

CHILDREN AND MEDIA:

Emerging Issues and New Agendas

Everette E. Dennis, Ph.D. and Ellen A. Wartella, Ph.D., Editors



FRED ROGERS CENTER
for early learning and children's media
at Saint Vincent College

Briefing Monograph

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OUR MISSION

STAYING TRUE TO THE VISION

OF FRED ROGERS

AND EMULATING THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

OF HIS LIFE'S WORK,

THE MISSION OF THE FRED ROGERS CENTER

IS TO ADVANCE THE FIELDS

OF EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDREN'S MEDIA

BY ACTING AS A CATALYST

FOR COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION,

AND CREATIVE CHANGE.



Briefing panelists Milton Chen, Jerlean Daniel, Everette Dennis, John Murray, and Ellen Wartella

THE BRIEFING

This inaugural Fred Rogers Center Briefing was on May 18, 2006, at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Conducted as a panel discussion, the Briefing focused on topics and issues surrounding the body of research to date in children's media, the increasingly media-saturated environment for children and families, and the importance of building substantive bridges between the knowledge base in early childhood development and the creation of children's media.

The Briefing panel was made up of five distinguished experts in child development and media.

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Panel Moderator, Felix E. Larkin Distinguished Professor of Media and Entertainment Industries at the Graduate School of Business, Fordham University; Member, Fred Rogers Center Advisory Council

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Through this Briefing and other forums, the Rogers Center promotes dialogue and new agendas in service to children and families.

INTRODUCTION

Television has been a fixture in the majority of American homes for little more than 50 years. During that half-century, researchers have probed the medium's influence on children's learning and behavior while producers in commercial and public broadcasting were competing for the children's audience. What happened behind the scenes in the research lab and the television studio, however, rarely reached the public, particularly parents of the children who were being studied and for whom the programs were being produced.

Reflecting Fred Rogers' commitment to sharing information and building understanding, the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media convened a special Briefing on children and the media in May 2006. The audience included educators, child development specialists, media producers, foundation executives, and others with a deep interest in the human condition. They interacted with the distinguished panel of experts: Everette E. Dennis, Ph.D., Moderator; Milton Chen, Ph.D.; Jerlean Daniel, Ph.D.; John P. Murray, Ph.D.; and Ellen A. Wartella, Ph.D.

What emerged that morning was a distillation of the latest information about children and the media – television and all the video and digital formats that have followed it. This publication reflects the conviction of those present that the Briefing's interplay of knowledge and experience needed to be shared with a wider public to encourage an ongoing dialogue with parents and others concerned with the nexus between early learning and children's media. They agreed that the Rogers Center should become a dynamic "sense maker," drawing on existing knowledge in the dual fields of early childhood learning and children's media while identifying areas where new knowledge is needed. They also agreed that it is crucial to put that knowledge in a form that will inspire scholars, television producers, and others.

Because research begins with questions, the moderator, drawing on prior contacts with panel members and Rogers Center staff, posed a number of questions to frame the discussion. These concerns included the following.



Mia Hallett Bernard, Executive Director, The PNC Foundation; Rogers Center Advisors, James Ragan, USC Master of Professional Writing Program; and Margaret Petruska, The Heinz Endowments

- The present state of knowledge about children and the media: Is the field mature already, maturing, or neither? What has 50 years of research taught us about children and the media?
- What research tells us about the promise of children's media vis-à-vis its lurking dangers.
- What role children's media actually play in school curricula and learning in general.
- The ideal age (if any) when children should begin watching television, especially in light of issues surrounding its impact on violent behavior and such health concerns as childhood obesity.
- The ultimate effects of television viewing on children's "consumer behavior."
- In light of the thousands of studies already done on children and the media, what do we really need to know? Where are the gaps in knowledge? What should the Rogers Center do to address these gaps and to monitor and develop a research agenda for the future?
- The evolving role of the Fred Rogers Center as a bridge between child development and children's media.

WHAT WE KNOW

Looking back at the history of technology in the United States (because most media technologies were quickly adopted, if not developed, here), we see that film was introduced in the first third of the last century, then radio, followed by television, and now the interactive technologies introduced in the late twentieth century and still evolving today. With each new medium came the same set of controversies, many of them still being waged. Proponents believe that media can do wonderful things to change the world and educate children. Opponents believe that media have mainly negative effects on children, beginning at an early age.

What have we learned from the debate and the research of the past 50 years? The Briefing panel highlighted four important findings.

