

A Study on the Impact of Electronic Media, particularly Television and Computer Consoles, upon Traditional Childhood Play and Certain Aspects of Psychosocial Development amongst Children

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Abstract

Excessive use of electronic media among children is resulting in traditional play being displaced and the years of childhood innocence lessening. Consequently “mini-adults” instead of children are emerging with knowledge too complex for their stage of development. Research comprised of 3 questionnaires for 3 different target groups namely, 2nd and 6th class boys and girls, their parents, and the teachers in their schools. It found that indeed electronic media is impacting upon a child’s development in varying forms and highlighted the dominant presence of television in households. In addition, findings showed the contrasting opinions of parents regarding television and computer consoles upon their family life and child’s growth. Teachers clearly expressed their anxieties for the children in their school and outlined the areas of a child’s development being impacted upon that were of greatest concern to them. Furthermore, the research findings indicated the other electronic media that are growing in prevalence amongst primary school children in Ireland.

1. Introduction

Love childhood...promote its games, its pleasures, its amiable instincts.ⁱ

Rousseau emphasizes the obligation of society in safe-guarding and nurturing childhood since it undoubtedly lays the foundations of a child’s development, as the plays of childhood are the “...germinal leaves of all later life”.ⁱⁱ Children must not be viewed as “miniature adults” since their world is one of concrete realities where their experiences are regularly communicated through play unlike adults whose natural medium of communication is verbalization [9].

Play, similar to a child, also develops in relation to its contexts namely the physical environmentⁱⁱⁱ, social ecology^{iv} and culture^v [9]. Rather than children growing up on a diet of rich and healthy traditional childhood play, one could contest that children are now growing up in media

saturated surroundings on a fast food diet of electronic media that have come to the fore as a consequence of the technological innovations over recent decades. As a result, the aspect of childhood which society likes the most, innocence, is under threat by mechanisms that society has actually made itself!

2. Electronic Media

Through the multiple components of media: - television/dvds, computer consoles/games, radio and music-ipods/mp4s, internet, mobile phones and magazines/newspapers, media is able to retain substantial spheres of influence over people, especially children. Electronic media, in particular, has become so powerful over recent decades that it has morphed into a master puppeteer pulling and shaping a child’s emotional, cognitive, moral, social and physical development through incorporating onto a child, what they want them to believe and value.

Television and dvds e.g. violence	Computer consoles/games e.g. Playstation	Radio and music devices e.g. i-pods	Internet sites e.g. Bebo Facebook	Mobile phones e.g. texts	Magazines and newspapers
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Figure 1. Puppet

The puppeteer’s wooden sticks mechanism is representative of the corporate greed of mass media companies such as television networks. Every string that pulls and shapes the puppet’s formation

symbolises various aspects of the media, whilst the puppet itself mirrors the vulnerability of a child! Each component of the media is controlling and displacing play-time from children such as magazines replacing books, computer consoles replacing board games, text messages replacing verbal speech. Furthermore, the appearance of the child is also representative of an adult thus highlighting how electronic media is lessening the length and innocence of childhood and thus producing “miniature adults” instead who have not yet fully acquired the cognitive capabilities to process media information as well as a fully-developed grown-up.

2.1. Television

Of the several varying form of electronic media that affect the play and development of children the most influential is television [7]. Television; - the so called “Window to the World”

“...brings real life drama, action and happenings into the home of the viewer who can, sitting comfortably and even alone, participate in real life and imagined events without having to stir, talk, share or even explore”^{vi}

Consequently, over recent decades that hypnotic, marvellous “magic box”, called television has become the prime media component that is affecting children’s cognitive growth and development in substantial ways especially since it is displacing the most distinctive feature and activity of childhood:- Play![10]

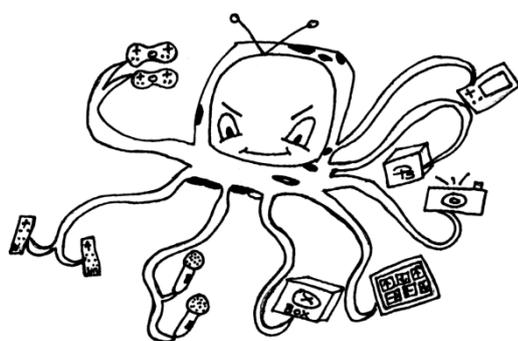


Figure 2. Octopus

As illustrated above, television is one of the most powerful type of media since, similar to an octopus, it has many tentacles/wires that expand from its large illuminating screen:- Playstations, X-boxes, Wiis, video players, dvd players, digital camera photos/films, karaoke machines and dance-mats, and young children’s v-tech computers. Therefore, its effect on society is many folds and not just limited to the television programmes and films it exhibits. Television’s most occupied

tentacles/wires amongst children are undeniably computer consoles such as Playstations, X-boxes and Wiis.

