystems (i.e., intersection of systems with one another), exosystems (i.e., settings in which a child indirectly participates), and macrosystems (i.e., cultural context).

From a family systems perspective, television is an important aspect of the microsystem of the family. The use of television in the home anchors norms that come to be enmeshed within the system (Garbarino, 1982). The central role of the television is apparent in number of televisions in the home as well as the number of activities (meal times, homework, chores, and family time) during which the television is on (Saelens, Sallis, Nader, Broyles, Berry, & Taras, 2002; Vandewater, Bickham, Lee, Cummings, Wartella, & Rideout, 2005a). Beyond its use as a leisure time activity, Lull (1990) and Jordan (1992) have suggested that television viewing plays a functional role in regulating household routines, facilitating communication between family members, physically organizing family members within the house, encouraging social learning, and providing a forum for the expression of parental authority.

Given the plethora of functions television provides in the home, changing family viewing patterns may require some renegotiation of roles, rules, and
general patterns of functioning within the family system. Changes may be met with opposition from inside the system (e.g., from children who enjoy spending their leisure time viewing and from mothers who may rely on the medium to distract children while she prepares meals). Influences from the exosystem (i.e., such as parents’ work demands or the availability for leisure time alternatives) may pose additional challenges to families trying to reduce television time. The purpose of the present article is to explore parents’ attitudes about the AAP recommendation as well as their perceptions of barriers to reducing children’s time spent with television. An understanding of how changes to television habits disrupt the family system, thereby creating challenges for parents, will likely have implications for researchers, professionals, and parents alike.

Rules Regarding Child Television Use

Currently, too little is known about the challenges that parents face in limiting their children’s time watching television if they are motivated to follow AAP guidelines. This research gap may be the result of a focus on the types and effects of parental media regulation behaviors (mediation) in the absence of a consideration of the broader context of how such behaviors are a central part of the family system’s routines. Researchers have tried to contextualize parental television-regulation strategies by examining how they correlate with key variables, such as family communication patterns (Fujioka & Austin, 2002), parental involvement with children (Warren, 2001), and socioeconomic standing (Vandewater, Park, Huang, & Wartella, 2005b; Warren, 2005). However, a more thorough understanding of the family as a context is needed.

Parental Mediation of Television Content

Research has identified three types of mediation strategies used by parents to regulate the content of children’s television viewing. Parents using “restrictive” strategies prohibit some specific types of media content, whereas those using “instructive/active” strategies focus on explaining the content of television material to children. Parents might also use “social coviewing” strategies; that is, watching television programs alongside their children (Nathanson, 2001; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Although these mediation strategies are employed to mitigate the effects of content, some may be more effective than others. Coviewing, for example, can increase understanding of children’s programming (Barr, Zack, Garcia, & Muentener, 2008) but can also signal parental approval of television content (Nathanson, 2001).
Alternatively, active mediation appears to increase children’s understanding of television content (Lemish & Rice, 1986) while diminishing the impact of negative television content, especially for older children (Nathanson, 1999; Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002). Younger children benefit from restrictive mediation strategies that serve to diminish aggressive displays (Nathanson, 1999), but older children may interpret such restrictions as evidence that parents do not trust them. This appears to make them more likely to watch forbidden content with their peers and hold more positive attitudes about the restricted programming (Cantor & Wilson, 2003; Nathanson, 2002).

Parents are most concerned about the inappropriate content of television programs (Ridley-Johnson, Surdy, & O’Laughlin, 1991), which seems justified given the significant increase in media content involving violence, sex, and drugs (see Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). These concerns translate into rules about the content of television programs rather than rules limiting the amount of time children spend watching television (Nathanson, 2001; Vandewater et al., 2005b). The lack of parental rules restricting the time children spend watching television may help explain why the majority of infants and very young children watch more than an hour of television per day (Certain & Kahn, 2002), whereas school-age children spend an average of 3 hours a day watching television (Jordan, Hersey, McDivitt, & Heitzler, 2006).

**Parental Mediation of the Amount of Television Children Watch**

Few parents have specific rules about how much time children are allowed to spend watching television each day. In fact, the research of Jordan et al. (2006) showed that only a quarter of parents have rules about how long children are allowed to watch television. Even so, some parents curtail children’s television use by not allowing any television after a certain time of night, or before homework is done, and parents report that they can observe when children have had enough and they regulate TV time accordingly. Despite professional agreement on the importance of limiting screen time, few studies have explored challenges parents may face in doing so.