- **Children actively construct their worlds from their experiences, including their engagement with media.**
- **Planned, thoughtful programming does benefit children.**
- **Successful use of media is linked to the contexts of home and family.**
- **Even the youngest children are using a variety of screen media.**

Children construct their worlds from experience:

Children actively create their environment; they learn by doing, constructing their knowledge base from their experiences. In modern life, technology is a source of much of that experience, but because it tends to do more things for us, we need to make sure that children remain actively involved and are not merely passive observers. Parents and other caregivers (whether grandparents, babysitters, or childcare staff) need to go out of their way to keep the active, “doing” part of learning in place for young children. We know that the best development occurs when there is a high degree of parental and caregiver involvement – when there is a good integration of learning and emotional and social support.

John Murray: *We still need continuing research on the basic issues of how do kids, or adults for that matter, come to understand the media world that they’re watching, the virtual reality in the video game or television, movies, or the Internet.*

Planned, thoughtful programming benefits children:

The nature of television’s impact on children depends on the content. Programming that is thoughtfully designed to increase children’s emotional and cognitive understanding can have tremendous benefits. *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, Sesame Street*, and other really well-produced children’s television programs of the last 30 years have enhanced children’s learning and their understanding of the world around them.

Ellen Wartella: *Every technology also has brought with it those few pioneers, the Fred Rogers, if you will, who were able to demonstrate the educational potential of the technologies.*

On the other hand, violent or otherwise inappropriate content affects children negatively. Much of the research over the past five decades has focused on violence in media, whether television, video games, or computers. Nearly half of the 1,900-plus studies reviewed in *Children and Television: Fifty Years of Research* (Pecora, Murray, & Wartella, 2007), were concerned with violence issues, and they confirmed that media violence has serious implications for the developing young child. Studies have shown, for example, that when anti-social, violent programming is watched in a family where violence is condoned, the effects are amplified.

The family context matters: The family setting, its values, and the ways in which a family uses media can be as important as the content of the programming itself. We know from the research that when educational materials are used in a context where the parents are supporting the program or talking with their children about the program, the educational effects can be increased dramatically.

Milton Chen: *The family setting, the values in the family, the way in which the family uses the media – that context can be as important as the content of the program itself.*

One study, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of Young American Children* (Hart & Risley, 1995), researched the familial context of learning by observing the children and home lives of about 40 families. These families fell into three groups: low-income or receiving public assistance; working class; and affluent (many of whom were college professors). When these children were 18 months to three years old, researchers visited for an hour several times a week and



David Hartman, Rogers Center Advisor, Television Producer

wrote down every word that was said in those homes. The researchers found that the actual number of words, the complexity of the sentences, and the elaboration of language that children heard were correlated to income.

The context in which new technologies are being used in the home matters a great deal. It is important to note that, while the educational values and support in the home provide the context for the impact of technology, these factors are not necessarily correlated directly with income. There is not necessarily more purposefulness about using media for educational purposes in high-income families. Families with higher levels of education and affluence, however, are able to afford more technology while the new technologies are not as available to families of lower income.

Appropriateness is more important than age: Along with content and context comes the question of age. What age is too young to watch the segment of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in which Mister Rogers and the football player Lynn Swann talk about what Lynn does to perfect his football skills? This is the type of media that a two-year-old, or an

even younger child, might enjoy watching and from which he could gain something positive. But what age is too young for many of the prime time, adult television shows that are watched by millions of children each week before their bedtimes? As shows like these become available on other media, such as iPods, the question of age appropriateness becomes even more relevant, and more urgent.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) attempted to answer the question of age appropriateness (the age at which children should start watching any screen media, including television, computers, and videogames) with its 1999 recommendation that no child under the age of two should be put in front of a screen and that older children should have their viewing limited to under two hours a day.

The Kaiser Family Foundation's first *Zero to Six* study (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003) found that 68 percent of children under the age of two were using screen media daily. The average usage was about two hours a day, or the same amount of time that children spent playing. They also found that a quarter of households with babies had television sets in the babies' bedrooms. What does this mean for children's development?

Ellen Wartella: *The under-two situation is very sharply drawn today and there's a lot of debate about it. At the same time, we have almost no research on children under two and their viewing. There's even debate on whether children under two comprehend what they are seeing on the screen. The research literature is quite murky, so the American Academy of Pediatrics said, "Let's be safe."*

Another aspect of the AAP recommendation is that for all children, regardless of age, parents and caregivers should know and examine what children are viewing. Sesame Workshop, the producers of *Sesame Street*, recently announced the creation of *Sesame Beginnings* videos, intended to model interactions between babies and parents and other caregivers. The organization was roundly criticized for creating the videos on the grounds that parents should not be encouraged to use media with their very young children. Many feel, however, that age-appropriate media for modeling positive parent-child interaction provide a sound and reasonable response to the reality of increasing parental use of media with their children.

IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

Over the last 50 years of television and other screen media, the research questions and the claims have been consistent. Children are thought to spend too much time with media and not enough at home with their parents, or at school, or at church, getting the proper kind of socialization. An Institute of Medicine report in April 2006 suggests that television advertising, which is heavily weighted toward fatty, high sugared, high caloric, high salt foods, is related to the rise of obesity in childhood. Some pediatricians say that simply by putting kids in front of the television, the television is causing the obesity.

Everette Dennis: *I recall a conversation years ago with pioneer figures in this field – Hilde Himmelweit and Wilbur Schramm, who studied television and children early on. They did so when others worried about whether TV might cause cancer or hurt kids' eyesight, rather than the social and behavior effects of television.*

For years, media content has been considered too violent, too sexual, and more recently, too commercialized. We know, though, that technology can have educational benefits. To mediate some of the negative effects and to capitalize on the benefits, we need to discover how to find and use the educational, interactive parts and make them work for children.

John Murray: *Programming that's thoughtfully designed to enhance children's understanding works, and there are ways to increase this.*

Technology today is available to children in overwhelming quantities and varieties. The commercialization of children's television has long been decried; yet, we don't really know the full impact of commercialization on children. We know that adult supervision of – and ideally, adult interaction with – children as they view media is important, but in today's world, how media literate are adults, let alone children?

Media saturation, media literacy: Multiple televisions per household. Ready access to cable television and the Internet. Cell phones that take photos, send text messages, surf the Web, and broadcast television programs. Computers. Videogames. It is a rapidly changing world of new media and media use, far more complex than the traditional world of television and videos.

In the Kaiser Family Foundation study, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds* (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005), children were found to spend an average of eight and a half hours a day with media. This far outstrips the amount of time they spend in school or with their parents. It is important to note that these children were doing those eight and a half hours in six and a half hours because they were using multiple media at the same time. In the not so recent past, when children were watching television, they watched television. Now, when children are watching television, they are also on their cell phones or computers, or they are playing video games.

In this media-saturated environment, are children media literate? Are we taking steps to teach them to be media literate? More important, perhaps, how are we using technology to educate adults, including parents and other caregivers? It is a question of whether adults in today's world comprehend the various technologies, the various media, and whether they are aware of how these media affect children and their development.

We need to discover how to harness the educational value, the positive interactive value of these technologies and begin to teach adults – parents, grandparents, and other caregivers – to understand them. Once adults know how to use media in effective ways, they will pass on this understanding, this literacy, to their children. If media go directly to children, without adult supervision, this leaves children unprotected and vulnerable.

Jerlean Daniel: *Right now, you have the technologies leaping right over adults to children. That's dangerous.*

The business of creating consumers: The business community has invested in the early recruitment of consumers, but there is no clear evidence in the literature to suggest that children learn good practices while being consumers. And corporations aren't currently in the business of teaching children how to be wise consumers.

American television and web-based video are among the world's most commercialized media. Today, infants are exposed to commercials, as compared to the five-year-olds observed in the study, *How Children Learn to Buy: The Development of Consumer Information Processing Skills*



Thomas Gessner, M.D., Pediatrician, Excelsa Health Latrobe Area Hospital

(Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977), which analyzed how children in the '70s were exposed to commercials. If it is possible to profit by inserting a product on film, on a television show, or in a video segment on the Web, business today will find a way to do it.

The observable success of those few well-planned, well-thought-out educational programs has led many American parents to believe in the educational potential of television, as the first *Zero to Six* study three years ago discovered. Marketers understand that parents are eager to expose their children to whatever promises of early educational stimulation, and they have capitalized on it with such popular items as the Baby Einstein® videos. Businesses promote children's consumerism not just through commercials but also by marketing as educational items a number of toys based on television characters and programs that appeal to children. These products – from interactive toys to cell phones to DVDs – are advertised as “educational,” but few are based on research that could demonstrate the extent of their actual educational potential.

Dealing with commercialization: Many child development specialists are concerned about the increasing commercialization of childhood and believe strongly in the need to develop more non-commercial children's media. Bipartisan bills currently before the U.S. Congress (S.1023 and H.R. 2512) would establish a national

educational digital content endowment from funds received for the sale of the telecommunications spectrum. The goal is to channel the billions of dollars that go to the Federal government each year for the sale of licenses for wireless communication media into the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust (DO IT). The Trust would support the development of non-commercial, educational content for the Internet and other digital media. Called the Digital Promise (www.digitalpromise.org), the project is a stronger version of what originally created public broadcasting by giving spectrum but no money for content to PBS stations. By contrast, Digital Promise would provide funding for content.