Similar to television and attached computer consoles such as those named above, the Nintendo DS with games like *Imagine, My Dress Up, My Make-Up, Emma on the Farm* and *Gardening Mama*, are taking away real life and make-believe/pretend experiences that are greatly associated with play. Rather than children using props like a doll and bottle to play being a Mum, dress-up games to pretend to be somebody else e.g. fireman, teacher and, playing chef/baker in the kitchen with Mum or Dad, Nintendo DS games like *Cooking Mama*, and *Imagine (My Baby, Teacher, Doctor, Vet, Dream Wedding, Chef* etc.) are encouraging children to experience life in an electronic manner instead of in an active, imaginative and social way thus children are missing out on the benefits such play exerts e.g. socializing, turn-taking, language acquisition, perception etc [2, 4, 9].

2.2. Television and social contexts

Bronfenbrenner in his ecological theory advocates that every person lives within a *microsystem*, inside a *mesosystem*, embedded in an *exosystem*, all of which are a part of the *macrosystem* [1]. Each system has reciprocal effects and influences on each other. Consequently, television enters a pattern of influences that already exist: the home, the peer group, school, religion and culture generally. But as Winn, mirroring Moody, points out, television does not merely influence a child; it also deeply manipulates the “pattern of influences” which people expect to ameliorate the effects of television [11, 19]. However, this is not the case. Consequently, television influences are widespread and begin in the home where it:-

Like the sorcerer of old...casts its magic spell, freezing speech and action, turning the living into silent statues, so long it lasts.^{vii}

Family life has undergone a dramatic change with significant and undesirable consequences [16]. In addition, peer groups have become television-orientated with the majority of children’s time spent together playing, being displaced by television. Culture and religion, in general, too, has been transformed by television [19]. Therefore, television is an undisputed casual factor in a change occurring in social interactions since it is stunting existing relationships’ growth and preventing the budding and blooming of new ones.

2.3. Family Life

Through the changes television has made in family life, television is not merely one of a number of important influences upon today's child it is instead now emerging as the important influence in a child's life [11]. Television can affect human relationships through influencing our feelings about ourselves and our expectations of others. Expectations, in turn, influence behaviour [11]. Television and computer consoles are not only leading to less parental involvement with children's home play but they are, especially television, a key factor in altering the face of family life [19].

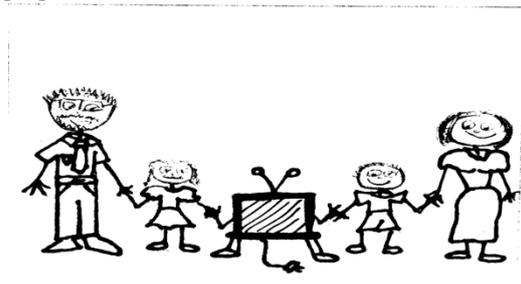


Figure 3. The Family Portrait

Television has become like another member of the family with the ability to simultaneously unite and separate its members [18]. Presently, it is quite common to find an entire family sitting and watching television in companionable silence or chatting about what is being watched. People are therefore becoming engrossed in television programmes rather than showing an interest in what is happening in the lives of the people around them, thus resulting in them knowing the personalities of television characters better than their own family, and friends [18]. As Mander points out:-

...television encourages separation: people from community, people from each other, people from themselves.^{viii}

An escalate in the number of television sets in households, along with televisions now being bombarded with a selection of channels from satellite and cable tv, has made television viewing become an increasingly isolated activity, thus erasing previous generation's perhaps naïve notion of television drawing families closer. Therefore, even the illusion of togetherness is being lost as family members now disperse around the house into different rooms to watch their preferred programmes. In addition, many primary school-aged children now have their own television sets in their bedrooms. Consequently as these children grow up, they too, will:-

...establish [their] own special relationship with [their] TV set. It will be [their] companion, [their] surrogate playmate, compensating for other activities within and outside the home.^{ix}

3. Family Rituals

The quality of family life may be determined and measured on what a family *does* [3, 20]. Many important family rituals and activities such as mealtimes and bedtime are being displaced by television and the desire and addiction to view it's programmes [12]. Celebrations such as birthdays, anniversaries, parties and holidays (even abroad), are often usurped by television through sport, media and special television events occurring simultaneously.

