

Media technology is an integral part of children's lives in the twenty-first century. The world of electronic media, however, is changing dramatically. Television, until recently the dominant media source, has been joined by cell phones, iPods, video games, instant messaging, social networks on the Internet, and e-mail.

Why Should We Care about Children's Media Use?

American children are heavily exposed to media. Most have television and radio in their homes, and half have a television in their bedrooms. Also widespread are the Internet, video games, cell phones, and iPods. Growing numbers of children are joining social networking websites like Facebook and MySpace. Children, particularly adolescents, have almost constant access to media—often without adult supervision. America's young people spend more time using media than they do on any single activity other than sleeping. The pervasiveness of electronic media in the lives of children makes it important for policymakers, educators, parents, and advocates to know what research shows and what questions remain unanswered about how America's youth use electronic media and how it affects them.

Some observers believe that media technology is helping American children become better educated, more socially connected, and better informed than any previous generation. Others fear that it is a hazard for vulnerable children—exposing them to advertising, violent or pornographic images, and encounters with strangers. Research on these questions is uneven. Analysts have amassed a vast amount of solid information on older technologies such as television and movies, but studies on newer technologies are far fewer in number and more speculative in their findings.

Focus of the Volume

This volume examines the best available evidence on whether and how exposure to different media forms is linked to child well-being. Contributors to the volume consider evidence for both children and adolescents and consider the quality of the available studies.

Key findings include:

- Content matters. More than the type of media platform or even how much time is spent using media, the content is what determines whether the impact is positive or negative.
- Media multitasking is at an all-time high. Traditional media-use diaries, in which youth record the time they spend using various forms of media, are no longer useful as youths are often using two, three, or even four forms of media simultaneously. Analysts must develop a new way of conceptualizing media exposure to capture accurately children's media use and exposure.
- Media content designed to promote pro-social behavior does increase social capacities such as altruism, cooperation, and tolerance of others. On the flip side, the content of some entertainment and news programs can instill fear and anxiety in children.
- Children and youth use electronic media mainly to better communicate with their offline friends, not with strangers.
- Media can enhance healthful behaviors—such as preventing smoking and alcohol and drug use, and promoting physical activity and safe sex—through social marketing campaigns.
- Some risky behaviors such as aggressive behavior and cigarette and alcohol consumption are strongly linked to media consumption. Others, such as obesity and sexual activity, are either only tangentially linked or require additional research before an answer can be given.
- Marketing and advertising are influential and integral parts of children's daily lives and many of the products marketed to children are unhealthful. Young children do not understand that advertisements are meant to persuade them to purchase goods rather than simply inform them.

- Government regulation of media content is unpalatable to many given our country's valuation of free speech, and recent expansions of First Amendment protection of commercial speech means that government is not likely to strengthen regulation against advertisers.

What Can Be Done to Ensure More Positive Outcomes for Children Using New Media?

The main lesson learned from this volume can be captured in one phrase: *content matters*. Rather than focusing on the type of technology used or how much time is spent with media, parents and policymakers need to focus on what is being offered to children on the various media platforms.

Implications for Policymakers.

Because of the government's responsibility to protect the safety of vulnerable citizens such as children, policymakers strive to craft legislation and regulations that both respect the First Amendment protection of free speech and provide parents with effective tools to help them regulate media content within their homes. Government at all levels should fund the creation and evaluation of positive media initiatives such as public service campaigns to reduce risky behaviors. Policymakers should also support research on educational programs that explore innovative uses of media to educate and to teach students how to use technology in preparation for the world of work. Government should also ensure that good educational programming is available to children through broadcast television and radio.

Implications for Educators.

Schools and teachers should implement research-based programs that use electronic media to enhance classroom curricula and teach students how to use electronic media constructively. Teachers should also receive training in the uses of new technologies and in how to manage the private use of electronic media in schools to decrease distractions, bullying, and cheating.

Implications for Families.

Parents will continue to be central to regulating their children's media exposure in two ways. First, working with governmental and especially nongovernmental organizations, they can put pressure on industry to develop better content, create meaningful ratings systems, cut back on inappropriate advertising, and invent better products to help screen content. Second, they can educate themselves about good media use based on their children's developmental stages and monitor their children's media use to ensure that it is healthful and constructive.

Because government will probably not intervene heavily in the realm of media content, the most effective pressure on industry to produce positive media content will come from the court of public opinion. The key is to shift the focus from the medium to the message. Government officials, community activists, child advocates, and families must put their energies into shaping content to make media technology a positive force in the lives of children and youth.