Not all experts, however, advocate for commercial-free zones, arguing that an even larger issue is how to teach children to deal with this consumer-focused world. One option would be to develop a childhood consumer literacy program that teaches children the value of thrift and saving — and that the most important things in life are not commodities that can be bought.

Who decides what is appropriate? Television, interactive toys, DVDs – these are just the beginning. From the vast and growing array of media technologies, who will decide what's appropriate, what's educational, what's healthy for children? Many children, from a very young age, spend many of their waking hours in group care. Their parents are not the ones mediating what they watch. Indeed, the media often become the babysitter as a harried caregiver puts on a video, which may or may not be appropriate, to occupy the children. Even some programs with a G-rating may not be appropriate for three- and four-year-olds, and many have little or no educational potential.

Jerlean Daniel: *It's my sense that children today are less protected... less protected psychologically, less protected in terms of mental health kinds of issues, because they are exposed to more.... As adults, our sensibilities about what children ought to be seeing, hearing, doing, are not sufficiently protecting them.*



Milton Chen, Chair of the Rogers Center Advisory Council

Milton Chen: *We desperately need a bridge between the world of early childhood development and the world of media professionals and practitioners.*

Some research about programs like *Sesame Street*, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and a few others goes back many decades, but we have no comprehensive measures of the value of educational media or guidelines for achieving the educational benefits. We need to be thinking about what might be the digital version, the 21st century version of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or *Sesame Street*. We have yet to understand fully what these new media can do. Fred Rogers can be credited with being the first to change the conversation around children's television. Now it is time to apply his thinking to these various other media. It is time for those who have studied children's developmental needs to communicate with those who create the media children are consuming, for those who have the knowledge about children's learning – the researchers – to connect with those who create media for children.

Milton Chen: *One of my favorite things Fred used to say is, "Can't we use television for broadcasting grace throughout the land?" I don't think any TV producer or FCC commissioner, or network executive, has ever used those two words together in the same sentence. We need to think about these new media, and the opportunities made available by them, in a very different way.*

Research and Development: In industry and business there is almost always a connection between research and practice. Virtually every other industry has a very active Research and Development (R&D) component with a close relationship to universities and training centers. Business keeps abreast of what is going on in university research and what scholars are thinking. Children's media doesn't have this type of R&D connection. The Rogers Center may be the first place to facilitate such a connection – to be the model that offers media the opportunity to ask questions about how children will understand a specific video or how to make a better educational DVD.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW



Archabbot Douglas Nowicki, O.S.B., Rogers Center Advisor, Saint Vincent College; Gregg Behr, Executive Director, The Grable Foundation

Expressing appreciation for five decades of research, some of continuing value and some ephemeral and dated, the panel agreed that future research “stands on the shoulders of giants,” in the words of sociologist Robert Merton. Much remains to be done, nevertheless, given that the media of 50 years ago are not the media of today, which encompass all the old forms of publishing and electronic media plus the yield of the digital revolution. Some earlier research initiatives on consumer behavior – teaching children how to buy and whether violent content triggers violent behavior – are worthy of continued study with an eye to the nuances of the Internet with its instant messaging and interactivity.

Panel members also agreed that media scholars who study the content and effects of children’s media need to go beyond overt behavior and attitude change into the realm of cognitive influences on the way that children understand concepts, frame issues, and perceive the world.

They strongly agreed that early childhood educators know far too little about the yield of media research and that media researchers and television professionals aren’t always attentive enough to what is known about children from the work of educators.

Finally, there was consensus that the research ought to migrate far beyond the insiders who produce it, whether from the worlds of communication research or educational research. The research should be disseminated in easily accessible forms that reach the people who produce television programs for children, advertisers and advertising professionals, teachers, parents, families, and even children themselves, the panel said.

Everette Dennis: *We’ve heard parents mentioned, we haven’t heard grandparents, who are very important in this mix as well. We haven’t heard a lot about the big institutions of society, a little about the television industry, public television... so there’s obviously a very rich terrain out there to explore. I hope this will just be the very beginning, the tip of the great iceberg that will continue for a very long time to engage the very important subject of the interplay of the fields of early childhood education and media.*

NEXT STEPS

The panel recommended the following agenda going forward.

- Build bridges between what we know about early childhood development and the production of positive, educationally effective children’s media across the board.
- Discern the roles of major societal institutions – the television industry, higher education, advocacy organizations, and others – in building and sustaining the bridges.
- Support new research on the content and effects of current and emerging media for young children.
- Institute media literacy programs for children and for the adults who are responsible for their early development.

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