



Viewers and Family Viewing Policy

A report of research undertaken for
the Broadcasting Standards Commission
British Broadcasting Corporation
and the Independent Television Commission



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SUMMARY

- The findings of this qualitative research are indicative rather than definitive, showing the responses of a sample of families, parent peer groups and children.
- The great majority of parents are aware of the broadcasters' Family Viewing Policy and the nine o'clock watershed. For many it is a key tool, being a signal for parents of older children to reassume responsibility for viewing and a signal of bedtime for younger children.
- The concept of the watershed as a contract between the audience and the broadcaster is generally understood.
- Parents also generally understand the progressive character of the watershed and it continues to be valued by both parents and, indeed, by younger children themselves.
- There were households in this research who were more active in monitoring and controlling children's television viewing and other media consumption:
 - Households with younger children, especially those below secondary school age
 - Households of higher social grades (ABC1 versus C2DE)
 - Terrestrial-only households (versus multichannel)
 - Single parent households
- Parents recognise the increasingly complex nature of their children's viewing and use of other electronic media, which comes with the proliferation of television sets in the home, together with video cassette recorders (VCRs), multichannel television, the internet, and computer and video games. It should be noted, however, that access to multichannel television is generally confined to the set in a family's living room.
- These developments bring widened choice, which is welcomed, but many parents encounter problems with the new diversity of choice, and some parents do not feel equal to dealing with the problems.
- Despite the many issues and concerns in parents' minds about their children's television viewing and media use, this does not always translate into formal control or regulation of media consumption, either of television viewing or use of other media.
- The absence of active control or regulation is associated with strong child autonomy and a belief, expressed by many parents, that older children in particular are able to make their own media choices.
- The presence of one or more older siblings in a household usually makes it harder for parents to control the media consumption of younger children.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of a 'Family Viewing Policy' is shared by all British broadcasters and broadcast regulators. It goes back to the 1970s, but has its origins well before that, arguably in *Television and the Child*, the report of research conducted by Professor Hilde Himmelweit of the London School of Economics, with funding from the Nuffield Foundation, published in 1958. Following much public discussion, Himmelweit looked at the influence of television on children. The research drew on observations by parents and teachers, but principally on a study of more than 4,000 children. The report accepted that after 9pm very few children remained in the television audience, but said that before that time parents alone could not be responsible for children's viewing. It suggested ways in which television producers could take action to share this responsibility, including programme balance (avoiding, for instance, a concentration of crime programmes before 9pm); looking carefully at the presentation of violence; and undertaking further research.

But, fully formulated and in the public domain, the Family Viewing Policy, including the nine o'clock watershed, designed to help parents to protect their children from material that might harm or distress them, dates from the 1970s.

Family Viewing Policy as currently applied is a 'contract' between, on the one hand, the broadcasters and the regulators, and, on the other hand, viewers, that:

- * What is shown on television up to 9pm in the evening will be broadly suitable for children under the age of 16 to see without the need for parental supervision.
- * After 9pm, material unsuitable for children will be shown only progressively, with the more unsuitable programming shown at progressively later hours.
- * Nine o'clock is the 'watershed', but it does not mark a 'waterfall' ie after 9pm programmes may progressively contain material unsuitable for children, but there is not a sudden switch to wholly unsuitable material.

In the 1970s, the great majority of homes had a single television set, only a minority of which could receive colour, and so the family viewing experience was a comparatively simple affair. A Family Viewing Policy made immediate sense. With the arrival of multichannel commercial television delivered by satellite or cable in the 1980s and 1990s came dedicated film channels. For those channels the nine o'clock watershed was, in time, replaced by two watersheds, one at 8pm before which films with a British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) classification of '15' could not be shown, and a second at 10pm before which those rated '18' could not begin. Then, with the advent of individual films being available on a Pay-Per-View (PPV) basis, with access protected by the mandatory use of a personal identification number (PIN) and with itemised billing for the films viewed, films with any BBFC classification could start at any time of the day or night on PPV services. But still, for the overwhelming majority of viewing, the nine o'clock watershed has remained.

Viewing in the home has altered radically over the last 30 years, however, and has been affected by two major changes. First, there has been a proliferation of

electronic equipment. The typical home has a television set in more than one room, although sets in rooms which are not the 'main' room currently tend to receive only analogue terrestrial services; 'live' viewing is supplemented by time-shifted viewing using a VCR, sometimes more than one, used also to watch pre-recorded tapes; many homes have multichannel television delivered to the main set by satellite or cable, and a significant minority have digital television; and there has been a rapid spread of personal computers, some with internet access, of electronic games consoles, and latterly of digital versatile disc (DVD) players. So the family viewing experience of the 1970s accounts now for only a minority of viewing.

The second major change has been in the way parents and other adults treat children. Compared with 30 years ago, most children are given more responsibility for making choices for themselves about what they wear, what they read, what they watch on television, what time they go to bed, and so on.

Given these important social changes, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC), decided to commission a small-scale qualitative research project into the media consumption patterns of parents and children today, and into the culture that surrounds media consumption. The purpose was to evaluate the relevance and utility of the existing Family Viewing Policy in general and of the nine o'clock watershed in particular. The main thrust of the research was to be an exploration of people's actual habits and behaviour in connection with media, although relevant attitudes and beliefs were to be examined as well.

The project was specified in a research brief and put out to competitive tender, as a result of which the contract was awarded to Simons Priest & Associates, and the work was undertaken in July 2000.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

There were three principal research objectives:

First, the research would explore the issues and relationships surrounding children's viewing and parental involvement and intervention. It would assess the degree to which parents are involved in their children's viewing, where they give children autonomy in their choices, where they impose vetoes, what they seek to regulate, and how.

Second, it would investigate the sources of viewing to which children and their families have access, and how these are used within the household. Thus it would explore the availability to parents and to children of various television sets in the home and what control parents exercise over the use of the various sets; it would seek to understand the role of different broadcast experiences within households with children; and it would compare the live viewing of the four (or five) terrestrial channels with uses of VCRs, of non-terrestrial channels, of the internet and games, of DVDs, etc.

Third, it would provide an understanding of the ways in which parents relate to their children's media consumption. It would assess the level of parental responsibility as perceived both by parents themselves and by their children; it would

examine the role which parents expect to be played – and want to be played – by broadcasters and broadcast regulators in protecting children from unsuitable material; and it would consider how television schedules shaped by the Family Viewing Policy are regarded by parents.

SAMPLE AND METHODS The research was a qualitative study, rather than a quantitative survey of the opinions of a sample designed to be fully representative of the UK population. It was designed to elicit fine-grain information about the behaviour, views, opinions and attitudes of a sample of people, by employing a mixture of focus groups with parents, family group sessions, and paired depth interviews with parents, with one parent and one child, and with two children. The sample included younger and older families, with children aged eight to 11 and 12 to 15 respectively, respondents in social grades AB, C1, C2 and DE, respondents in households receiving only the four (or five) terrestrial channels and also households with access to multi-channel television, and people living in a range of locations in England, Scotland and Wales, but not in Northern Ireland. Altogether, 28 research sessions were held – 10 with groups of up to eight parents, four as family groups and the remainder as pairs of parents and/or children. This comprises about 120 respondents in all. Fieldwork was conducted in July 2000. A schematic description of the sample and methods employed is given in Appendix 1.

