



Children's hyperactivity, television viewing, and the potential for child effects☆



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ABSTRACT

Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B; $n = 6250$), this study examined whether children who display difficult behaviors early in life watch more television from year-to-year. Results revealed that 4-year-old children's hyperactive, but not aggressive, behavior was associated with an increase in television watching over the ensuing year. These potential child effects, however, were embedded in both proximate and distal ecologies. That is, the association between children's hyperactivity and increases in their television exposure over time was strongest among those in the low-end of the socioeconomic distribution and those whose parents displayed less optimal mental health. It was also stronger among girls. These results underscore the importance of considering child effects in future research and how intra-familial dynamics vary across different types of family contexts.

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1. Introduction

Television viewing among children in the U.S. is at an all-time high (Rideout, 2013), which has significant implications for their achievement, behavior, health, and other developmental trajectories (Christakis, 2009). In particular, a wealth of empirical evidence suggests that high levels of television viewing are particularly problematic for children's hyperactivity (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, & McCarty, 2004; Miller et al., 2007; Thakkar, Garrison, & Christakis, 2006; Zimmerman & Christakis, 2007) and aggression (Manganello & Taylor, 2009; Mistry, Minkovitz, Strobino, & Borzekowski, 2007). Such associations have been a source of great concern among pediatricians, educators, researchers, and laypersons and helped to spur recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001, 2013) that parents limit their children's television viewing to 1–2 h per day.

Although these observed effects of televising watching on children are important, they are also likely to be only part of the story. For very young children (and even older ones), how much children watch television is really about parental behavior, and parental behavior is not a decontextualized unidirectional path from parents to their

children (Bell, 1968). Indeed, the developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2006), suggests that children's development is part of a dynamic and reciprocal transaction between them and their parents. Thus, not only do parents influence children, but children also elicit (either actively or passively) new responses from their parents over time (Ansari & Crosnoe, 2015a, 2015b; Bell, 1968; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2015; Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003; Yan & Dix, 2013). This notion of child effects—that children may actively and passively influence the ecologies that then shape their future developmental trajectories—has a long-standing history in developmental research but has been slow to develop, especially when compared with the child outcomes of parenting. In this study, we argue that these child effects are particularly relevant to developmental studies of children and television. If television viewing is an aspect of parenting, then the potential for children to elicit that kind of parenting needs to be better understood. As a means of opening up new lines of discussion and inquiry, we consider here which children elicit more television viewing over time.

As background, television viewing is often conceptualized as form of parenting and managing children (Rideout, 2013); in other words, the television can be used as a means of occupying children who exhibit difficult behavior. Yet, to date, only two studies have explored how such parenting may be evoked or elicited by different types of children, the child effects that are integral to the transactional processes of early childhood highlighted by developmental systems (Lerner, 2006). Both studies revealed that young children with difficult temperaments watched more television during the first two years of life, although these authors did not look at change over time (Radesky, Silverstein, Zuckerman, & Christakis, 2014; Thompson, Adair, & Bentley, 2013). Given the potential theoretical and practical value of understanding such child effects, we need to know more, such as whether and how

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different dimensions of young children's behavior predict television exposure over time and across contexts.

The first aim of this study, therefore, is to test the hypothesis that children who demonstrate problem behaviors early in life watch more television from year-to-year. Evidence for this hypothesis will suggest that children who display greater behavior problems watch more television over time (Radesky et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). Importantly, we test this hypothesis by looking at and comparing two related but different dimensions of behavioral problems: hyperactivity and aggression. We focus on these two specific behaviors in light of the extant literature, which has consistently documented associations between television viewing and children's hyperactivity and aggression (Christakis et al., 2004; Manganello & Taylor, 2009; Miller et al., 2007; Mistry et al., 2007; Thakkar et al., 2006; Zimmerman & Christakis, 2007).

The transactional emphasis of developmental systems motivating this study of the potential effects of child behavior on their television viewing should be coupled with other points of emphasis in this theory, such as the value of viewing transactional processes within larger ecological systems (Lerner, 2006). That coupling suggests that the links between child behavior and television watching should be expanded to also consider whether these links vary across different types of family contexts (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Essentially, some parents might be more susceptible to using the television as a response to their children's behavior problems than others. We consider three kinds of variability in the child effects here, focusing on ways of characterizing families that cross multiple ecological levels from distal stratification systems to more interpersonal and personal dimensions of family life.