**Nonmediating Parents**

Some parents do not mediate children’s television consumption at all. Half of children aged 8 to 18 years, regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic status, report that their parents implement no rules concerning media use, and an equal percentage of children said that the television is “usually on” in their homes (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Researchers have termed this
subset of parents nonmediators (Austin, Bolls, Fujioka, & Engelbertson, 1999). Nonmediators, according to Austin et al. (1999), expressed few concerns about television content and were likely to engage in coviewing with children but did not discuss television content with children.

However, parents do not always characterize household media use norms as “rules” (Schmitt, 2000). Some households that do not have explicit rules regarding media possibly have more implicit media regulations. Instead of making overt rules about what children cannot do (i.e., watch more than 2 hours of television), parents may encourage alternative activities. This meta-understanding between family members regarding television use may serve to regulate children’s time with television, possibly leaving little need to reduce television viewing in some homes. When asking parents to detail the “rules” they have regarding their children’s media use, these implicit regulations may escape measurement when assessed via traditional survey methods. Therefore, the knowledge gap surrounding attitudes about child media use may be overcome with a qualitative design aimed at identifying the sometimes implicit themes emerging from discussions of children’s media use: a major contribution of the current study.

**Contextualizing Parents’ Mediation Strategies Within the Family System**

The differences in parents’ mediation strategies, whether implicit or explicit, may vary based on complex features of the family system such as social class. For example, parents who limit children’s television use are more likely to head higher socioeconomic households than are parents who do not impose such rules (Jordan, 1992; Vandewater et al., 2005b). Jordan posited that these differences may be explained by features of the family system such as variations in families’ perceptions of time as an abundant or scarce resource (Jordan, 1992). Perhaps families facing significant stress (i.e., low-income families) have more difficulty finding the time and energy to turn off the television and successfully engage children in more appropriate activities (Jordan, 2005). Indeed, stresses associated with parents’ work environments diminish parents’ capacity to provide positive home environments for children (Lleras, 2008). Such stresses may also diminish their ability to implement rules limiting children’s television access.

This article aims to illuminate an array of stressors within the microsystem of the family that may affect parents’ sense of efficacy in imposing clear time guidelines on children’s television use. To this end, we examined parents’ attitudes about limiting children’s television viewing time and identified what
parents perceive as the particular challenges of reducing viewing time to a level that health and education experts believe is developmentally appropriate. Additionally, to further understand potential challenges parents might face, we examine children’s reactions to limited television access.

**Method**

The data were collected in three locations (Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Richmond, Virginia), chosen because of the heterogeneous population demographics associated with these areas (e.g., race/ethnicity, urban/suburban residence, and socioeconomic background). Participants in Philadelphia were recruited through schools and community organizations. Participants in Chicago and Richmond were recruited via a focus group facility. Institutional review board approval was granted by two separate research institutions. Interviews were conducted between October 2004 and February 2005.

**Participants**

Participants were 180 children and one of their parents (77% mothers, 21% fathers, 2% grandparent/guardians). We included 60 parent/child dyads from each of the following age groups: 6 to 7, 9 to 10, and 12 to 13 years. These ages are associated with important developmental stages that reflect differences in children’s interests, abilities, and decision-making autonomy (Crain, 2003). The race/ethnicity, as identified by parents, was Black (34%), White (36%), Hispanic (26%) or Other/Mixed ethnicity (4%).

**Methodology**

Given the relative lack of research addressing challenges parents face in limiting child media use, we chose a qualitative approach to explore parents’ perceptions of the problem. On arrival at the interview site, parents and children completed a household media inventory about the number and location of media in the house as well as a background form about the amount of time children spend with television, computers, and video games. Parents also answered questions about their own television use. Semistructured interviews were conducted with parents of similar-aged children, whereas their children were interviewed in another room. Each group had an average of three participants. Children in the older two age groups participated in group interviews, but young children aged 6 to 7 years participated in one-on-one
interviews because pilot testing indicated that group discussions created distractions for younger children.