2 THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH: TELEVISION AND OTHER MEDIA

Quotas were set for the number of respondents in homes with multichannel television, but not for the numbers with access to other electronic equipment, and the research found the average home to contain a remarkable range of equipment. What struck the researchers was respondents' lack of awareness of what they possessed. Asked how many television sets or VCRs they had, most seriously underestimated the number, and it was only when mentally taken round their own homes, room by room, to count them up that they were able to provide the accurate figure – often with the result that respondents were shocked at the discovery. It seemed that the main television set and VCR, and perhaps one or two further sets, came immediately to mind, but that they over-looked, or perhaps 'discounted', old sets and VCRs which had been relegated to a child's bedroom or a spare room. Apart from equipment in the main living room, they seemed more aware of newer technology, such as a DVD player, or a new computer or piece of computer equipment or PlayStation, or recently acquired internet access.

Attitudes to television and other media were mixed, but there was a very widespread acknowledgement of the beneficial impact that developments in technology have had, expressed by a majority of people in homes with multichannel television.

POSITIVE ASPECTS Enhanced choice was the positive aspect of today's television and other media mentioned most frequently. Respondents commented on the greater range of media available to their children than they themselves had enjoyed, and remarked that this did not necessarily imply a decline in quality of programmes and entertainment and information delivered by other electronic media.

Another common theme was the way in which television programmes and films can help children face the often-uncomfortable reality of how other people and other children live their lives. Also programmes can deal with upsetting or difficult issues in a responsible way, thus helping both parents and children.

But my point is, that those kinds of programmes [teensoaps], a lot of them do actually have a moral in them and I'm quite happy for them to watch that because they are teaching them to be nice to each other. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

They like things like Byker Grove that goes into pregnancy and homosexuality and the stuff that kids are into. It's bits of their lives. I mean what's the point of Blue Peter, making things out of sticky backed plastic. It's not that generation any more is it? (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

We watched Comic Relief last year and some of it was quite gory and I thought, 'Well we'll stick with this and guide her through it and show her other countries and whatever.' And we sat up till about 1pm in the morning. I wouldn't have let her sit there on her own and watch it, but together it was quite useful. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

A further benefit perceived by some was the way in which handling new technology in the home gives children familiarity with equipment which, beyond a doubt, will figure prominently in their future lives, and provides them with a valuable sophistication.

Well, I think that children now are more – I don't know if they are more advanced but with technology and everything else happening in the world, they seem to know more than I did when I was nine or 10, you know, or 11. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

Other parents said that programmes on television allow sometimes uncomfortable issues to be raised in the home, giving parents an opportunity to discuss with their children subjects which it would have been embarrassing to raise unprompted. And parents value these discussions since they provide teaching opportunities, and mean that children are not left to pick up from their peers at school information that can be misleading or bigoted – or just plain wrong.

I think it's a good thing [sexual issues on television]. When I was growing up my mum didn't tell me anything... So you didn't learn it off the telly then, and my mum when it was time for me to know, she let me read a book, and I was quite naïve. I make sure I tell them. (C1, older family, multichannel)

I have just thought of another rule, I can't bear for Fay to watch talk shows without me. I admit I love Jenny Jones and Sally and Oprah, Jerry Springer and Rikki Lake. I know that people are very judgemental about the no brainer American TV but I love it, I think it's fab. But I like to watch it with Fay because I think she needs guidance. They talk about a lot of things that she really needs to have an adult reinforcer to say, 'That's not OK'. (DE, younger family, multichannel)

NEGATIVE ASPECTS A number of negative aspects of television and other media were also raised, perhaps the most commonly mentioned was television's tendency to 'rob children of their innocence'. There is concern that children are exposed prematurely to issues they cannot understand fully, and therefore misunderstand. This applies in particular to younger children. There are fears, too, that images and language carried on television and in films can expose children to the underbelly of society at an inappropriately tender age, with the risk that such aspects of social life can be misunderstood as normal.

You just want to try and let them be children as long as they can. I mean, they start bringing things home from school that they've said, you've got to start addressing the question properly. But on telly you don't want to force it down, you just want to let them grow into it, if you like. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

Television has changed things. Years ago, when we were younger, kids weren't as mature, 14 year-olds were more naïve than they are now. It's probably television that's changed that. (C1, older family, multichannel)

Anxiety was expressed by others that the many technological options available to children lure them to solitary play, away from parents and other family members, thus contributing to a weakening of family life.

A recurrent theme, in this research, was the way in which time spent watching television or playing electronic games is time not spent outside, playing in the way parents themselves had done. But those same parents often said they colluded in this behaviour because they feared that old-fashioned play in streets or parks or on waste ground was no longer safe¹.

These days you have to coax kids into going out – they spend so much time indoors. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

They could go outside before. When we were young we could go outside and play, we weren't as interested in television. Today they have no option, I think, because they can't really go out. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

You can't be safe and certain. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

Another feeling expressed by some parents was that of powerlessness. They said they felt powerless in the face of their children's demands – to monopolise the main television set, to get sets of their own, to be given games, to have their own multichannel access, their own telephone – and they felt that these demands were compounded by the peer pressure to which their children were subjected at school.

It started off with one telly in the girls' bedroom and my son was throwing a wobbly because he couldn't watch what he wanted to and that's just how it's all grown. That's how I ended up with two computer consoles – because there was arguments that he was playing on the PlayStation and they wanted to play on it. The computer was originally going to be purely educational for them to do their homework with. We've got a whole drawer of games now. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

The point is that if she [14 year-old] wants to watch that [Pulp Fiction] she might find that horrifying but The Exorcist she might find funny or vice versa. It's just the way people are now. It's peer pressure at school, 'I watched that', 'Is it good?' 'Yes', and then having a chat about it the day after. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Where younger children are concerned, there are parents who worry about increasing links between television programmes and merchandising, seeing this as forcing consumerism on their children. The immediate effect of television programmes is seen as reinforced by peer pressure, and the child says that he or she 'has to own' the merchandising.

¹ *Young People New Media*; Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill; London School of Economics and Political Science; 1999

3 USING TELEVISION

In this section and the six that follow we will present the findings of the research as they relate to the use of television, film, the internet, and computer and video games, although most attention will be paid to television, this Report's main focus. Not least because they will recur several times, three points should be mentioned at the outset.

First, three factors seem to account for much of the variation found: the age of children in the home, social class and multichannel access, although the last two, class and access to multichannel television, are inter-related. It is not possible therefore, to ascribe priority between them, and certainly not on the basis of the methods employed in this research.

Second, while the age of children in the family is of crucial importance, even this factor can be confused since the regulation of a child's media consumption is crucially affected if an older sibling is present in the same house.

Third, single parent households in this research represent a special case, especially where there is a single child. This study found the single parent is much more involved in her (or his) child's viewing and other play, and the degree of control is concomitantly greater. This is less true in a single parent home with two or more children, but even in these homes there seems to be more control of children's media consumption than is typically found in two parent households, because, it appears, the older sibling assumes the mantle of protecting younger ones with a seriousness that was not found among older children in two parent homes.

CONTROL OF YOUNGER CHILDREN'S USE OF TELEVISION

It was clear that active control of children's viewing, including the use of actual vetoes, occurs most commonly in younger families – defined here as those aged under 10 years (the BARB audience measurement system most commonly divides children into those aged 4-9 and those aged 10-15). The form assumed by control varied, from principled decisions and rules made in advance to decisions prompted by the content of programmes as they went out, to lower level and more passive interventions. It was clear that the nine o'clock watershed was a key tool for the majority of parents, being a signal for parents of older children to re-assume responsibility, and as a signal of bedtime for younger children. But the research, nevertheless, found examples, even among parents of younger children, where no vetoes or controls are imposed.