To begin, children of distressed parents watch more television than children of non-distressed parents (Thompson & Christakis, 2007), and similar patterns emerge for families of low socioeconomic status (Thompson et al., 2013). In other words, parents' wellbeing (proxied by depressive symptoms and stress) and socioeconomic status (proxied by income and educational attainment) are likely to predict children's television exposure and their behavioral difficulties over time. The larger question, however, is how these factors—the first tapping into the proximate family ecology, the second into distal stratification systems—may condition the degree to which children elicit their own television viewing patterns over time.

As one example, some evidence suggests that socioeconomically disadvantaged parents are more reactive to external influences on their parenting than more advantaged parents (Augustine & Crosnoe, 2010; Crosnoe, Augustine, & Huston, 2012). In part reflecting the psychological and social resources available to them, they seem to change their parenting behavior more in relation to their own circumstances, especially moving away from more positive parenting practices in the face of challenges to themselves or their families (Augustine, 2014). Another well-documented pattern is that psychologically distressed parents are more reactive to children's behavioral difficulties and that one common reaction is to avoid conflict and suppress children's negative behavior (Dix, Moed, & Anderson, 2014; Trew, 2011). As a result, more disadvantaged parents and parents in poorer mental health might be more likely to use the television as a means of managing their children's challenging behavior.

In line with our interest in child effects, we should not limit the consideration of ecological variability to aspects of parents' lives. Parents may also differentially react to children's problem behavior depending on other characteristics of children (e.g., Crosnoe, Ansari, Purtell, & Wu, 2015). To explore this possibility within our general framework, we focused on child gender. Although the role of gender in media use is complex (Anand & Krosnick, 2005; Huston, Wright, Marquis, & Green, 1999), it is clearer in terms of problem behaviors. Considering that girls are less likely to be hyperactive or aggressive than boys (Rubin, Burgess, Dwyer, & Hastings, 2003), evidence of these behavioral issues might be particularly vexing to the parents of girls. Thus, if parents consider girls to be hyperactive or aggressive, they may be more likely to view it as problematic and, therefore, react to it. To the extent

that television is a reaction to challenges raising children (Rideout, 2013), then increased viewing may be more common among girls perceived as challenging to raise as compared with boys.

Testing the hypothesis that family socioeconomic disadvantage, parents' psychological distress, and children being girls will moderate the associations between child behavior and television viewing across early childhood is the second aim of this study. Taken together with our first aim, the results of this investigation can address gaps in the literature and advance theory by demonstrating the insights to be gained by reversing some of the assumed directions in the interplay of parents and children. It can also have more practical significance by pointing to potential targets for intervention during early childhood to curtail excessive television viewing.

2. Methods

The ECLS-B (Snow et al., 2009) followed a nationally representative sample of 10,700 children born in the U.S. in 2001. Children participating in the ECLS-B came from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and were sampled from different counties or groups of counties across the country. The initial sample excluded children who had died, those who had been adopted after the issuance of the birth certificate, and children who were born to mothers younger than 15 years of age. The same children were followed from birth through kindergarten entry with data collection occurring at 9 months (2001–2002), 2 (2003–2004), 4 (2005–2006) and 5 years of age (2006–2007). At each wave of data collection, information was collected from multiple sources, including: parent, caregiver, and teacher interviews as well as direct child assessments (for more information on sampling procedures see, Snow et al., 2009). The analytical sample for this investigation included 6,250 children and families who participated in the preschool and kindergarten waves (note that sample sizes have been rounded to the nearest 50 per IES/NCES regulations). For sample characteristics, see Table 1.

2.1. Measures

Weighted samples descriptives for all focal variables can be found in Table 1.

2.1.1. Child behavior

Parents reported on children's behaviors at age 4 on a 5-point scale (1 = never observed, 5 = very often observed) using 8 items from the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales–Second Edition (Merrell, 2003). Sample items for aggressive behavior ($\alpha = .74$) include: has temper tantrums, destroys things that belong to others, and is physically aggressive. Sample items for hyperactive behavior ($\alpha = .64$) include: acts impulsively, is overly active, and pays attention (reverse coded). In both cases, the items were summed to create the final scale.

2.1.2. Television watching

In each wave of data collection, parents reported how many hours on a typical weekday that their children watched television. We truncated these scales at eight hours due to skew; less than 3% of families reported greater hours of television viewing. On average, children watched approximately 2 h of television each day between the ages of 2 and 5 (see Table 1 for mean hours of television viewing across each time point).

2.1.3. Maternal and child moderators

Two socioeconomic characteristics of families were measured to capture the socioeconomic stratification that might moderate the potential effects of children's behavior on their television exposure. They include: parental education (Group 1 [G1] = less than high school; G2 = high school; G3 = some college; G4 = bachelors or greater) and

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