

# Television as a Social or Solo Activity: Understanding Families' Everyday Television Viewing Patterns

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*Over four days, a researcher recorded the at-home activities of 30 families at 10-min intervals. Television viewing was the second most frequently observed activity for parents and the most frequently observed activity for children. Most television was watched in common areas of the home and in the presence of at least one other person, with the most common viewing configuration involving both parents and at least one child. When parents pursued another activity in conjunction with TV viewing, that activity was most likely to be in-person social interaction. In contrast, children were more likely to watch TV in bedroom spaces and were more likely to pair TV viewing with other leisure activities. In families with TVs in a child's bedroom (about ½ of the families), children were especially likely to watch TV alone and in non-common areas of the home. The results indicate that parents tend to engage in television viewing as a social activity, but that children may be more likely to be solo viewers.*

**Keywords:** Family Communication; Home Spaces; Media; Social Interaction; Television; TV Viewing

The television (TV) has become an inescapable part of American family life, with the average U.S. home now containing more television sets ( $M=2.86$ ) than people ( $M=2.50$ ; Nielsen Media Research, 2009). Only 1% of U.S. households do not

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own a television, and most (>50%) have more than three TV sets. Despite the growing popularity of other entertainment media, TV viewing has increased steadily over the last decade, reaching an all-time high of 141 hr per viewer per month (about 4.5 hr per day) in 2009 (Nielsen Media Research, 2009).

The near-ubiquity of television in American households underscores the importance of understanding how contemporary families incorporate TV into their lives. Despite extensive research on the *content* of television programs (e.g., violence and sexual content) and the *consequences* of TV exposure (e.g., attention problems, obesity, and antisocial behavior), relatively few studies have examined the everyday spatial and social *context* of TV viewing. Of these, many studies are more than 20 years old (e.g., those in *Television and the American Family*; Bryant, 1990), yet the landscape of television has changed dramatically during that time. Now that families are more likely to own multiple television sets and can access more specialized programming, TV viewing may be increasingly fragmented. For example, the number of TV channels accessible to the average American household tripled between 1990 and 2000, and a 2005 study found that viewers spent less than 20% of their viewing time tuned in to one of the three major networks (Webster, 2005). Within a sample of dual-income families with children, this article explores where family members watch television (e.g., in common home spaces or bedrooms) and whether they watch alone or with others.

In keeping with the need for functional approaches in communication research (Pavitt, 2009), we explore whether, for contemporary families, TV viewing constitutes a social activity or a solo activity. In other words, how does television function within the family—as a shared activity that helps to maintain and strengthen relationships with other family members or as a solitary activity that provides respite from the social life of the family? Some studies have found associations between TV time and reductions in socializing with family and friends (e.g., Bickham & Rich, 2006; Vandewater, Bickham, & Lee, 2006). However, other researchers have noted that families can use TV time as a platform for togetherness (e.g., Dempsey, 2005; Pigeron, 2006). A study that videotaped the in-home TV viewing of children and adults found that almost one half of the time spent watching TV was spent engaged in another activity as well, with social interaction the most common (Schmitt, Woolf, & Anderson, 2003). However, another study (Brody, Stoneman, & Sanders, 1980) found that children and fathers were less social and talkative when watching television with family members. This article examines how families combine TV viewing with other activities, and looks separately at fathers, mothers, and children.

Many studies of everyday television viewing rely on retrospective reports (e.g., estimates of TV viewing hours). Some researchers have used experience-sampling methods, allowing for more precise estimates of viewing (e.g., Bickham & Rich, 2006; Vandewater et al., 2006). However, social desirability pressures may motivate participants to underreport TV time. Also, since TV watching is often a “background” activity that unfolds in concert with other activities, participants may not report it, and parents might not be fully aware of children’s TV viewing. More exact data can be collected with direct monitoring of TV sets (e.g., Anderson, 1986) and

with videotaped TV viewing (Brody et al., 1980; Schmitt et al., 2003), but these approaches cannot fully capture families' other activities. This study, part of a larger study of dual-income families with children, employs an observational methodology in which family members' locations and activities were recorded every 10 min by an *in-situ* observer. We identified all observations marked as "TV viewing" and examined family members' locations, secondary activities, and the presence of other family members. In exploring the social dimensions of everyday TV viewing, we ask two research questions, using descriptive data:

- RQ1: *How often, where, and with whom do family members watch TV? More specifically, what proportion of time at home is devoted to TV? Is TV watched in common home spaces or in bedrooms, and watched alone or with others present? In what family configurations (parents only, parents and children, children only)? We expect that most TV will be watched in common spaces, with others present, but that differences may emerge between parents and children.*
- RQ2: *What activities typically co-occur with TV viewing? Specifically, when watching TV is the primary activity, what secondary activities are pursued? When watching TV is a secondary activity, what primary activities are pursued? We expect family members to pair TV viewing with social interaction, and possibly also chores, homework, and other leisure activities.*

## Method

Thirty participating families were recruited from the Los Angeles area as part of a larger study focusing on dual-income families, conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles's Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) between 2002 and 2005. Families were eligible for the study if they identified themselves as middle-class, maintained a mortgage on their homes, and included two cohabitating adults, both of whom worked full-time (>30 hr per week). Each family had two to three children, including a "target child" who was 7 to 12 years old ( $M = 9.28$  years; 14 girls and 16 boys). Parents' median age was 41 years (range = 28–58 years), and couples had been married 13 years, on average (range = 3–18 years). Parents' ethnicities include White of non-Hispanic descent (65%), African descent (9%), East or Southeast Asian descent (9%), Hispanic descent (10%), and South Asian descent (7%). Families received \$1,000 for their week of participation.

## Procedure

The study sought to capture a "week in the life" of each family through questionnaires, videotaping, and scan sampling (Ochs, Graesch, Mittman, Bradbury, & Repetti, 2006). Scan sampling is a technique designed to obtain data on multiple participants by observing individuals at regular intervals (Altmann, 1974; Dunbar, 1976). Each family member's location (e.g., the kitchen, hallway, or living room) and activity (e.g., watching TV) was recorded every 10 min by a researcher using a handheld computer (as described in Broege, Owens, Graesch, Arnold, & Schneider,

2007; Graesch, 2009; Klein, Graesch, & Izquierdo, 2009; Ochs et al., 2006). Each entry included the “primary” activity, a “secondary” activity (if applicable), and any other family member that might have been present.

Scan sampling was conducted on two weekdays and two weekend days during the study week. On weekday mornings, scan sampling occurred before family members left for work or school (typically between 6:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m.) and resumed in the afternoons and evenings, beginning when the first parent returned home from work and ending at bedtime (typically between 4 p.m. and 9 p.m.). Weekend scan sampling occurred on Saturday mornings (around 8 a.m.–12 p.m.) and on Sunday mornings and evenings (around 4 p.m.–9 p.m.). Over all four days, scan sampling observations averaged 76.6 for fathers (about 12 hr, 45 min of observation), 92.7 for mothers (about 15.5 hr), and 101.1 for target children (about 17 hr), with a range of 38 to 111 observations for husbands, 64 to 135 observations for wives, and 58 to 145 observations for children.

Scan sampling activity descriptors were typically just a few words (e.g., “sleeping,” “watching TV,” or “playing a video game”). In cases when family members were perceived to be engaged in more than one distinct activity, the ethnographer designated one activity the primary activity and the other the secondary activity. “Primary” activities were those with which the family member appeared most engaged at the time of scan sampling. For example, when a child was doing homework in front of the television, but was focused on the homework assignment, “homework” was designated as the primary and “television” as the secondary activity. However, when homework papers were sitting in the child’s lap while the child attended to the television, “television” was coded as primary and “homework” as secondary. In cases where family members were present, their primary or secondary involvement with TV was also recorded. For example, if the child’s father was focused on the child’s homework, “homework assistance” would be his primary and “TV” his secondary activity. Because scan sampling was conducted every 10 min, it is possible that activity designations could change several times while an activity was being pursued; for example, over the course of one hr-long television program, a family member might have “television” marked as a primary activity several times, but might also have other activities recorded, such as homework, talking with others, and eating.