3.1. Mealtimes

The traditional family ritual of sitting to a table at mealtimes is diminishing in most households. Meal-times, once an opportune moment for the family to interact with each other, through chatting about their day, has become synonymous with television time [11, 16 19]. Consequently, children are growing up without table manners and the knowledge of the etiquette associated with eating a meal at the dinner table. Furthermore, one could contest that mealtime has also become an isolated activity as due to the presence of multiple television sets in households, family members regularly disperse to watch their preferred programmes, so if they are eating their dinner in front of the television too, they would perhaps prefer to be viewing their favoured programmes whilst doing so [16]. If people cannot remove themselves from the world of television to simply sit down together as a family at mealtime for a few moments, one cannot help but wonder, what can the family actually do *together* on a daily basis?

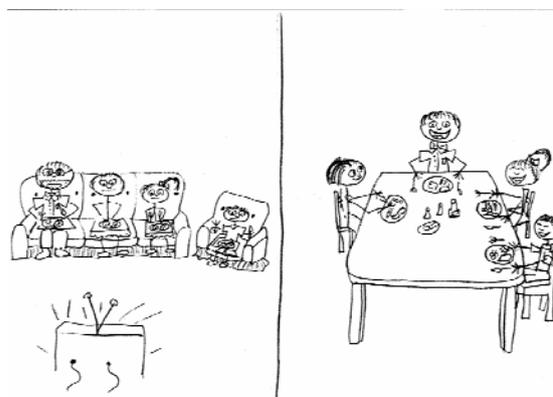


Figure 4. Mealtimes

3.2. Bedtime

Similar to the traditional family ritual at mealtime, the ritual of bed-time is also evaporating. The actual time children go to bed at is regularly being determined by the scheduling of particular television programmes, such as after *Coronation Street*. With the emergence of television channels devoted to just children programmes, such as *The Disney Channel* and *Nickelodeon*, it is often a struggle for parents to get their children to bed when their child's programmes are still being aired. In addition, instead of parents spending quality time with their children at bedtime by reading a story or simply tucking them in, children are often given this time to watch television programmes or DVDs on their own personal sets, or maybe play a computer console such as the *Nintendo DS*. Therefore, it is not only the *activities* that families might engage in together that are being diminished by the powerful presence of television in the home but the *relationships* between each family member are also affected in both obvious and subtle ways [16].

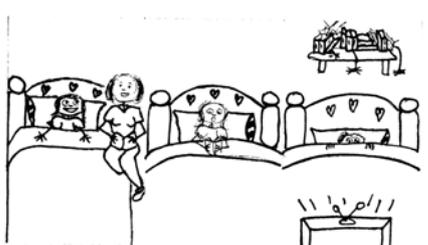


Figure 5. Bedtime

3.3. Family member relationships

The elimination of opportunities to talk, and perhaps more important, to argue, to air grievances, between parents and children and brothers and sisters is being lost. Consequently, television can be employed as an avoidance mechanism, used frequently to avoid confronting family problems, problems that will not go away if they are ignored but that will only fester or escalate to become less easily resolvable as time goes on [11]. One could not help but acknowledge the irony in that although many families are not actually engaging in the traditional rituals associated with family life at mealtimes and bedtime, they are often viewing programmes which depict the above e.g. *soap operas* – a family sitting together at the table discussing their day's activities. Being a soap opera, an argument might arise but they are still usually seated at the table for meal-times. Since family rituals and activities are now becoming a dying breed, one could agree with Winn's warning in that:-

“...if the family does not accumulate its backlog of shared experiences, shared *everyday* experiences that occur and recur and change and develop, then it is not likely to survive as anything other than a caretaking institution”^x

Besides generating negative effects on a family's living patterns, television can also lead to friction amongst family members with disputes usually arising over how much television to watch, what to watch, and when to watch? (Before school? Whilst doing homework? When someone visits?) Television can also evoke unnecessary tension through the constant elaborate advertisements between programmes [16]. These can often undermine parental control over a child by parents having to relentlessly say no to a child's demands for advertised television products that can range from food products, toys, and clothing, to name but a few. In addition, parents can also get stressed when television programmes show contradictory morals, values, attitudes, behaviour and messages to what they are trying to teach their children. Furthermore, all of the above tensions and conflict are aggravated more by the fluctuation of multi-television sets in households.

3.4. Electronic Babysitters

Children presently are spending less time outdoors playing traditional pastimes, variations of make-believe, imaginative games or engaging in sports [17]. Therefore, they are missing out on vital social interactions with parents, siblings and peers which are essential to forming a healthy sense of self [3]. One could contest that parents nowadays are arguably spending less time with their children especially since it is now common for both parents in a household to work in order to feed the growth that has occurred in society for consumerism [18]. Even when parents interact with their child in their home, the television, even though only in the background, is still ever present. As shown by Kirkorian et al, background television can even affect interactions between parents and children with their results showing how both the quality and quantity of parent-child interaction decreases in the presence of background television [8]. Furthermore, studies by Schmidt et al highlight how background television also disrupts very young children's play behaviour even when they pay little overt attention to it [15].