By interviewing parents in small groups, parents were able to explore and clarify their views in the context of a group dynamic—a process that allows researchers to more substantively understand opinions and attitudes rather than simply getting answers to a series of questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Morgan (1993) suggests the comparison that focus group participants make among each other’s experiences and opinions are a valuable source of insight into complex behaviors and motivations. This is because participants query each other and explain themselves to each other allowing researchers to readily see commonalities and discrepancies in participants’ thoughts and attitudes. The utility and efficacy of the focus group methodology is evident in the steady growth of focus groups in empirical research studies (Morgan, 1996). The group interview is well-suited for the exploration of children’s media use, particularly since television viewing can reflect patterns and routines that are a significant but unconscious part of family life (Lull, 1990; Jordan, 1992). It was anticipated that small group conversations about media habits and beliefs would help bring these patterns into sharper relief than a paper-and-pencil survey.

Both parent and child interviews consisted of questions about the child’s typical day, use of media on weekdays and weekends, media rules, and the benefits and costs of television viewing. We explored reactions to the idea of instituting a 2-hour-a-day limit on television time. We also explored reactions to the following strategies for limiting TV: eliminating “background” television, turning off the television during meals, not allowing a television in the child’s bedroom, and limiting viewing after school. Discussions lasted an average of 90 minutes for parents, 60 minutes for older children, and 30 minutes for interviews with 6- to 7-year-olds. All discussions and interviews were audio-taped.

Data Analysis
Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. For analysis, respondents were tagged with an identification number that indicated site, age, gender, and race/ethnicity. The transcripts were entered into Atlas.ti 5.0 qualitative software (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany). The research team (i.e., research manager, two graduate students, and three undergraduate students) iteratively developed a classification strategy made up of nine main section codes (e.g., rules, limiting TV, right amount of media time). Within each of these nine topic headings, the team established rules for marking subcategories and probes. For example, subtopics for the section code “limiting TV” included
subcodes such as “limiting TV—reaction/opinion” and “limiting TV—hypothetical impact on family.”

In addition to using Atlas.ti to tag quotes with directed codes derived from the protocol, the coding team was encouraged to incorporate conventional qualitative content analysis methods by assigning new codes to spontaneous, recurring topics that had not been anticipated by the protocol-based codebook. After team discussion, these were added to the team’s codebook. In addition, the team of analysts discussed questionable quotes or patterns with team leaders if they were confused as to how to tag them.

Although the conversations were wide ranging and dozens of coding classifications were used, the focus of the present article is on discussions of the challenges parents and children faced or foresaw with respect to limiting television use. These appeared in responses to questions asking how limiting children’s television time to 2 hours or less would affect family life. Parents were also asked whether children’s television use was considered as helpful or beneficial. Additionally, children were asked how they would respond if their parents were to reduce the amount of television they watched. Thematic codes were sorted by demographics (age, race/ethnicity, gender) and analysts summarized themes in narrative memos. Lead investigators of the research team reviewed the summary memos for each topic area and triangulated with data from the brief written survey and with summary memos from other topic areas to better understand the ideas articulated in group interviews.

Results

Many parents responded positively to the idea of limiting television viewing to 2 hours per day or less, saying things such as “So you’re talking 14 hours a week? Guess what? I think that’s realistic” (White parent of 6- to 7-year-old girl). However, they also recognized that substantive changes would be needed to implement the AAP guidelines—changes that many felt posed specific challenges to their ability to monitor and reduce the amount of their children’s television viewing. Analysis revealed three primary obstacles posed by children and/or perceived by parents: (a) children’s negative reactions to reduced television time, (b) lack of parental resources, and (c) parental benefits associated with television viewership.

Child Defiance

We asked children how they would react to having the television turned off during certain times of the day or after a certain amount of time. Answers
varied by age and gender. In general, 6- to 7-year-olds expressed the most anger at the thought of having the television turned off, whereas older children tended to have a more laissez-faire attitude. When speaking of what his reaction would be if his parents were to restrict his television use, one young boy said, “I would be real upset because that is not enough” (6- to 7-year-old African American boy). Middle school girls in particular reported that they would respond with anger if parents tried to limit their television use. One defiant child said, “I’d try to convince them to let me watch . . . by begging them . . . or else beating my head against the wall” (9- to 10-year-old Hispanic girl). Girls also tended to qualify their statements saying they would be mad only if they couldn’t watch their favorite show. Although many children were more easy-going about the thought of limiting their time with television, they often reported that they would turn to other sources of media for entertainment. For example, one boy said, “I would be okay because I know that I could just go in my room and play my Play Station” (6- to 7-year-old White boy).