A minority of respondents in this qualitative study described themselves as very strict, and they tended to be in ABC1 social grade households, or to be single parents who were heavily involved in their children's viewing. Although a range of interventions was applied, they are often part of a lifestyle rather than being based on particular concerns about television viewing. For example, a child may have to be in bed by 7.30 or 8pm, and thus there is simply no opportunity to see unsuitable programming scheduled after 9pm, in line with Family Viewing Policy. When pressed to say what would be matters for concern, these parents mentioned sex, violence and so on, which are less of an issue before the nine o'clock watershed, a valued tool. Consequently, younger families commonly have no house rules about what may and may not be watched because it is not an issue. Added to which, of course, younger children are uninterested in more adult programme material.

Respondents mentioned many specific examples of control. The principled decisions and rules included a 9 or 9.30pm (or even earlier) curfew; unplugging the aerial to the television set in children's bedrooms at night; no television in bedrooms on school nights; only videos, rather than live television, in bedrooms; no television before school; no access to multichannel services in children's bedrooms; no television until homework has been done; post-watershed viewing only if shared with parents.

He hasn't got a TV in his room, so I've got a certain amount of control over what he watches. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, older family, terrestrial only)

I say, 'Turn the tellies off,' at half past nine. I think that's late enough. But you can go up there any time until 11 o'clock – like really creep up the stairs – I normally go up at ten to check to make sure they are off and then they will turn them off. But if you don't go up and check, they'll just leave them on and watch it. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

Well once she's in bed she's not going to have the telly on anyway. If it's on I just cut the aerial out and it interferes with the picture and she turns it off anyway. So she knows that I mean business if I say, 'No TV'. (DE, younger family, multi-channel)

Among the programme-prompted interventions were: zapping at the point of unsuitable material, such as sex scenes; a prohibition on *South Park*; no soaps; no *Jerry Springer*.

And the lower level interventions included the general encouragement of activities other than watching television, such as playing outside and doing homework; maintaining an awareness of television schedules and children's viewing choices; routinely checking listings, especially the listings for Channels 4 and 5; checking the suitability of storylines as they appear in soaps.

I just say, 'You can't watch it'. He'll go on and on and on, 'I want to watch it'. But we just play cards or I take his mind off it. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

I like South Park. So I watch it first, and then I let her watch it, but I never would have thought I would have let her watch that until she was much older but my friend lets her daughter watch it and so did I but I watch the episodes first and if it isn't too dodgy I will let her watch it. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

CONTROL OF OLDER CHILDREN'S USE OF TELEVISION

The research found very few house rules applied to older children in this study, who are regarded as being virtually adults by the age of 14 or 15, and although there is some sensitivity to the inappropriateness of certain content, the imposition of vetoes on viewing is unusual. Only idiosyncratic examples of intervention in the viewing of older children were found, and they tended to be general concerns, such as the overall amount of viewing, rather than censoring programmes.

Specific examples of house rules about television being applied to older children were rare, and certainly there was no discernible pattern. Pornography appeared to be the only content which was the subject of an absolute veto, but even pornography was considered acceptable for boys aged 14 or 15 and over by a

few parents. (N.B. As used by respondents in this research, 'pornography' meant anything of a sexual nature that people consider 'rude' or risqué, and only occasionally was it used to refer to what would strictly count as pornography – although it must be allowed that even legal definitions are imprecise.) Other specific rules mentioned included a few examples of no television until homework done and isolated examples of no television at meal times; television limited to two hours a day; not allowed to watch Channel 5; children have to cover their eyes at sex scenes.

In general, parents of older children may express misgivings about specific programmes and about certain content, but they do not actively ban their children from viewing. It seems that children aged 11 and over typically stay up until 9 or 10 to 10.30pm on school nights, and much later at weekends and in school holidays. Children of this age quite routinely watch post-watershed programming in their own bedrooms, and they do so with the consent, if not the approval, of their parents, and with only the most minimal checking or supervision. Most parents believe that their children are effectively adults by the age of 14 or 15 and therefore able to control their own viewing.

It really depends on what their friends say. He's got a lot of older friends and if they come round and say, 'Can we see that, my mum says it's alright', you tend to start thinking, 'Oh well there can't be much wrong with it then'. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, older family, terrestrial only)

I don't know whether I'm different to other mums but I don't really regulate an awful lot. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

When they're younger it's easier to instil these ground rules because I can say like, 'Put the TV off and into bed', but when you get to somebody that's as big as Kirsty they seem to be much more demanding and you're busy with the younger ones, I don't really want you watching that and they come out with that Ibiza programme or something. (Family group, single mother, DE, older family, terrestrial only)

Channel 5 has got more porn than the adult channels. Do they [teenage boys] ever watch? Oh yes, from 14 upwards they're inquisitive. It's part of life. It's part of growing up. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

In the end I just tend to think, 'Oh you know, whatever...' I tend for the sake of peace and quiet sometimes to give in because I think, 'Well what he doesn't watch at home'... He's got lots of friends outside. (Parent/child paired depth, DE, older family, terrestrial only)

That's the only thing that bothers me is the violence side. But we don't have any checks, do we? I mean Steven will be upstairs for hours, lying on our bed watching telly and we haven't got a clue. (Family group, AB, older family, multichannel)

**WHY DO PARENTS NOT
REGULATE TELEVISION
VIEWING MORE?**

There were two groups of reasons these parents gave for not regulating their children's viewing. On the one hand, there are external or practical reasons: a sense of powerlessness, the fragmentation of families and differing parental views, and a belief that children cannot be protected from the outside world. On the other hand there are internal or emotional reasons: the 'anything for a quiet life' attitude, and a feeling that they have to trust their children. In addition, many parents feel they must positively and actively avoid being over-protective, and see television as a window on the world that exposes children to the realities of life. A number of factual programmes were cited to illustrate the beneficial effects of television, and the coverage of the Sarah Payne story was mentioned more than once (the murder of eight year-old Sarah Payne in Sussex had happened not long before the research was being undertaken).

First, the external and practical reasons that were given. The parents of older children most frequently reported a sense of powerlessness, but it can occur when children are as young as seven or eight. It seems to derive mainly from the proliferation of television sets in the homes, and parents say that what is viewed is effectively beyond their control. The problem is exacerbated by peer pressure, and the 'everybody else is watching' argument.

ADULT PERCEPTIONS

I don't think, with the best will in the world, whatever age they are, you can really control what they're exposed to at all. Because the watershed's at 9 o'clock and at night they're not in bed anyway. Unless you're sitting with them all the time, I mean, you're not in control, are you? (AB, older family, multi-channel)

In terms of, 'You're going to bed now, lights out', you probably don't [have rules]. So long as they're not giving you any grief – you can't exercise too much choice. You can pretend to, 'Oh you're not going to watch this', but what can you do when you're not there all the time because the telly's in their room? (DE, younger family, multichannel)

We tend to just leave them with it [South Park] and tell them, you know, 'We are not happy that you watched it.' They say, 'I know but I am watching it.' (C2, younger family, terrestrial only)

The research suggested that some parents – single parents particularly, though not exclusively – find the fragmentation of their families leads to conflicts of rules. There can be differences between parents that generate conflicts with children that can be hard to resolve, with the result that it is impossible to shield children from some programmes. And, while single parents appeared to be generally more involved in their children's viewing, there were instances reported of allowing them access to more grown-up content because of the absence of a second parent.