Scan sampling activity descriptions were sorted into 14 categories, such as leisure, chores, and communication (see the Appendix for categories) by two coders working independently. The “leisure” category was divided into subcategories, including watching television, video game play, creative play, and reading. These categories have been employed in several investigations (e.g., Beck & Arnold, 2007; Broege et al., 2007; Saxbe, Repetti, & Graesch, 2011). In this study, interrater reliability was high, with the two coders in agreement over 97% of the time. Broege et al. also found high interrater agreement (.92) and high internal consistency when CELF data were combined with data from a 500-family Experience Sampling Methodology study (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ , split-half reliability coefficient = .82).

## Results

The full dataset (including observations for fathers, mothers, and the target child in each family) included 8,115 observations, about 271 per family. In 1,600 cases, about 20% of the observations, a secondary activity was also recorded. Television viewing was recorded as the primary activity for 926 observations, 11% of all observations, making it the second most often pursued primary activity, following talking in person (942 observations) and meal prep and cleanup (807 observations). Television viewing was a secondary activity in 211 instances (13% of secondary observations) and the second most common secondary activity, again following talking in person (634 observations) and followed by reading (59 observations).

Looking separately at family members, mothers devoted an average of 6% of their primary activity observations to watching TV. Fathers devoted 10%, significantly more (as a percentage of their total activities) than mothers,  $t(29) = -2.34$ ,  $p < .05$  ( $d = 0.87$ ). Target children devoted 17%, more (as a percentage of their total activities) than mothers,  $t(29) = -5.21$ ,  $p < .001$  ( $d = 1.93$ ); or fathers,  $t(29) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .001$  ( $d = 1.73$ ). Watching TV was the most frequently observed primary activity for children. Similarly, TV viewing as a secondary activity constituted 8% of mothers', 11% of fathers', and 22% of children's secondary activities.

### *Families' TV Ownership, TV Viewing Locations, and Co-Presence of Others*

Families owned a median of three TVs ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ; range = 1–7). Every family had at least one TV situated in the living room, family room, or den. Eighty percent of the families (24 families) had a TV set in the parents' bedroom, and 14 families (47%) had a TV in at least one child's bedroom. When TV viewing was the primary activity, parents were most often in the living room or den (82% of TV observations for mothers and 84% for fathers) or in their own bedrooms (9% for mothers and 10% for fathers). Children were in the living room or den for 60% of primary TV observations, and were in a bedroom space for 34% of primary TV observations—12% in a parent's bedroom and 22% in their own bedroom. When only families with TVs in a child's bedroom were examined, parents' viewing locations remained similar, but children were more likely to watch TV in a bedroom (54% of their primary TV observations: 41% in a child's bedroom and 13% in the parents' bedroom) than the living room or den (43% of TV observations).