**Increased Conflict Within the Family**

Parents also suggested that efforts to curtail television time would result in more conflict between parents and children as well as between siblings. When speaking of what would happen if she were to limit her child’s access to television, one mother said, “I think we’d see more arguments . . . because they instigate each other. . . . When they have nothing else to occupy themselves, they see how they can irritate each other” (White parent of 6- to 7-year old boy). Notably, most of the concerns regarding increased family conflict came from parents of girls in the 6- to 7-year-old and 12- to 13-year-old groups.

**Lack of Resources**

A second key obstacle to reducing children’s television time was perceived by a large number of the parents: limiting their children’s television intake would require resources, including time, energy, money, and transportation. These challenges appear to be perceived by parents of children of all age groups and both genders and indicate barriers to expanding children’s micro-systems to include community programs and social events outside of the family and home activities.

**Time and energy.** Many parents, particularly working parents, were concerned about the amount of time and energy needed to limit their children’s television viewing. These concerns were cited more often by parents of girls
than boys. Although it is not entirely clear why parent perceptions differed based on the gender of the child, the findings from our discussions with children about alternatives to TV provide some clues. Specifically, we found that boys perceived having more alternative activities to television (e.g., video games, computers, sports) and a more laissez-faire attitude toward TV. Girls, on the other hand, appeared to be more TV dependent and reacted more negatively to the thought of reducing their time with television.

Another challenge related to time and energy articulated by parents stemmed from the amount of involvement parents believed was needed to more effectively structure children’s free time. Indeed, parents reported that to successfully reduce children’s television use, they would need to be more proactive in finding and creating activities for their children. One mother said,

On the weekends [my child is] usually, you know, she’s by herself. She doesn’t have any other siblings so, I mean, unless I’m sitting down or, you know, have time to sit down with her she’s usually, you know, she uses that as a source of entertainment. (White mother of 9- to 10-year-old girl)

Although parents reported useful alternatives to television, both inside the home (e.g., games, craft projects, reading) and outside (e.g., after-school programs, clubs, sports, trips to the park, or taking the child along on errands), some parents said that finding alternative activities poses a challenge. For example, one parent said,

We knew what to do with them when they were younger. It’s hard to figure out what to do with them now. I mean, we can’t take them to the Franklin Institute [a science museum in the city] anymore—they’re bored with that. (White mother of a 12- to 13-year-old boy)

In addition to finding and creating alternative activities for children, a number of parents, particularly those of younger children, reported that enticing their child away from the television would require them to be actively engaged with their child. One parent responded,

I’d have to think of more things to entertain him, to keep him busy, other things to think of, because children, he has no one to play with so it’s really his dad or his sister and it’s really hard at times to get her to play with a 7-year-old. (White mother of a 6- to 7-year-old boy)
A few parents said their children would try to circumvent the 2-hour rule, and they would have to personally supervise the child to make sure the rule was followed. Said one,

You know it’s really, pretty much he is going to try to sneak and turn the TV on so I have to watch him. I have to sit there and watch for him to actually not to cut the TV on. (White mother of 12- to 13-year-old boy)

These concerns were summarized by one mother who indicated,

I’d like to say that I could limit [my son] to two hours a day. I think that’s, that would be perfect. But that would also mean that I would channel his interest in other areas and be with him throughout that time. And I can’t always commit to that because of the other obligations that I have, including cooking dinners, chores, and doing other things that kids require. So I think two hours is a perfect time. It does not always work. (Mother of 9- to 10-year-old boy, race unknown).

Money and transportation. Many after-school programs and activities have costs associated with them, including registration fees, materials, equipment, and transportation to and from the activity. Understandably, parents voiced concerns for the cost associated with many of these activities that were proposed as alternatives to television watching, including clubs, sports, music lessons, and general entertainment activities. For instance, one mother suggested that it would be easy for parents to find alternative activities for children “if they have money to entertain them all day. Because people that has means . . . [otherwise] it is not possible” (Hispanic mother of 6- to 7-year-old girl).

Overall, parents reported that efforts to engage children in non-television-related activities may be hindered by the relative lack of resources, including time and energy, money, and transportation. These concerns were summed up by one mother who said,

The resources are there but you need a lot of money to do that. There are a lot of activities, sometimes three activities at the same time. I know a lot of our neighbors, their kids have something every day. It’s hard for me and I would love to get her into stuff like that but I work a full-time job and even if she would be able to get into some kind of activity after school I would have to try to find someone to take her...
there or for me to pick her up from. (Hispanic mother of 6- to 7-year-old girl)

Reduction of Parent Benefits Associated With Television Viewing Time

Our conversations with parents revealed benefits associated with family television time that could inhibit motivations to implement media-restricting rules in the family. When parents were specifically asked whether children’s media use was helpful to them in any way, they reported a number of benefits associated with children watching television. Only 4 of the 60 parents of 12- to 13-year-old children said their children’s media use was not helpful to them. Most parents admitted that, in some way, children’s time with media made their lives a little easier by keeping children safely occupied, improving communication between parents and children, and helping regulate child behavior.