My son's the same age [11] and because I'm on my own I maybe treat him more as an adult than I would if his dad was still there sort of thing. I let him watch things that I probably shouldn't do, swearing and sex scenes. (C1, older family, multichannel)

Other parents have an awareness that children cannot be protected from the 'outside world', and are struck by a feeling that it would be futile to try to

protect their children from the portrayal on television of issues they will encounter in everyday life. Many, especially those in C2DE homes, take a positive pride in their children's savvy, and some see television as a useful catalyst which brings into the home issues that need to be discussed. This is true mainly for the parents of older children in the sample, although, except for the more extreme examples, it can apply to the parents of younger children too.

I think you have to be a lot more open than when I was my daughter's age, I didn't know what lesbians and gays were, I had no idea. I hadn't a clue what they were. Because I didn't know at that age. They know now, you have to discuss it with them. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

Turning to the more internal or emotional reasons for not regulating their children's viewing, there are some parents who adopt the attitude of 'anything for a quiet life'. They acknowledge that they take the line of least resistance with regard to choices about television viewing. Often they are happy to use television as a baby-sitter. The last thing they want is to arbitrate in debates between siblings, and so the younger children in the family watch what is chosen by the older ones.

They just wear you down after a while. I can't bear them arguing so it ends up with everyone having their own TV and doing their own thing. (Parent/child paired depth, DE, older family, terrestrial only)

The fact that J [6] has an older brother probably influences more what he watches. And again South Park, it's A's video, isn't it? But they wouldn't be in the house if it wasn't for the fact that he had an older brother. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

I don't know about anybody else, because I've got three boys and they're all different ages obviously, if they were all watching their own allotted type of programme, I don't think that's possible [to control their viewing]. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

You tell them to turn it off [TV at night] and it comes back on but the volume goes down. So you see the light and you go, 'I told you, school in the morning.' 'OK. No problem. See you.' You can't physically stop that. Apart from taking the telly out of the room. We can't do that because then you're bad – well, not bad parents but... (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

In some cases parents have a more consciously non-restrictive approach. There were examples of boys in their mid-teens being allowed to watch what their parents described as 'pornography' and 'extreme television' with their parents, although there are no definitions of what were meant by those terms. Some operate a policy of 'I won't ask and you don't tell me'. Others allow children to watch inappropriate material because the parents themselves want to watch it.

We don't set rules [for bedtime]... We've given up. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

But then again there are those parents who refuse to operate a heavy-handed veto because they want to trust their children, believing it is important for them to be given responsibility for their own television choices. Some trust their children to regulate themselves, and to abide by their parents' general rules and principles without those rules and principles being enforced.

I trust his judgement really in what he watches and he tends to watch the same things over and over again. And he doesn't really kind of – he's not that kind of child that will kind of watch something because he can. (Family group, AB, older family, multichannel)

The eldest one goes to bed and puts her telly one. That's her private time. And you've got to give them that trust, haven't you, to develop the responsibilities that they're going to have. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

The older one – the 13 year-old – I really feel that he's his own person now. He decides for himself what he wants to watch and in fact he watches way over the watershed, he'll watch till much later. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, older family, multichannel)

4 AREAS OF CONCERN WITH TELEVISION CONTENT

So far we have looked at general attitudes to watching television. The following section considers attitudes to particular types of content, starting with sexual content and the portrayal of sexual acts.

SEXUAL CONTENT Sexual content is a particular concern for the parents of younger children. Parents have a sense that sexual innuendo, if not explicit sexual content, pervades most programming, and as such is hard to avoid.

When we were younger it wasn't as much on the telly, sex and violence, whereas now it's in every programme. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

For many parents of younger children, however, the issue of avoiding sexual content barely arises because their children are in bed when potentially embarrassing material is screened.

For other parents of younger children, sexual content of the kind shown after 9pm is acceptable, even seen as educational or informative, or helpful in prompting sensible discussion.

I did watch some of it [Generation Sex]. I didn't watch all of it, and it was just about 14, 15 year-old girls, explaining when they lost their virginity. That really wouldn't have bothered me, if she'd have watched that. Because you can't shield them, you can't cloak them. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

But most parents of younger children feel they must make an effort to shield their children from such material, reporting that they feel embarrassed by watching it with their children, and many reported banning a number of post-watershed programmes, mentioning *Eurotrash*, *Sex in the City*, *Queer as Folk*, *Paddington Green*, *Ibiza Uncovered*, and 'late night Channel 5'.

It is somewhat different with older children. For some parents, it was a matter of embarrassment.

I think that people in bed I can cope with, and even nude I can cope with but any further than that when they start to writhe with passion or whatever, that is when I'm just like, 'OK change the channel'. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

But some did express concern, and said they enforced bans, mentioning, again, *Eurotrash* and *Ibiza Uncovered*, but also late night episodes of *Jerry Springer* and the male rape episode of *Hollyoaks*. The only thing that a majority of respondents said they vetoed, however, was adult channels, and even those were not banned by all the parents of older children in the research.

('Adult channels' were mentioned on a number of occasions in the research, but it has to be noted that the number of multichannel households that subscribe to such channels is very limited – probably no more than five per cent. The 'problem' of access to adult channels, therefore, is more in people's perception than in the reality of day-to-day viewing.)

What the research found was widespread acceptance of older children watching sexual content, or at least collusion with children's viewing. Across the board, there was a feeling in this study that children at the age of 13 or 14 no longer need to be shielded from sexual issues and sexual portrayals, and, again, a number of parents saw positive benefits in their older children watching this kind of content.

Generation Sex was a good one. We actually made our eldest [14] watch it. I mean I think there's the thing that came out in that programme last night where they talked about – it wasn't just the biological thing which is how I think a lot of sex education happens at school. They just talk about the reproductive thing out of context of the emotional feelings and all that sort of thing and the hormones rushing around and how they affect you. Whereas that programme did deal about those issues. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

I watched Graham Norton with this woman stark naked shooting ping-pong balls out of her fanny... I'd let my 14 year-old [boy] watch that. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

I watched it [Generation Sex] last week with the 16 year-old actually. It was about boys taking more control and using condoms. And the youngest came in and he said, 'What are you watching?'... because he's been going out with a girl now for about nine months – and he sat down next to me and watched it. And I'm like, 'Take note because you need to know'. (DE, older family, multi-channel/digital)

VIOLENCE Although only limited attempts to impose control were reported, many parents of younger children spontaneously expressed concern about violence, feeling that they are over-exposed to it on television at all hours, and suspecting that it might have some impact on their own children's long-term behaviour.

It [violence] gives them a bad outlook on life. Road rage, and everything. It's a more violent world. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

It's all violent [Jerry Springer]. I mean, they beat the living daylight out of each other. All they do, and swear, beat, beat, beat, but you don't get a word of sense out of it. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

There were the familiar fears about possible imitation and copycat behaviour, with mentions of programmes aimed at children such as *WWF* and *Power Rangers*. And there were a few anxieties about certain programmes made for a family audience and scheduled before the watershed, such as *The Bill*.

Like The Bill. They changed the programme to an hour whereas it was 8pm to 8.30. It was quite a timid programme but they have changed it to a kind of more... I keep thinking I'd better not let them watch any more of this because it is going to be a violent scene. (C2, younger family, terrestrial only)

However, few, if any, limits were set on younger children viewing violence, and some examples of violence were even applauded.