However, parents are often exhausted after a day's work so it is perhaps easier for them to get household chores done by switching on the television, DVD or computer consoles to amuse their child and ultimately keep them quiet. As a result, such electronic media are becoming like an electronic babysitter for children. Therefore, if there were no computer consoles or televisions for

a week, even a day, could parents actually cope? Would they be even *able* to play with their children? A reduced consumption of television and computer consoles by children might positively lead to parents spending more time with their children and bonds becoming stronger with perhaps a return to the old family values that families once possessed.

4. Peers

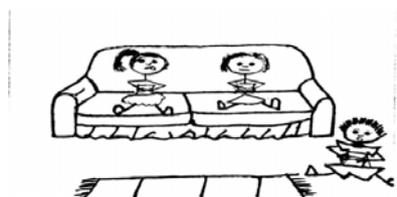


Figure 5. Peers

The influence of television and computer consoles on social relationships is not exclusive to the family unit. It reciprocates also to other social networks such as school, neighbourhoods and the peers they mix and interact with, since all social systems are interlinked – “...like a set of Russian painted dolls, nested one inside the other”.^{xi} Seeing as television is presently consuming much of a child’s time, with them passively and daily viewing television programmes, children are less engaged with people such as parents and siblings who undoubtedly help form a child’s developing sense of self [3, 20]. Consequently, children are finding it increasingly difficult to interact and relate with peers given that the family unit forms the basis of all other future relationships [3]. As Moody points out, “relating”, like other skills, requires *interaction* and *practice*. Both of which, are being lost due to excessive and passive television viewing [11]. Habitual television viewing undeniably affects childhood play which is often the common starting point for a child to interact with another child and possibly form a friendship [17]. Even when friendships are formed and friends visit each other’s homes, they regularly discard traditional forms of play to watch television, DVDs or play computer consoles which seems to defeat the purpose of the social visit.

Furthermore, children’s popularity in school and peer acceptance is often determined by sharing attitudes, activities and interests with peers [20]. Knowledge of television programmes such as *The X-Factor*, *SpongeBob Squarepants*, *Drake and Josh* and *Hannah Montana* along with owning the unlimited merchandise that comes with them like schoolbags and pencil-cases, excels a child into the desired popular group. Similarly, a child’s ownership of the newest electronic gadget and the games that are popular, such as the Nintendo DS and Wii, are also ways in which present primary

school children mix, get accepted by peers and earn popularity.

5. Research

5.1. Method

A mixed research methodology comprising of both quantitative and qualitative was chosen to examine the effects of electronic media specifically television and computer consoles on a child’s development. The method selected was three questionnaires distributed to three different target groups:- 2nd and 6th class pupils, their parents and, the teachers in their schools. The participation of children was restricted to just 2nd and 6th class pupils as both age brackets represent different stages of development and maturity. In addition, the readability of both class groupings was suitable for using the questionnaire as the research instrument.

5.2. The Questionnaires

Considerable time was given to the designing and developing of the research method since each of the three questionnaires was targeted at quite different and contrasting groups. Therefore, each group had their own specific needs and amendments such as language, since the language used in the children’s questionnaire would be quite different to that of the teachers and parents. A mixture of question items were used in the three questionnaires, varying from the style of closed and open-ended, dichotomous, multiple choice, rank ordering, constant sum, matrix and contingency questions, filters and branches. In addition, where appropriate, illustrations and diagrams were used as question items, and as stimuli, for participant responses. Furthermore, to enhance participant’s enthusiasm in completing the questionnaire, double-sided printing was chosen. This effectively lessened the appearance of the size of the questionnaire.

Throughout the varying questioning item styles, careful consideration was given to the avoidance of ambiguous questions, or questions that could be interpreted differently from the way that it was intended. In addition, attention was also given to the sequencing of the question items, to help in the avoidance of creating a mood-set or a mind-set early on in the questionnaire. Consequently, the design of the questionnaires was to ensure initial questions were not complex, had high interest value and encouraged participation. These were followed by more difficult questions such as the open-ended style. Furthermore, funnels and filters were also used to ensure effective sequencing within the different sections of the questionnaire.

