



Effect of television viewing on social–emotional competence of young Thai children



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ABSTRACT

Exposure time, program content and cultural context may affect the impact of television (TV) on the social–emotional competence (SEC) of children. This study examined the effects of TV viewing on the SEC of Thai infants. The study was based on a Thai birth cohort study from which duration and content of TV viewing and data from the Modified Infant–Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment instrument at 1 and 3 years of age were available. Generalized estimating equations were used to examine whether scores below the 10th national percentile were associated with TV viewing duration. The relationship between viewing duration and SEC risk was quadratic rather than linear. Viewing duration of 30–120 min/day was associated with a decreased risk of low overall SEC compared to non-viewers after adjustments for confounding factors. However, the beneficial effect diminished when the duration exceeded 120 min/day. Viewing educational programs was associated with a risk reduction of having low overall SEC compared to non-educational programs. These results suggest that a short period of TV viewing may be beneficial for the SEC of Thai infants, especially if the programs are educational.

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1. Introduction

Social competence is a part of emotional intelligence which is an important component in achieving a successful life (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Various studies have found that 30–70% of infants with low social–emotional competency (SEC) scores have later developed psychiatric or behavioral problems during their school years (Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2008; Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Skuban, & Horwitz, 2001), and these SEC scores tended to remain low during later childhood years (Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Bosson-Heenan, Guyer, & Horwitz, 2006).

As the number of very young television (TV) viewers have increased, there has been some concern whether watching TV is having a detrimental impact on the SEC of these young children. In preschoolers, a recent systematic review found that watching educational programs improved knowledge and imagination, and encouraged proper racial attitudes and self-regulation, while violent programs were associated with poor imagination play and aggressiveness (Thakkar, Garrison, & Christakis, 2006). However, this review focused on the effects of program content without considering viewing duration. In infants and toddlers, studies examining the effects of TV viewing on social competencies have been controversial. For

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instance, an American study (Mistry, Minkovitz, Strobino, & Borzekowski, 2007) showed that sustained TV viewing (>2 h/day) at both 2.5 and 5.5 years of age was associated with problems in attention and social skills at the age of 5.5 years; however, no harm was demonstrated in children who were early but not sustained viewers. Unexpectedly, benefits of TV viewing on children's emotional reactive scale were also noted in that study. Another American survey reported an association between the amount of TV exposure and attention problems at 7 years of age (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, & McCarty, 2004), but no association was found after reanalysis with a non-linear model by a later study (Foster & Watkins, 2010). To date, there has been no solid evidence that TV viewing <2 h/day is harmful for the SEC of infants and toddlers.

Differences in duration of TV exposure, TV content and cultural contexts among countries may influence the results of studies of this nature (Chen & French, 2008). For instance, common bed sharing with infants in the Thai cultural context (Anuntaseree et al., 2008) may lead to early or heavy TV exposure in Thai children. The recommendations related to TV viewing of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2001 are not well known in Thailand, and many Thai parents may let their babies watch TV, as they consider TV viewing to be beneficial for the baby's cognition and social development (Ruangdaraganon et al., 2009). Furthermore, Asians tend to have a less open communication style but more sensitivity to others' emotions, compared to people from Western countries (Lau, Fung, Wang, & Kang, 2009; Park & Kim, 2008). Thus, variations in etiquette, rearing practices and the way parents value their children's behaviors may affect the social developmental outcomes when the same assessment tool is used in different cultural situations.

The 2006 systematic review referred to above (Thakkar et al., 2006) involved studies carried out in the United States. However, as noted, cultural contexts may have an impact on the findings of studies of this nature, thus before drawing too many conclusions, it would be preferable to have evidence from other countries examining the impact of TV viewing on the development of young children. This study was undertaken to examine the effects of TV viewing on the SEC of infants and toddlers in a Thai birth cohort, the Prospective Cohort Study of Thai Children (PCTC) (Sornsrivichai, Chongsuvivatwong, Mo-suwan, & Intusoma, 2008). The results will help fill the knowledge gap and provide additional information on this important subject from an Asian country.

2. Methods

2.1. Study population and design

Thailand overview: In 2001, Thailand was considered as a lower-middle income country in South East Asia with a population of 67.7 million and Gross Domestic Product of 4608 \$US (Source: World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund). In a national survey in 2000, more than 75% of Thai children younger than 3 years of age were raised at home by their parents, and approximately 6% were looked after in childcare centers during weekdays (Prateepchaikul & Chaumpluk, 2004). Unlike Western countries, bed sharing with parents is common in Thailand (Anuntaseree et al., 2008). Thai people have a hierarchical culture, and most parents of children under three teach their children to be obedient and always pay respect to other people with the Thai greeting gesture (Prateepchaikul & Chaumpluk, 2004). At that time, the early 2000s, 96% of Thai households owned a television set (Source: National Statistical Office 2003), and having a TV set in the bedroom was common since family members normally live together in the same room. During the study period, there were four free TV channels available in most of the country, with no program rating (TV Classification System began in 2006). Although organizations for children's TV programs have since been set up, a TV survey in 2008 by Konglarb et al. (Thai Health Promotion Foundation Report) reported that the percentage of programs specifically for children aged 6–12 years was about 5% of total air time, and specific programs for children younger than 6 years was less than 1%.

PCTC overview: The PCTC cohort study selected five districts in Thailand, and in these districts all births from October 2000 to November 2002 were enrolled in the study, with parental consent (Sornsrivichai et al., 2008). Four cohorts from a chosen district in each of the four regions and a hospital-based sample in Bangkok (capital city) sites were accessible year-round with average annual 800–900 births and were selected to be geographically and culturally representative of the whole country. For instance, one district included a mountainous suburban district in the North, and included 13% hill tribes people, while two rural districts in the North-East and Central regions included both mountains and plains. Most families were Buddhists except in the rural district in the South where half of the people were Muslims. The children in the Bangkok group were a combination of children from crowded areas such as slums or crowded apartments and others from areas with more space.

The main caregiver of the child was the responder in a face-to-face interview carried out by a trained research assistant. The children were followed at 3, 6 and 12 months of age in the first year of life then every six months until 3 years of age, and the current analysis used data collected at 1 and 3 years of age. Children with significant perinatal problems (birth weight <1500 g, facial anomalies or severe birth asphyxia) were excluded from the analysis.

2.2. Measurements

2.2.1. Main outcome: low social–emotional competence (SEC)

SEC was assessed at 1 and 3 years of age using the Modified Infant–Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (MIT-SEA) instrument. The MITSEA was developed in 2001 as a part of the Thai national survey, in which standardized Thai normative values for social–emotional scores were established (Mo-suwan & Pornnoppadol, 2004). The MITSEA adopts all

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