I love Xena, I think Xena is a really great kind of role model for a 10 year-old girl. Because she is so independent and strong. And that kind of violence I

haven't got any problem with. I just don't, I guess my big hang-up is guns. It's one of the reasons I left America. Sick of guns and sick of seeing people carrying guns and watching programmes about guns. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

The research uncovered no examples of older children's viewing of violence being regulated, even when it came to programmes that some parents recognised as containing significant violence, such as *Lock, Stock – the Series* and *The Sopranos*.

There's nothing bad in it [Lock, Stock – the Series]. There's a lot of swearing in it and there's punch-ups. But there's nothing what you couldn't see on the street or what she [11 year-old daughter] hears on the street. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

Cinema films shown on television were mentioned as a source of more concern in this context than were television programmes. Nevertheless, even though they may not fully approve, virtually no parents objected to their older children watching violence on television, either with them or on their own in their bedrooms. That said, it is worth mentioning that much of the earlier research has suggested viewers regard cinema films on television, on the one hand, and dramas made for television, on the other hand, very differently. Thus, *Film Versus Drama: Relative acceptability of the two genres on television* (ITC, 1998), for example, found that viewers are not often offended by the content of films because, based on accounts they have read in the press and on the stars who are featured, they generally know what to expect, and therefore are not taken by surprise. And it is the sudden and unexpected appearance of a strong scene, or use of strong language, which is liable to upset viewers.

BAD MORAL EXAMPLE The idea that what is seen on television can sometimes set a bad moral example is a non-issue for the majority of parents in this sample. It would not cross the minds of most to impose a ban or a veto, either because they believe their children would be perfectly capable of making the distinction between their own behaviour and the behaviour they see on television, or because they simply do not mind.

I wouldn't mind my kids watching that [Paddington Green] at all because I say these things do happen in real life. If you ever come across a situation don't take the mickey and think it's like, 'Oh my God'. I do appreciate that more when it's real to life. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

Some parents in the research, however, especially those in social grades ABC1, expressed concern about the bad moral example certain types of programming set their children, and were prepared to veto them. They felt it may have a negative impact on society as a whole, and they were reluctant to let their own children be exposed to what they regarded as a warped view of life. Although an episode from *Jerry Springer* was not shown on British television, presumably some respondents had heard or read about it:

Again, it's real people and they're saying, 'Oh, I slept with a horse', or, 'Yes, I shagged the dog' or something. Real people and they know it's real people. So you have to stop them watching something like that. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

The large majority of parents in this sample, even of younger children, however, did not perceive such a danger.

The same concerns were expressed by a minority of the ABC1 parents of older children, too, voicing worries that, by portraying young people sleeping around and generally behaving badly, such programmes as *Ibiza Uncovered* might set a bad example, particularly if the young people featured could be seen by their children as role models or aspirational figures.

I couldn't bear her to watch it [Ibiza Uncovered]. I wouldn't let her watch it. I don't know I just don't like it, because it is always young people I can imagine her admiring, meeting up and jumping into bed together and they just met that afternoon. (AB, older family, multichannel)

I do think it's getting to a stage with the homosexuality and the incest and all that, that children seem to think that's the norm. But you can't stop them watching. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, older family, terrestrial only)

SWEARING AND OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

Research over a number of years has suggested that swearing and offensive language on television is the most frequent source of offence, and a recent study, *Delete Expletives?*², explored the matter in depth. It was mentioned in this research, too, although comic effect and genuine humour was often seen as justifying it. There was some concern among those with younger families, a number of whom report imposing vetoes on particular post-watershed programmes such as *South Park*, *Cops*, *They Think It's All Over*, and *Chewing the Fat*. The objections were based on parents' fears that their children will be negatively influenced by being exposed to too much swearing, and there was particular concern with the use of the F-word.

'I'll be damned', Stuart said the other day, and I said, 'Who said that?' He said, 'Homer Simpson'. I remember now. 'I'll be damned', he said in the kitchen. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

'Kiss my curly butt' is another one. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

Other parents of younger children just accept that swearing is now a fact of life. They believe it does no real harm, and in any case know they are unable to shield their children, not least because they recognise that it is part of unsavoury playground talk.

What you hear on the television is no worse than they hear at school. As long as they don't say it in front of me . . . though they probably use all the words with their friends. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

Only a small minority of parents of older children try to exercise any real veto on the grounds of swearing and offensive language, although many would ban a programme containing the C-word if they were aware in advance that it was going to be used.

²*Delete Expletives?*; Andrea Millwood Hargrave; Advertising Standards Authority, British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2000

What constitutes 'bad language' for you? *I think that the f-ing and the C-word. That really does go to the bottom of the barrel. I mean the odd shit and things like that isn't really offensive.* (Parent/child paired depth, AB, older family, terrestrial only)

It is generally accepted that children of 14 and over will hear swearing and offensive language at school and on the street, and for many parents there is no issue about it being used in post-watershed television programmes, including the F-word.

Funnily enough, swearing (on television) I don't mind. They know there'd be murder if they repeated anything. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

Some view swearing on television with pragmatic realism, even appreciating that *South Park*, for instance, is sufficiently humorous for the swearing to be tolerated.

I sit and watch it with him [South Park, a father and his 10 year-old]. (Family group, AB, older family, multichannel)

I think he watches it on a different level. I don't think he gets the whole gist of it. It is good. It is funny. (Family group, AB, older family, multichannel)

'REALITY' AND GRITTY REALISM

Many parents of older children did not mention having problems with the portrayal of 'raw' reality on their television screens. There may be slight concerns, but they do not translate into action, and older children commonly view this kind of material both with their parents and alone.

Some parents, however, reported experiencing a strong sense of discomfort when watching with their children – especially with their younger children – programmes that reflect real situations and the gritty reality that can be involved. It was less a matter of exercising a veto than of discomfort. Dramas were mentioned most frequently, but it was not only drama that came to mind.

I don't like her [aged 10] *watching the news because I think that she is little and I think that her life, her mind should be filled with things that are as happy as possible and again, there is no going and saying that's not real. I just can't do that. It is too sad, I can't bear it. The things about the missing children and the starving people and I watch the news but I don't like her to watch it.* (C2, younger family, terrestrial only)

And yet programmes such as the news represent a 'genre' that is generally scheduled before the nine o'clock watershed, and is widely accepted within the average child's repertoire of viewing. It is recognised as a part of family viewing, and is perceived as having an educational function. The programmes respondents had in mind when talking about this general problem also included *Casualty*, *The Bill*, *Children's Hospital*, and *EastEnders* and other soaps.

She loves Children's Hospital: me and Sean were sitting there like that while their heads were being cut open and she's like glued to the set. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

Some of the soaps though are a bit – some of the storylines I don't think Vicky [aged 7] should see. It starts her saying, 'What's that then, what's that about?' and I have to think well perhaps they shouldn't be showing that. But all her friends at school watch it. (C2, younger family, terrestrial only)

Sometimes it's hard because you're watching [a soap] and you think something's coming on and you sort of think, 'I wish she wasn't here' or whatever. But it's hard – if you knew what was coming up say the night before or whatever then you'd know to switch over but... (AB, older family, multichannel)

I think that's life really. It's hard to talk about issues, isn't it? (AB, older family, multichannel)

SCARY AND DISTURBING MATERIAL

Programmes and films which children are liable to find scary or disturbing are of concern to some parents of young children, particularly parents in higher social grades.