Media keep children safely occupied. Just less than half of the parents expressed the opinion that electronic media was helpful in keeping children occupied while the parent did other things such as household chores, tending to other family members, completing tasks brought home from work, or enjoying personal time.

I would have to say so because we’re really busy like during the week and then it’s like he’s, you know, just relaxing and then he’s not jumping around. He’s just in the zone—or just sitting on the couch then we can do what we have to do. We can do our chores, clean up, and it’s fine. And it helps us, you know, do what we have to do. (Hispanic parent of 6- to 7-year-old boy)

A number of parents mentioned the peace of mind that comes from knowing the child is in the house and out of danger or trouble. Indeed, one mother reported,

I used [TV] as an electronic babysitter sometimes. I need to get something done and I, I know that I’ll have at least a half hour if they’re watching at the top or the bottom of the hour. You know, where they’ll be engaged in that show or program and I’ll be able to do something for that half hour without, especially with multiple kids, without all three of them saying, “Can I do this? Can I?” you know, because they’ll all really get into it usually. (White parent of 6- to 7-year-old boy)
Respondents expressed these feelings regardless of race and child gender. As might be expected, parents of younger children found the television very useful for keeping children occupied.

Respondents also mentioned that television serves a useful purpose in entertaining their children when parents are not available for personal reasons—fatigue, illness, personal care, a psychological need for time and space for themselves, or simply a lack of interest in the child’s activities. This was expressed by one mother of a 9- to 10-year-old girl who said,

Yes, sometimes I send her to watch . . . I am tired . . . I just got home from work. Give me twenty minutes alone. For myself. I just got home from work. I will be there with you in a minute. Go and watch television and I am in my room for fifteen minutes for myself. Just to relax. If I do not get fifteen minutes for myself I will go crazy. So . . . I tell them . . . wait for twenty minutes and I will be there shortly. (Hispanic parent of 9- to 10-year-old girl)

Another mother expressed similar feelings saying,

You know, so it’s always kind of a struggle. You know, [target child] likes to read but she needs you to sit there with her and help her with the words. So, you know, sometimes you just want to say, “Just turn the TV on and watch something.” [laughs] So you know, I’ve got things to do. (White parent of 6- to 7-year-old girl)

Media improves communication between parents and children. Some parents believed that coviewing with children increased parent–child communication. Some parents and children enjoyed media together, allowing them to share a common activity. This is evidenced in the response of one African American mother of a 9- to 10-year-old boy who said,

See, my son’s the type you have to drag things out of him as far as what happened in school or, you know, what’s going on. He never says anything. Now if we’re watching a show or something and something comes up, you know, he may mention, “oh that happened, you know the other day.” So it kind of keeps me abreast of what’s going on with that age group, you know.

Television was reported to ease conversations between parent and child, either because it provided interesting things to talk about, or because the
subject matter of a particular program made it easier for a parent and child to discuss a sensitive issue. For example, one Asian American parent of a 9- to 10-year-old girl responded,

... like if something is happening on TV I don’t turn it off because I want her to see what’s happening in reality—there’s good and bad. So like, if there’s something like that you had explained, I’d let her see and then we’d discuss what happened so she doesn’t have any curiosity why mom turned off the TV.

**Media helps parents regulate their children’s behavior.** Parents reported that media helped them regulate their children’s behavior. In particular, some parents used television and video games as a reward for good behavior or as a means of punishment as one Hispanic mother of a 12- to 13-year-old boy said,

In my case, it does help me, because when he has to do something he does not like to do ... he goes to do it in a bad mood. Then I tell him he has an option: “If you do not want you do not have to do it, but there is not going to be Nintendo or television.” Then he runs to do it quickly and in a good mood as long as he gets the time to watch television.

In another vein, parents use television to help regulate sleep patterns saying that it helps children to relax, ease the transition to bedtime and thus, help children sleep at night. One White mother of a 12- to 13-year-old boy reported, “[Television] is a very simple way to just get them to sit down and relax because, you know, my children are very active.”