5.3. Findings

The children’s questionnaire was administered in April 2009 to 161 primary–school aged children comprising of 48 second class girls, 42 second class boys, 39 sixth class girls and 32 sixth class boys. 46 teachers, from both the boy’s and girl’s schools also participated in the research study. 132 parents of the 161 children completed and returned their questionnaires. Much of the results obtained from all three of these questionnaires were analysed through use of the computer software SPSS and Microsoft Excel.

6. Discussion

6.1. Television

The research results clearly exhibit how television is altering family life and traditions such as meal-times, bed-time and in general quality family time. Over 60% of all class groupings, regardless of gender, watch television at mealtime with 63% being second class girls, 88% second class boys, 72% sixth class girls and 64% sixth class boys. Furthermore, amongst second class children a significant amount of both girls (60%) and boys (76%) view television before school unlike sixth class children where viewing rates before school are significantly lower amongst both boys (33%) and girls (36%). However, where viewing rates before school are high, specifically amongst second class pupils, one could suggest that television is thus affecting breakfast time too.

The impact of television on family life and an individual’s development is further highlighted by the research data in that only 9 out of 161 children owned one television set, 21 owned two, 44 owned three, 42 owned four, 35 owned 5 and 10 owned more than 5. As a result, this may explain why it is quite common to find the family dispersed around the house viewing their preferred programmes in isolation. Furthermore, the presence of tv sets in the bedroom was clearly exhibited by the research data in that only 34 children do not have a television set in their bedroom. Of the 127 children that have television sets in their bedroom there is a relatively equal spread amongst the genders, with 67 girls and 60 boys. Out of the 34 children that do not have a television in their bedroom, there was a clear distinction between the two different class levels with 8 sixth class pupils not having one in comparison to 26 second class pupils, which suggests that by sixth class nearly 20 of those 26 second class children may too have attained their own personal television set.

As Mander highlighted earlier such high rates of television sets existing in children’s bedrooms may threaten a child’s development in

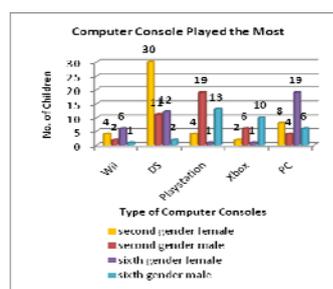
relation to family life and their social interactions with each other [10]. Although 113 of the 132 parents that completed the questionnaires stated that they monitor and supervise their child’s television viewing, one could not but contest that with such high numbers of children having television sets in their bedrooms that this would make such a task quite challenging and difficult especially when only 13 children said that they view the television with their parents and only 12 said that they view it with their whole family. 81 children said that they watch television most of the time on their own, which highlights the lack of supervision but also, most importantly, the isolation factor associated with television as highlighted by many researchers.

6.2. Computer Consoles

Television viewing is not the only media culprit to increase isolation amongst family members in the home. Television’s varying tentacles, especially that of computer consoles, are similarly contributing factors, especially since, greater than the television results, 139 children said that they play their computer consoles on their own most of the time. Such high ratings of television viewing and playing computer consoles on their own amongst all of the children, regardless of the class level and gender, highlight the role of the television as a babysitter in many households. Numerous parents did admit that after a long day working it is easier to just switch on the television or computer console and to allow such electronic media to amuse and occupy their children’s time rather than them having to.

One of the most distinctive features of the video/computer game culture is the belief that the majority of game players are boys [16]. However, as the data research shows, every child out of the 161 children that took part in the research own several computer consoles, therefore, second and sixth class girls all own computer consoles. Nevertheless, there are unmistakable differences in relation to the popularity amongst the children in the computer console played the most by them, with the preferences varying between each class level and also with gender differences.

Table 1. Popular computer consoles



The most popular computer console amongst second class girls was by far the *Nintendo DS* with 30 out of the 48 children holding a preference for it. In contrast, second class boys gave their highest rank position to the *Playstation* with 19 choosing it. However, the *Nintendo DS* was still ranked second with 11 preferences. Sixth class children showed a varied inclination, with no computer console reaching the figure 30 as in the second class data. Amongst the girls in sixth class, in comparison to the second class girls, the rates of preference were spread between the *Wii* (6) and *Nintendo DS* (12) with the *Personal Computer* being the favourite with 19 children selecting it. Sixth class boys held a divided preference between the *Playstation* (13) and *X-box* (10). Overall, the *Playstation* and *X-box* proved most popular amongst boys in both class groupings whilst the *Nintendo DS* and *PC* were the favourites amongst second and sixth class girls thus displaying a gender difference in the preferred computer consoles.

6.3. Television Programmes

With such high rates of viewing television as shown above, along with the significant amount of children with television sets in their bedrooms, and close to half of those children (53) admitting to watch television whilst their parents are asleep, the **type** of programmes being viewed become of a growing concern.