[Buffy the Vampire Slayer] is far too scary. That's on at six or seven-ish. If he watches that getting him to bed is a nightmare. It's, 'Are you sure there's no vampires?' And you just know that it's going to be on his mind and I'm going to be getting up and down in the night to a child that's frightened of vampires. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

But programmes of this kind are of concern to younger children themselves, and many avoid watching them or have no desire to do so. They are regarded as being for older children rather than for them, and both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *X-Files* were mentioned in this context. For many parents of younger children, however, scary programming was not an issue because their children were not available to view for one reason or another, while a small minority of parents found *X-Files* totally acceptable because their younger children simply did not understand the programmes.

With older children there is no problem. Their parents could name scary programmes – and films in particular – but they were all deemed acceptable because the children were believed able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and in any case positively enjoyed being a bit scared.

There's nothing that would really scare them. The X-Files is fine for children of 10 and over. It's family viewing. We'd all watch it together. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Right, so your seven year-old was watching Armageddon with you, and...? He told us to grow up and stop crying. And I think they just learn from a really early age that anything they see on telly is make believe, you know. It's not real. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Horror films really are sort of to a certain extent a scary giggle, do you know what I mean? It's just not real. It's not real. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

5 PARENTS AND FAMILY VIEWING POLICY

Virtually every parent knows about the nine o'clock watershed and Family Viewing Policy. The most recent ITC survey of attitudes found that 92% of all respondents said they were aware of the watershed and knew it was at 9pm, and, for people with children in their home, the figure was 94%³. On the basis of the qualitative research presented here, however, it appears that at least some people – erroneously – think of 9pm as marking an abrupt change, after which there can be a 'waterfall' of adult material, rather than a watershed. In fact, Family Viewing Policy says that programmes may progressively be less geared to viewing by unsupervised children as 9pm approaches, and that after 9pm programmes may progressively contain material unsuitable for children. The notion of progression is central to Family Viewing Policy, and it is clearly understood that programmes wholly unsuitable for children should not be shown before 10pm, or in more extreme cases before 11 or even 11.30pm.

The majority of parents use and value Family Viewing Policy at least to some extent, and it is appreciated and seen as relevant most by those with younger families, by parents in the higher social grades, and by those in homes with only terrestrial television. On the other hand, a minority in this sample has no affinity with it, saying they do not use the guidelines implied in Family Viewing Policy, and this view occurs more frequently in homes with older families, in C2DE homes, and in homes with access to multichannel television.

POSITIVE ATTITUDES As has been said, the great majority of parents are aware of the nine o'clock watershed, feel that broadly it works, and they appreciate the curbs on sex, violence, swearing and offensive language.

Yes, I think I do feel that anything that comes before 9pm is pretty acceptable for children. We're broad-minded with them. We don't hide things from them. We tell them black is black and white is white. They're not closeted away, they're told the truth within reason. So really his [bed-time – it was a boy of 8 or 9] is eight. We stretch to half eight sometimes. And sometimes it's nine o'clock. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

Especially in younger families, people use the nine o'clock watershed as a cut-off for viewing, or at least become more sharply aware of parental responsibility at that point.

I think the watershed serves its purpose. I think they do a really good job. I really do. I think it's a kind of reminder for parents to think again. I think it really encourages people to take personal responsibility for their children. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

I think the nine o'clock watershed is reasonably adequate, it's just that sometimes there's a big jump between, like, five to nine and five past nine. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

Yes, you have to be quick on the night getting them to bed, you know, if that's bedtime, which it usually is. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

³Television: The Public's View 2000; Communications Research Group; Independent Television Commission, 2001

Other parents expressed their appreciation for on-air warnings about strong content in programmes coming immediately after 9pm, especially on Channels 4 and 5, and also advice and information given when programmes scheduled earlier in the evening contain potentially troubling material.

Even among parents of older children, for whom the nine o'clock deadline is less directly relevant, there is support for the watershed. There is a feeling that it serves its purpose, and that, even at the risk of seeming a little puritanical, it is best to err on the side of caution. The feeling that there is a completely safe zone before 9pm on terrestrial television is found reassuring, and so parents appreciate an arrangement whereby broadcasters and regulators share responsibility for their children with them.

It's good to feel there's somebody doing something. I think they've tightened up on things like violence in recent years and I'm glad of it. (Parent/child paired depth, C2, younger family, multichannel)

I must admit in our house we do tend to like nine o'clock it is like the cut-off isn't it, even for the older one. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

Perhaps we're a bit harder on the eldest one [11 years old] because I dunno, perhaps we are. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

I will not have it [South Park]. Apart from anything it's on after the watershed and I mean for me that's justification enough. There's a reason for it and the material is often inappropriate. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

There were some parents of younger children, in higher social grades, and living in homes with only terrestrial reception, who said they would like to see more regulation before 9pm as they feel that, at present, they have to keep an eye on what their children see from 7 or 8pm. This view underlines the fact that the progressive character of changes through the evening's schedule, and the concept of a nine o'clock watershed, is not fully understood by at least some parents or is not felt to be followed closely enough by the broadcasters.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES For many parents, especially parents of older children, the watershed is less relevant. There are parents, too, who are simply less concerned about regulation per se. Of those who do not see the relevance of regulation, the vast majority are indifferent to Family Viewing Policy rather than having an explicitly negative attitude. It simply does not seem to relate to them or to their families, so they do not use the watershed for their children or allow it to inform their viewing decisions.

I think it's down to the parents. Parents have to have some responsibility as to what's watched. (Parent/child paired depth, C2, younger family, multichannel)

There are those, however, who are actively hostile to regulation.

But why should it be 9pm? It's government isn't it? We're asking them to make decisions for us... I want to make my own decisions. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Is the nine o'clock watershed still relevant today? I don't know, really, it's like why should the pubs shut at half past ten on a Sunday night, you know. It's always been that way. Why should it continue to be that way? I would want to challenge it really. (AB, older family, multichannel)

For some parents of older children, there is a feeling that their children do not need protecting from what is broadcast since it reflects 'real life', and they have a sense that such regulation is out-dated and prudish.

The watershed's really out of date. It's fine for when they're at school but at weekends or summer holidays they're up at 11pm. And you can't make television suitable for young children up to 11pm at night. It's just a sad fact of life. They're just going to be exposed to those things. (C1, older family, multichannel)

There were those who were critical of rules made for children of differing ages, feeling they reflect neither reality nor the needs of their own children. These were people whose children were habitually up later than 9pm.

The watershed is totally irrelevant. It's a farce. No kids are in bed at 9pm. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

There is a certain irony, of course, in parents concluding that the nine o'clock watershed is an irrelevance, when it has become so for many of them because they have 'given up', and fail to make use of it, often because of the age of their children.

Family Viewing Policy in general bemused some other parents, who saw no clear rationale to much scheduling. Apparently unaware of the considerations which determine scheduling other than a programme's suitability for younger viewers, they could not see why, for example, *Sense and Sensibility* should be placed after the watershed, but *Casualty* and *Animal Hospital* before.

I think that the broadcasting standards force you to make it up and you go along because the standards don't seem to be consistent. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

6 CHILDREN'S OWN PERSPECTIVE ON THE USE OF TELEVISION

The reports given by the children themselves in the research were interesting, although a proper caution has to be exercised in relying on the word of children alone.

Earlier research has shown children can sometimes make exaggerated claims about the videos they have seen, for example, even saying they have watched racy-sounding videos which do not actually exist⁴. To an extent, the findings of this research confirmed that vetoes are imposed on specific programmes and certain types of content, and even where there are no active bans, there are rules which obtain in their homes. Children under 12 – and girls – were often respectful of bans imposed on them, accepting that their parents were doing it for their own good.