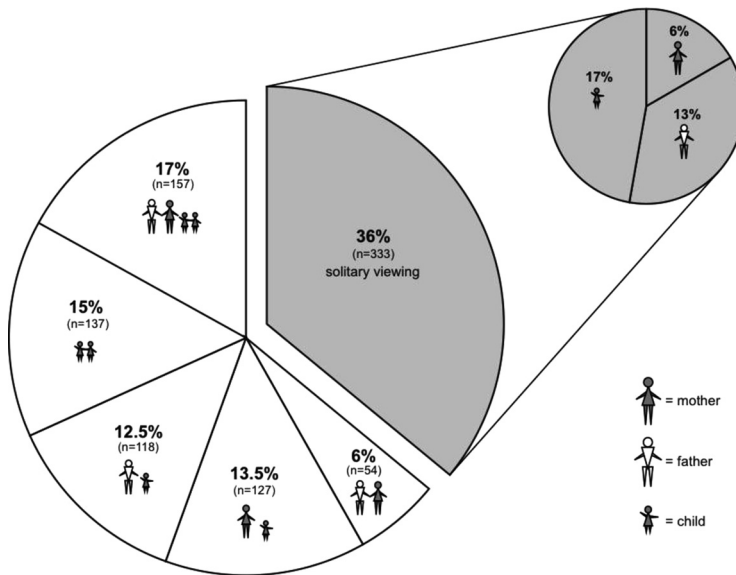
As predicted, family members typically watched TV in the presence of at least one other person. When mothers' primary observation was recorded as being TV watching, they were in the company of at least one other person 78% of the time; for both fathers and children, TV viewing as a primary observation took place in the company of at least another person 61% of the time. For children in households with TVs in at least one child's bedroom, TV was watched in the company of another person only 53% of the time, compared to 71% of the time for children in households that did not have TVs in a child's bedroom.

Figure 1 displays family TV viewing configurations. When TV was watched as a primary activity and in the company of at least one person (593 observations), the most typical configuration was “whole family”: both parents and at least one child, representing 27% of those observations. Following this configuration were the configurations of children without parents present, the mother with at least one child, and the father with at least one child. Parents watching TV without children present represented only 9% of shared-viewing TV observations.

### Television as a Primary or Secondary Activity

About one third (32%) of mothers' TV observations (in which TV was the primary activity) were accompanied by a secondary activity, which was the case for 23% of fathers' and 19% of children's TV observations. When other (non-TV) activities were primary, a secondary activity was recorded for 22% of mothers and fathers and 15% of children.

For both mothers and fathers, talking in person was the most frequently occurring secondary activity accompanying TV viewing, followed by eating and other leisure activities. For children, other leisure was the most frequently observed secondary activity, with video game play accounting for the majority of observations, followed by talking in person, eating, and schoolwork. When watching TV was a secondary activity, parents' primary activities were most often talking in person, followed by eating (both parents), other leisure activities (mothers), and paid work at home (fathers). When children watched TV as a secondary activity, their primary activities were most often other leisure, followed by eating and schoolwork.



**Figure 1** Scan Sampling Observations Where TV Viewing Was the Primary Activity (N = 926).

## Discussion

This article reported results from an observational study in which parents and children in dual-income families were observed at regular intervals in their homes over four days. The results suggest that watching TV is an important part of everyday family life: TV viewing was the second most frequently observed primary activity for parents, and the most frequently observed primary activity for children. Fathers devoted a greater proportion of their at-home activities to TV than did mothers, and children devoted a greater proportion of their at-home activities to TV than did fathers or mothers. Most TV was watched in common home spaces, although children in families with a TV in a child's bedroom watched more TV in bedroom spaces than in common spaces. Family members typically watched television in the presence of at least one other person, with "whole-family" configurations the most common. Parents were most likely to pair TV viewing (as a primary or secondary activity) with social interaction ("talking in person"), whereas children were most likely to be observed in other leisure.

For the families in this study, TV appeared to fulfill a social function, providing a platform for family togetherness. Parents did most of their TV viewing in common home spaces, such as living rooms and family rooms or dens, and were more likely to pair TV viewing with social interaction than with any other activity. Mothers were especially likely to watch TV in a common home space while talking with other family members, and to watch TV in the presence of others. Some differences emerged between children's and parents' television viewing patterns. While parents may consider TV viewing to be a "family" activity, children appeared more likely to watch TV alone, to watch in bedrooms rather than in common home spaces, and to pair TV watching with other leisure rather than in-person communication. Therefore, not only do children appear to watch more TV than parents, they also watch in more isolation.