**Discussion**

This study explored the challenges parents perceive they would face in complying with the AAP’s recommendation to limit children’s television exposure to 2 or fewer hours per day. In general, our findings indicate that although parents, on the whole, saw a TV time limit as a positive recommendation, they also articulated a number of obstacles in regard to their ability to limit children’s television time. These challenges fell under three broad domains: (a) children’s negative reactions to limiting time with television, (b) parents’ perceived lack of resources to provide alternatives, and (c) a reduction in the benefits associated with family television use. Each set of challenges appears to reflect how the television is disruptive to the family system. Indeed, some parents perceived that changes to children’s television habits might disrupt
negotiated patterns of functioning within the family system. Parents anticipated challenges to the renegotiation of family systems if children’s time with television was limited.

As a feature of the family microsystem, the television can act as a kind of anchor of norms, and regularities for the people within the system (Garbarino, 1982). By introducing change within the system (i.e., limiting the amount of television children watch), the definition of what is “normal” becomes a somewhat dynamic concept to children. Consequently, when telling parents to reduce television time, practitioners are actually asking them to change the patterns of functioning. Our findings suggest that this can prove difficult amid the amalgam of stresses (i.e., financial/ time constraints, household tasks) interwoven into child rearing and family life.

As an example of the influence of television within the microsystem of the family, we found one salient challenge to limiting children’s television was perceptions of increased negativity within the family unit. This was expressed by children’s expressions of defiance to parent efforts to limit television as well as in parent concerns of increased family conflict as a result of limiting children’s television. Interviews with children indicate that some children reported that they would be angry about their parents limiting their television. This was particularly true for very young children and middle school girls. Though middle school girls seemed to be more negative than middle school boys about the notion of reducing time spent with television, their reaction might be explained by boys’ stated inclinations to play video games and use other screen media when television is not an option. Seemingly, younger children in general might simply not know what to do with themselves when television and/or video games are not an option. Parents may need to take extra care in actively providing them with nonscreen media alternatives, at least until they have reoriented their leisure time habits.

Additionally, parents often reported concern that limiting children’s time with the television would negatively affect the family by increasing conflict between siblings as well as between parents and children. This was particularly true for parents of girls. Such concerns are likely not unfounded, given that television is often used to create and maintain desired relations at home (Lull, 1979) and “can be employed as a kind of social distractor, rendering less intense the communicative formalities which otherwise might be expected” (Lull, 1990, p. 39). Without the distraction of TV, family members are forced to turn to each other for social interaction and, if norms of interaction have not been established because family members’ time together is typically spent watching television, one may expect interpersonal conflicts to result. However, parents should be advised that because
of the adaptive self-organization capacities that help family systems adapt in the face of change (Cox & Paley, 1997), these conflicts will likely subside once family members become accustomed to engaging with each other in alternative activities.

Though the AAP’s approach to educate parents through discussions with pediatricians is admirable, our findings suggesting that children resist parents’ efforts to limit television watching indicate that perhaps children should also be included as part of the audience to which children’s television policy is disseminated. Organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children might develop school curricula aimed at (a) educating children about the harmful effects of television and (b) encouraging children to think of accessible healthy alternative activities to television that they can use to effectively structure their free time. School-based screen time reduction interventions have been effective for preschoolers (Dennison, Russo, Burdick, & Jenkins, 2004), elementary school-age children (Robinson, 1999), and adolescents (Gortmaker et al., 1999). Targeting youth with screen time reduction campaigns may result in children taking the initiative to implement microsystem changes by reducing their television time and obviate some of their resistance to parents’ efforts in this regard.

A second set of challenges revealed in the interviews is parents’ perception that they would need resources such as time, energy, money, and transportation to comply with the AAP’s recommendation. This illustrates how implementing changes in the way television is used within a family creates added pressure to expand children’s microsystems to include activities in the community that require resources that are not always readily available, thereby creating added stress for parents. Perhaps the stress that accompanies the lack of such resources makes it particularly challenging for parents to limit children’s time with the television. Indeed, stress is a significant contributing factor in the discipline strategies parents use (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000) and parents facing economic stress particularly are less likely to impose rules about television on their children (Vandewater et al., 2005b). Therefore, for parents who are already lacking resources, the increased stress to the family system that would result from changing children’s television habits may not seem particularly necessary amid the array of stressors they deal with daily. In fact, in times of financial stress, television may serve as an alternative to more costly entertainment for children (Goodman, 1983), and therefore, parents lacking financial resources may feel little incentive to restrict children’s television use.