I'm watching like this programme and people kiss, and my mum and dad go, 'Oh, oh', and just flick over. Or they turn my TV off and if they like turn over channels and then I turn it over again, they turn my TV off. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

I don't watch things that aren't suitable for us. People swearing, things like that. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

These younger children may change channels almost automatically when they encounter swearing, or offensive language, or content they know their parents would disapprove of.

Also, children regulate themselves, actively avoiding sexual content they say they find embarrassing or disturbing or confusing.

Okay, what do you feel about rude stuff on telly? *It's disgusting.* (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

I don't think it should be allowed, I think it should be censored. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

All people's bits. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

Nor is embarrassment the only thing that makes children avoid certain material. There was evidence from the research that some children had learned from experience that when broadcasters put out a warning, there is a chance that they really will not like what follows.

Well they say... lots of times there's like these commercials before or after programmes being on and it says it's not nice for children, so I know and I turn over onto my programmes and stuff. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

⁴ *Legislating mythology: Video violence and children*; Guy Cumberbatch; *Journal of Mental Health*, 3, 1994, pp 485-494

If on-air warnings are important now, the content advice about programming which is available on digital services will be more important still with the spread of digital and after digital switchover. The content information will become vital when programmes are available at any time of the day or night using devices such as the currently-available personal video recorder TiVo.

Prompted by curiosity or by the influence of their peers, boys, in particular, may want to watch sexual content, but they do not because they know what would be the reaction of their parents.

She [mum] doesn't like me watching Eurotrash. She just knows about that programme. [Would you want to watch it?] Well I know it's got some rude stuff on but I wouldn't watch. It's too risky. She'd kill me. (Younger girls paired depth, C1, terrestrial only)

Definitely no pornographic things. I'd be grounded. (Older Boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

On the other hand, children of all ages seemed very adept at evading parental restriction, especially restrictions on viewing late in the evening: if children are determined to watch a programme they will usually find a way of doing so, employing one strategy or another. This research showed, as we know from other research, that children will watch videos of previously recorded programmes and pre-recorded tapes when their parents are out of the house; they will watch when visiting friends and at sleepovers what their own parents would ban; they will play their parents off against each other when they can; they will use their older siblings as shield against parental disapproval, pretending that it is not really they who are watching something⁵. The most common strategy, however, is to watch secretly in their bedrooms.

I don't think mum would like me to watch it [Ibiza Uncovered] but I do. It's on really late at night, so I'm in my room. I don't think she knows. (Older girls paired depth, C2, multichannel)

What my mum does is she comes into my room to see what channel I'm watching and she puts it on her TV so she can watch what I'm watching. But normally I turn over the channel when she's gone. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

If my mum says you've got to go upstairs and then I say I really want to watch this programme, I'll pretend to go to sleep and then when she comes up and goes downstairs and shuts my door I turn the telly on and watch it. (Younger girls paired depth, C1, terrestrial only)

Parents are not necessarily gullible. Often they collude in their children's deceptions.

⁵ *Film versus drama: relative acceptability of the two genres on television*, Counterpoint Research/Pam Hanley, Independent Television Commission, 1998; *Children and Video Games: An Exploratory Study*; Andrea Maguire and Samantha Woods; Elspa, Worcester, 1993

There are some things I don't watch downstairs. Programmes involving sex and drugs. That's downstairs, but I can watch it out of mum and dad's way. Do they know you watch it? Yes, but mum likes to think I'm not watching it. (Older girls paired depth, C2, multichannel)

Sometimes the collusion is open, as when an eight-nine year-old boy said in front of one of his parents in a parent/child paired interview:

I pretend to be asleep. Whenever I know she's gone downstairs I always turn back on the TV and watch South Park. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

And there are many occasions when a child will negotiate a change to the rules, sometimes with remarkable condescension to its parents, as with one particular 14-15 year-old boy:

Are there any other things that your parents put their foot down over?
Well the first time I watched Ali G, you know what parents are like they don't know what people watch in school and they think, 'Oh, you can't watch that'. Then when you explain to them that people watch it in school. In the Ali G show it was pretty strong language and of course, they didn't have things like that in their day, their parents were even stricter about that. I just said, 'Look watch it', and then it's not that bad so... (Older Boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

There were also, in this research, examples of homes where there are no regulations about what can be watched, the only restrictions occurring when all television was banned as a punishment for naughtiness.

7 TELEVISION VIEWING IN MULTICHANNEL HOMES

The viewing of television in multichannel homes follows a slightly different pattern from that found in homes with only the analogue terrestrial channels, but it is of special importance as the proportion of those homes climbs towards 50 per cent, and as the approach of digital switch-over heralds universal multichannel access.

Access to an extended range of channels is typically limited currently to one set in a household, usually to the family set in the living room. It is not uncommon for there to be links to other rooms, including children's bedrooms, although usually it is simply a feed from what is being received on the main set.

I've got Sky Digital on all my tellies. There's one Digibox but it's connected to all the TVs. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

From this research, it seems that only a tiny minority of children – and usually those over 16 but still living at home – have their own digital or analogue multichannel access, which they themselves pay for, although when this occurs it has implications for the viewing of younger brothers and sisters.

Few respondents in multichannel homes spontaneously mentioned the special mechanisms available to them to control their children's viewing by blocking specific channels. This seemed the result, in part, of ignorance regarding such tools, but also because they took for granted the watershed that is universally available. Further, it seems from this research that parents who have chosen multichannel access seem to be less concerned about their children's diet of viewing than do parents who choose to stick to the five analogue terrestrial channels.

Three strategies for the regulation of viewing were mentioned, the first of which involved the use of Personal Identity Numbers (PINs).

With them [Pay-Per-View films], the certifications are on all the time... You give a PIN number so if you don't want your children to watch you don't let them. You don't give them the PIN number. (C1, older family, multichannel)

Secondly, a number of parents in multichannel homes said they were careful to pre-check listings in channel guides so they were aware of what programmes were on offer, and this seemed to be an important strategy where television programmes, rather than films on television, were concerned. Thirdly, others said they paid special attention to film certifications. In addition, people said they resisted giving their children independent multichannel access in their own rooms, thus controlling their choice of viewing.

A majority, however, while voicing concern about content, did not report actively regulating their children's viewing of television, and the issues surrounding Pay-Per-View seemed to register with comparatively few.

Yeah. My kids have watched programmes, you know, films on the movie channels, that are rated 15 and things like that. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

At any time during the day. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

Three o'clock in the afternoon. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

The only area of programming that that most parents in multichannel homes seemed to regard as off-limits was pornography, by which they meant the so-called adult channels such as Playboy Channel and Channel X.

All we limit them is porn. We don't allow that. You have to enter a PIN number. It's parental guidance. You can block off all the channels if you want to. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

Even the most sophisticated control mechanisms, however, are vulnerable to the wiles of the young, as their parents well know.

When we first got the Sky Digital she [13 years old] was right there with the remote control. Unfortunately she was there when the man came to install it. And she sat there... I knew it was a toy to her but it was like from channel to channel. Then the bill came in... for all these films she'd ordered. (AB, older family, multichannel)

8 FILM

Films made for the cinema represent a special category and we treat children's access to them separately in this section.

AGE AND VIEWING SCENARIOS It seemed from the research that two factors were of special importance. First is the age of children. There appeared to be a common division between the treatment of junior school children, whose access to films is controlled and subject to vetoes, and those in secondary education, whose parents reported attempting little or no regulation. But even this broad dichotomy has to be qualified since many parents, even of younger children, said they could not control which films their children viewed when they were away from their own homes. As far as the BBFC certifications are concerned, many parents confessed to a lack of understanding of how content relates to the certificate given to a film. The 12 certificate seemed to give rise to the most confusion, with the example of *Mrs Doubtfire* being given many times. There was a general view that films with a 15 certificate are acceptable for 11 year-olds, and maybe for those as young as 10.