Overall, *Comedy* (139) proved quite popular with everyone, so too did *Cartoons* (125) and *Reality TV* (108). Gender differences were most visible in relation to viewing the genres of *Action*, *Drama*, *Soap Operas* and *Sport*, with the boys preferring *Action* and *Sport* while the girls favoured *Soap Operas* and *Drama* programmes. The most noted gender difference is in children's preference for *Action* programmes with only 10% of both second and sixth class girls favouring this genre, in comparison with second class boys (59%) and sixth class boys (91%). Similarly girls showed a higher rate of interest in *Soap Operas* with the viewing rates being 71% amongst second class and 64% amongst sixth class. This is in contrast to the significantly lower rates amongst second class (27%) and in particular, sixth class boys (6%).

In relation to class level, differences are most noticeable with the numbers viewing *Documentaries* and the *News*. *Documentaries*, in particular highlight this, with figures highest amongst second class girls (50%) and second class boys (37%), unlike sixth class girls (8%) and sixth class boys (12%). Therefore, although all of the primary school teachers (46) that participated in the research believe that children can learn from television in that curriculum subjects such as Science, Geography and History, may benefit from some of the television programmes aired, the

research data shows that, *The Discovery*, *National Geographic* and *History Channels* and, similar programmes shown on the terrestrial stations were not popular or regularly viewed, if viewed at all, by the children surveyed. As a result, one could argue that although television may have the potential as a learning tool it is not however being utilised in that manner.

Both *gender* and *class level* accounted for differences in genre preferences. In comparison to second class girls and sixth class boys and girls, second class boys, with only a 5% rating, displayed very little interest in music programmes which would include television channels such as the variety of *MTV* stations, *TMF*, *Smash Hits* and *Bubble Hits*. Conversely, in relation to the genre of *Crime*, second class boys excel above all of the other children with their preference for *Crime* being rated at 83% and being their overall second most popular viewed genre after *Cartoons* at 88%. Although *Comedy* scored high amongst sixth class boys it was only a third favourite, at 82%, scoring just below *Cartoons* at 85%, with their favourite genre *Action* at 91%. Sixth class girls excelled above the other children with their rating for *Reality TV* which like *Comedy* scored 85%.

Undeniably, the content of what children watch on television can greatly impact a child's development, in particular their behavior [20]. 86 children did admit to viewing television programmes that were unsuitable for them such as *Southpark*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, *C.S.I.*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Two and a half Men*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Skins* to name but a few. Furthermore, 97 children admitted to feeling scared after watching something on the television which may be a result of viewing something that was inappropriate and unsuitable for their age.

6.4. Films/dvds

Films and dvds are undeniably very popular amongst children nowadays especially when many actual television sets come with a dvd player as part of it and computer consoles such as the *Playstation* play dvds as well as playing computer games. Similar to the results of favourite types of television programmes, children's overall favourite type of film was *Comedy* with both sixth class girls (97%) and sixth class boys (100%) rating it as their favourite while the genre was a second preference for both second class girls (81%) and boys (80%). The most popular type of film amongst second class was *Animated*. On the other hand the **least** popular type of film was, undoubtedly amongst the boys, the genre *Romantic* which only got rated at 17% by children from second class and 6% from sixth class, unlike second class (77%) and sixth class (62%) girls.

As Mander points out, ownership of personal television sets amongst children enables a child to develop their own individual relationship with the television especially in relation to viewing what they want [10]. One could argue that this was clearly exhibited in the research data as film preferences were high in relation to the genres of *Action* and *Horror* with the average liking of *Action* being 70% and *Horror* being 76%. The surprising data was that second class girls held the highest preference for *Horror* with 81%. The research findings clearly and shockingly exhibited the unsuitable television viewings that the children have engaged in, comprising mainly of exceedingly inappropriate films that were common to all class levels regardless of gender such as *The Exorcist*, *Childsplay*, *Chuckie's Bride*, *Halloween*, *The Grudge*, *The Ring*, *Saw IV*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Jason versus Freddy*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Strangers*, to name but a few.

Although 86% of parents were insistent in that they regularly supervise and monitor their child's television viewing it could be contested that with the dominance of televisions in the bedroom along with a high percentage of television viewing being an isolated activity, one could question a parent's adequacy and effectiveness in supervising and monitoring their children's TV consumption, especially in such a fast paced world where both parents work in order to feed the growth of consumerism amongst society [16, 18]. Furthermore, although only 33 parents said that their child got nightmares and felt scared after viewing something on television, 78 of the 161 children admitted to feeling scared after viewing a film. However, one could contest that this figure is actually much greater as many, especially with sixth class pupils may not admit to have being scared. Nevertheless, one must also consider that such films mentioned above may have been exaggerated by children and just heard of and spoken of by an individual who had viewed it rather than actually themselves. In addition, the above also displays how dehumanised and desensitised children are becoming to violence. Whether the children had or had not actually viewed the horror films named by them, the research data still showed a high knowledge amongst all children, regardless of gender and class level, of horror films, both new and old.