This perceived lack of resources may indicate a need for intervention. At the level of the microsystem, professionals who are advising parents to limit
the amount of television their children watch need to be sensitive to the challenge it will be for parents, particularly those parents who are lacking resources, to implement change within their own family system. It may be helpful to encourage parents to begin with small changes such as turning off the television when no one is watching, so as not to introduce additional stress that would be counterproductive in helping parents implement positive change in their families. Perhaps professionals can discuss with parents alternative activities for children that do not require inaccessible resources. In doing so, professionals may be able to better motivate parents to promote nonsedentary child activities by limiting children’s television exposure.

Additionally, decisions of community organizers and government officials who are part of the child’s exosystem often affect familial resources that can facilitate functioning of the microsystem. Organizers of outreach efforts that offer children alternative activities to watching television (i.e., after-school programs, community sports leagues, etc.) could provide incentives such as lower fees and/or shuttle services that take children home. Such incentives may make programs already in place more accessible to parents who are lacking the time, money, and transportation necessary to structure children’s schedules in ways that keep them active.

A third resistance to microsystem functioning, which parents expressed in relation to reducing TV time, came from parents who believe there are benefits—to themselves, to their children, and to their families—that come from children’s TV use. Parents realized that to be effective in restricting children’s television, they would need to reduce their own television use, which many enjoyed enormously. In fact, many parents used television as a means to be together with a spouse and unwind from the stresses of the day (Gantz, 1985). In accordance with Lull’s (1990) notion that there is a relational dimension of media uses within the family, parents perceive that television can improve communication between parents and children. Given this finding, limiting children’s television may be difficult for parents because they feel they are giving up an activity that they perceive strengthens ties between family members (Gantz, 1985) and structures family interactions.

Additionally, many parents view television as a means to keep children safely occupied, which indicates that TV plays an important role in the lives of all family members, even the ones who are not watching (Goodman, 1983). Indeed, our results show that parents of young children in particular may find it challenging to impose limits on time with television because it would mean, in some sense, giving up a reliable babysitter. Moreover, parents often grant television use as a reward for good behavior or take away the privilege of television as a punishment for bad behavior. In this way,
television helps parents regulate children’s behavior. Therefore, by reducing children’s time with the television, parents may actually be losing leverage in dealing with children’s behavior problems. Taken together, these perceived benefits speak to the television’s regulative function within the family system and, therefore, the advantages of the television may impede parental motivation to restrict excessive television use in their homes.

Ideally, the AAP’s recommendation to restrict children’s television need not require parents to completely give up the benefits of television. Parents could be advised to structure children’s viewing to coincide with their own goals, such as accomplishing household tasks or planning to watch a program with a child as a way to promote conversation about a specific topic. Families can be encouraged to practice mindful viewing, which requires advanced planning and deliberate decision making. In this way, parents may be able to experience the benefits that television can provide while reducing the harmful effects of excessive viewing.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of the current study contribute to our overall understanding of how limiting children’s television may disrupt family functioning within and regulation of family systems and, therefore, pose specific challenges to parents. An understanding of these challenges grants practitioners, researchers, and parents an awareness of the feasibility of the AAP’s recommendation, and may inform efforts to help parents limit children’s time with television.

However, caution should be used in interpretation. First, the current study is exploratory in nature and the dearth of studies addressing this topic offered little guidance in terms of research questions and interpretations. Second, the data were collected in groups that may result in biased participant responses based on what is perceived to be socially acceptable to fellow participants in the group. However, the discussion groups were small (three people) and moderators were trained to encourage articulation of diverse viewpoints. Finally, though our participants represented children and their parents across a vast range of development (i.e., ages 6 to 13), residential settings, and ethnic groups, the findings may not be universally generalizable as challenges may be unique for parents of very young children and adolescents or children growing up outside of the socioeconomic spectra included in this sample.

Future research efforts might build on the findings of the current study by identifying how aspects of the family system (e.g., quality of familial relationships, time management strategies, parenting beliefs, child temperament) influence both parents’ proclivities to limit children’s television and their
abilities to affect change in that regard. Such examinations will go beyond linear cause-and-effect relationships between media use and child outcomes, and promote an understanding of the complexities of implementing change within family systems.

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