Although this study did not find TV viewing to be socially isolating, especially for parents, the quality of interactions may be affected by TV: Brody et al. (1980) found differences in social behavior when comparing a TV and non-TV condition. Mothers were the most likely to continue engaging in social interaction during the TV condition, a result consistent with this study. Other investigations have suggested that children play with less focused attention in the presence of background TV (e.g., Schmidt, Pempek, Kirkorian, Lund, & Anderson, 2008), raising questions about how children pair TV viewing with other leisure activities, and about the impact on children of parents watching TV in common home spaces. We also found that TV sets in children's bedrooms affected children's viewing patterns, such that children with access to child's-bedroom TVs were more likely to watch TV alone.

This study's main strength is its live observation of parents' and children's activities. Four days were sampled, including weekdays and weekend days, and a range of at-home activities were captured in addition to TV viewing. The participating families all consisted of full-time working parents with children between the ages of 7 and 12, which may have standardized differences in TV viewing that could be explained by parents' employment status or children's ages.

This study has several limitations. Scan sampling data are subject to biases—for example, underestimates of TV viewing if participants watched TV between observation rounds or if TV was on in the background but participants did not appear engaged with it. Similarly, participants might shift between multiple activities between observation rounds, making the designation of “primary” activities necessarily imprecise. In addition, although the study sought to recruit families representative of contemporary dual-earner families, its intensiveness restricted the sample size. However, a collaborative study (Broege et al., 2007) merged this 30-family dataset with a 500-family dataset, finding general agreement about families’ everyday activities. The majority of participating families were of White, non-Hispanic descent, and the small sample did not permit exploration of ethnic and cultural differences in television viewing. In addition, our observation may have changed families’ behavior; for example, parents might have interacted more with children than usual. Finally, data collection ended in 2005, before the widespread adoption of technologies (e.g., streaming video) that have further changed the landscape of TV viewing.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on families and TV in several important ways. First, it reports on dual-income families’ everyday TV viewing behavior, shedding light on how often family members watch TV, where TV viewing occurs, who is present when TV is watched, and whether TV watching co-occurs with other activities. Although other studies have attempted to describe families’ involvement with TV, no recent study has featured live observational data at this level of detail. Our use of an outside observer also circumvents self-report bias, especially relevant because some families with children may downplay their TV time when asked to self-report. This study sought to be primarily descriptive and presents basic data on family members’ TV viewing, a level of analysis that we feel is appropriate given the literature. Further in-situ studies of family TV viewing can continue to explore the impact of TV viewing on the social life of the home.

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## Appendix

### Definitions of Activity Categories

#### Leisure

Subcodes: 1-Watching TV; 2-playing video game; 3-listening to music/radio; 4-reading; 5-board game or card game, puzzle; 6-exercise/sports/movement; 7-arts/crafts/coloring/music, or other creative play; 8-free play; 9-other

#### Housework

Household maintenance, e.g., preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning, lawn care

#### Communication

Subcodes: 1-general computer use; Web browsing; 2-e-mailing, 3-using phone: checking messages, calling; 4-talking in person; 5-writing a note; 6-non-verbal communication, e.g., crying, laughing; 7-argumentative communication; 8-listening

#### Childcare

Caring for children, e.g., bathing child, dressing or grooming child, feeding child

Schoolwork

Doing homework or (if a parent) facilitating children's school-related work

Paid work at home

Job-related activities, e.g., using computer (job-related), sorting through work papers

Eating/drinking

Consumption of food or drink, e.g., eating dinner, snacking

Study-related activities

Talking to researchers, sampling saliva, filling out questionnaires, using video equipment

Spouse care

Showing affection to the spouse, e.g., massaging spouse, hugging, kissing spouse

Transit

Arriving at or leaving the home, walking from one part of the home to another

Personal time

Resting or daydreaming, e.g., napping, looking out the window, staring into space

Personal care

Self-care activities, e.g., grooming, showering, brushing teeth, getting dressed

Missing data/no data

No activity label provided, or label too vague to code, e.g., "door closed," "getting something," or "holding something"