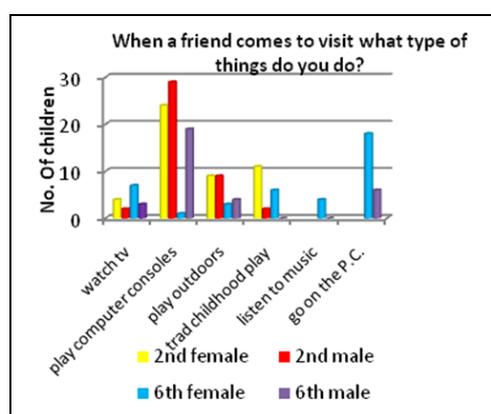
6.5. Computer games

The type of games chosen by the children clearly exhibits the gender differences between them. Overall boys had a tendency to choose games that contained violence. Games such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo* were the most popular. The game *Call of Duty* further questions parental monitoring and supervision in that the game itself is rated as

suitable for persons aged 16+. However, all of the games chosen were not violent-related. Other games that were popular, especially amongst second class, were *Club Penguin*, *Mario Bros*, *Sonic Rush*, *Fifa 09*. Unlike the boys, the girls showed high distaste for computer games of a violent nature (second class = 36, sixth class = 29). Instead the games favoured by the girls of both class levels comprised of games that generally represent traditional imaginative, creative and experiential play such as *Cooking Mama* but however lack the social and active aspect that comes with traditional play.

6.6. Peers

Table 2. Playing at friend's houses



According to the research findings the most popular activity to do whilst visiting a friend's house is to play computer consoles (73), such as the *Nintendo DS*, *Playstation* and *X-box*. This activity seemed most popular amongst both second class girls (24) and second class boys (29). Similarly, it proved popular with sixth class boys (19). However, for sixth class girls (18) the most common endeavour for them was to use the *P.C.* and go on social networking sites such as *Bebo*. Although television in other parts of the questionnaire proved to be an enjoyed regular activity, as an activity to do when friends visit it was not as popular as other activities with only 16 children choosing it. Not surprisingly traditional childhood play such as playing with toys such as dolls, reading, colouring, hide-and-seek and cycling was only engaged in by 19 children while outdoor play, comprising mainly of playing on the trampoline, was a common activity for 25 children. Listening to music when friends visit, was only popular amongst sixth class girls and not with any other class grouping.

6.7. School

34 out of 46 teachers felt that viewing television and playing computer consoles enhances

a child's popularity in class. Similarly, numerous parents felt that if their children didn't play certain computer consoles or watch certain television programmes that they may be excluded and not fit in with their peers.

The world of electronic media extends beyond the spheres of technologically advanced devices, but impacts too upon other contexts, especially consumerism. Merchandise representing characters from television programmes and computer games are widespread and found in a range of shops. Consequently, if a child is not viewing the television or playing their computer consoles they still see characters from them in varying forms such as magazines, books, stationary, clothing and bedroom sets, to name but a few. This is often quite visible in schools, where primary aged children in particular regularly have schoolbags, lunchboxes and stationary representative of television programmes, films and computer games. 40 out of the 46 teachers that participated in the study said that most of the children in their classroom and school had merchandise representing media characters with the most popular being *Hannah Montana*, *High School Musical*, *WWE* and *Soccer Clubs*. In addition, 31 teachers felt that ownership of such merchandise enhanced a child's popularity amongst their peers.

35 teachers felt that the school playground is currently being influenced by television and computer consoles rather than traditional childhood games and types of play, with 33 also believing that play is becoming more aggressive. When the teachers (46) were asked which part of a child's development was of greatest concern to them, *Copying of undesired behaviour* was rated the highest with 23 teachers selecting it, followed by *Imagination and creativity* (10), *Lack of communication skills* (6), *Loss of personal experience* (3), *Lack of physical fitness* (3) and, *Fatigue* (1). The area of *Copying of undesired behaviour* comprised of many aspects with the highest rated being *using phrases from television characters* (38).

6.8. Parents

Out of 161 children, 132 parents participated in the research. When asked if they felt that television was affecting family life only 48 believed that it was despite 50 of them admitting that television had taken over a family occasion before! Furthermore, only 50 parents felt that their children watched too much television when ironically a much greater number of them said that their child watches 4 to 6 hours of television per day. As a result one must question the parent's opinion on what is "too much television viewing"? However, as the parents advanced in answering the questions on the questionnaire one could argue that their

opinions changed as, unlike the low response (only 48 out of 132) to electronic media such as television and computer consoles affecting family life, all 132 parents by the last page admitted that changes were occurring with all of them agreeing with the illustrations shown and 86 parents admitting that they are experiencing the illustrated change in their homes!

7. Conclusion

As highlighted earlier electronic media is lessening children's opportunities to engage in traditional childhood play and socially interact with others. The latter is displayed quite clearly in the research findings, with children viewing television and playing computer consoles on their own most of the time. The findings also emphasize the truth and reality of educators and researchers anxieties and worries regarding electronic media, especially since the data highlights how the cognitive, emotional, social, moral and physical benefits that come from playing traditional childhood activities and that have excelled children in the past are now becoming a dying breed amongst the 21st century, electronic child.

In relation to Rousseau's advice in safeguarding childhood whose responsibility is it to prevent "adult" secrets from being freely available to children? [14]. Despite the majority of parents saying that they regularly supervise and monitor their child's television viewing and computer playing one could not help but believe that parental control is urgently needed to change the current situation especially since so many children have television sets in their bedrooms. However, this task could be further assisted by educating both parents and children about the risks of television viewing and computer console playing, promoting and rewarding traditional types of play, encouraging involvement in sports and clubs and, reducing television ownership in bedrooms.

Although this study explored how television and computer consoles are affecting a child's development, as shown earlier through the puppet illustration and metaphor, there are 4 other strings that may be more dominant and influential on a child's growth depending on their stage of development. For example, one could not deny the rising dominance of the "cyber" playground, specifically social networking sites.^{xiii}

The conclusion to be drawn is that electronic media, specifically television and computer consoles, have intrinsically good or bad affects and, like any other resource, may be used or abused. However, society needs to be aware of the potential effects that can be caused by excessive viewing and try to implement strategies such as SMART to help counteract the harmful effects of both television and computer consoles and reap instead the

positive benefits from these resources [13]. With parental and teacher co-operation, parent awareness and child education regarding electronic media usage and its effects on an individual's development, electronic media may be used less excessively and in moderation by children. With a decrease in electronic media usage, more time would be then made available for the long-established family rituals and for an inclusion of the traditional style of play into the 21st century child's life, a time when play was

...as effortless as breathing and as varied as the images in a kaleidoscope.^{xiii}

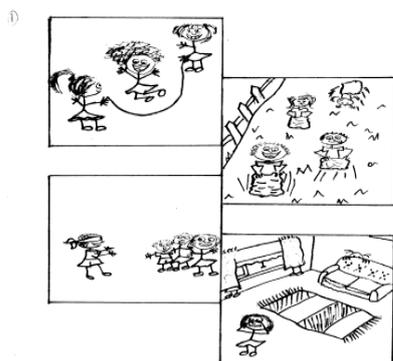


Figure 6. Play

ⁱ Rousseau, J. (1972) *Émile* (A. Bloom, Trans.), London: Basic, (original work published 1911) pp. 5.

ⁱⁱ Froebel, F. (1902) *The Education of Man* (W. N. Hailmann, Trans), Appleton, New York, (original work published 1826).

ⁱⁱⁱ This consists of geography, climate, and locations and domains on play.

^{iv} This involves family dynamics and social class influences on play.

^v This includes time as a context variable and the effects of culture on play.

^{vi} Unnikrishnan, N., and Bajpai, S, (1996) *The impact of television advertising on children*, Sage Publications, London, p. 39.

^{vii} Bronfenbrenner, U., as cited in Winn, M., (1977) *The Plug-In-Drug*, R.R. Donnelly & Sons, Virginia, p. 141.

^{viii} Mander, J. (1978) *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Harvester Press, New York, p. 142.

^{ix} Unnikrishnan, N., and Bajpai, S, (1996) *The impact of television advertising on children*, Sage Publications, London, p. 64.

^x Winn, M., (1977) *The Plug-In-Drug*, R.R. Donnelly & Sons, Virginia, p.147.

^{xi} Woolfolk, A. (2007) *Educational Psychology*, Pearson Education Inc, Boston, pp. 73.

^{xii} Although my research used *Bebo*, since the study was undertaken, *Facebook* and *Twitter* have replaced *Bebo* in popularity whilst similarly in relation to computer consoles the *Kinect* has been developed

^{xiii} Fromberg, D. (2002) *Play and meaning in early childhood education*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, p. 1.

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