We don't really like them [film certificates] because you know what somebody can say, it's a 12, 15, it might not be my opinion really. I know it's a general sort of thing but, you know they're going to watch it probably anyway if you said no. They might watch it round somebody else's house if you say no. (Parent/child paired depth, C2, younger family, multichannel)

I like them to watch stuff older than what they are to try and bring them on and get them more used to society as a whole, but without it being too in their face, like I think perhaps for Vicky [aged 7] a 15 would be too much. (Family group, D2, younger family, terrestrial only)

As with television viewing in general, control of film viewing seemed generally to be renounced by the time a child reached 13 or 14, and being allowed to watch 18 certificated films was seen by many as a kind of rite of passage marking arrival at this age; it was very rare indeed in this sample for a parent of a child over the age of 13 to ban a child from watching an 18 rated film. To add to the confusion, many parents expressed a belief that the certifications carried by older films – *The Exorcist* was mentioned – do not count because the certifications themselves are in some sense past their sell-by date.

When I watched Poltergeist, I was about 18, and it really scared me. But our children have watched it since and it's like, 'Oh God, this is really stupid, how can you be scared, you can see it's special effects.' (DE, younger family, multi-channel)

The other important factor was the distinction drawn by parents, and indeed by children themselves, between where and with whom films are seen, or viewing 'scenarios'. In particular, they distinguished between seeing a film in a cinema, buying or hiring it on video to watch at home, and seeing it on a broadcast television channel.

Where younger children are concerned, what is seen in the cinema is not a matter for parental intervention since the cinemas themselves exercise control.

With videos, parents generally act as the gatekeepers, tending to read about appropriateness on the box. Videos owned by younger families are usually appropriate for children, with titles such as Disney videos, *The Simpsons*, *Home Alone*, and *Grease* being mentioned. Indeed, videos were thought to represent a safe environment for children, because parents are aware of the content and have given their approval, and several parents said they actively encouraged the use of videos for bedtime viewing.

Some parents, on some occasions, are accepting about children watching videos made for an older audience – or can be persuaded to be so. An eight or nine year-old girl said:

Sometimes I pick out like 15s [in the video shop] that my mum and dad have already watched and sometimes they say, 'That's not suitable for you', because they've already watched it. And I say, 'Am I allowed to watch it because you've seen it', and ... sometimes they say 'yes' or sometimes they say 'no' because it's not suitable. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

Others, under other circumstances, are decidedly not accepting, as with the same pair of eight or nine year-old girls:

Would you ever watch an 18 or a 15 round at a friend's house?
My mum would ground me for a month. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

No, I'd be lying and I don't like lying. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

Watching films on television is regulated by the nine o'clock watershed, and, subject to prior checking with listings guides for suitability, weekend viewing of films is particularly important as a family viewing occasion.

If it's a 12 one I would generally let him [8 year-old] watch it without worrying about it. I just feel that if it's a 12 that it's something that's fairly mild and fairly innocuous. 15-18 he wouldn't watch unless Adam [aged 13] had watched it first. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

And a child of James's age, eight, I know it sounds – eight doesn't sound very old – but in this world I think they grow up so quickly. I think when we were eight we were still really quite immature. But I think at eight now they're really so grown up and they're so worldly-wise. He knows about the World War and that's what went on so you know we weren't too bothered about him watching it [Saving Private Ryan]. It was a bit horrible in the beginning with arms and legs flying off but it was an exceptionally good film. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

A child's perspective – that of a boy aged nine or 10 – reinforces the point:

What I like about Saving Private Ryan, there's this man and this man's pulling him because he's his best friend, he gets shot and he dives down and he runs to his other friend and he's only got the arm in his hand because the other man's got shot off and the body was down there and the arm was in his hand. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

Where older children are concerned the arrangements are different. Control is strictest when films are seen in the cinema, again because of the control exercised by cinemas. On the basis of this research, young teenagers seem frequently to get into 15 rated films, but rarely even attempt to get into an 18 because they know they will be turned away. For a minority, at least, and especially with 14 and 15 year-old boys, viewing an 18 is an accepted part of growing up, which is made possible by the fact that often they look older than their years. Hiring videos is a more ambivalent area. Younger teenagers are unlikely to rent videos without parental approval because they are too visible, too easily found. But the level of control exercised by video shops seemed to the parents in the research to be very variable, and in any case many younger children take older siblings with them to take out 18 rated films without parental permission.

A boy of 14 or 15 said:

I'd never try and rent out an 18 because my sister tried to rent one and they've got your date of birth on the computer and everything. (Older Boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

Whereas a 13 or 14 year-old girl said:

My mum doesn't like me watching things like that [Pulp Fiction] but she doesn't really know. Me and my [older] sister just take them out and watch them. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

Viewing films at home, on transmission, seems to be the least regulated scenario. The watershed rules apply, but this research suggests that, when it comes to cinema films on television, parents pay comparatively little attention to their scheduling, or to the watershed. As a 13 or 14 year-old girl reported:

I think I was probably allowed to watch 18s when I was about 12. Really mum just said when you're old enough like, when you think you're old enough to cope with it and watch it. (Older girls paired depth, C2, multichannel)

And in any case, rules are easily flouted, either when films are viewed secretly or when they are seen in friends' homes.

DIFFERENT GENRES OF FILM Horror films divide opinion. Some people seem genuinely appalled by them, and the research found a few parents of younger children who had grave concerns about their impact. Thus one 10 or 11 year-old girl said:

Horror films are completely banned. I'd be grounded if they caught me watching one. (Younger girls paired depth, C1, terrestrial only)

Most people, however, differentiate between 'spoon horror' and 'hard core horror', and believe their children, too, make this distinction. For this reason younger children are allowed to watch horror films such as *The Mummy*, the *Friday 13th* series, the *Scream* series, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and *Halloween*. Thus, a nine or 10 year-old boy said:

I watch on my own, when my mum and my stepdad are out doing something, sometimes they go out the back... but they take my sister out so I watch horror

films. I watch I Know What You Did Last Summer, it was cool, and Scream I. My stepdad's got the video. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

Horror films seem not to be an issue with older children, even when it comes to the serious examples with 18 certificates such as *The Exorcist*, and the research found one example of an 11 year-old having been allowed to watch it. (*The Exorcist* is something of a special case. As a horror film, it raised no problems not raised by others. It was the inclusion of supernatural and occult elements that caused concern and, in the opinion of many people, makes it particularly unsuitable for children.) There is a sense that horror films are a social occasion for children, a ritualistic part of sleepovers, and watched with friends 'for a laugh'.

Sexual content poses more of a problem. Especially with younger children, people distinguish between nude scenes and portrayals of intimate physical contact within loving relationships, on the one hand, and on the other hand more explicitly sexual scenes – especially scenes portraying sexual intercourse – and any kind of perversion.

I don't mind an action film – as long as there's not like a lot of sex in it. I mean the bad language, they hear in the streets anyway. My opinion of that is kids, they hear it anyway at school. But if they're too bad, but if they're like really having a good...! (DE, younger family, multichannel)

Some people report discomfort with nude scenes when children are present, due to a sense of embarrassment, while others say they fast forward through such scenes, or cover children's eyes. No examples of specific films being vetoed for older children were found by the research, although parents said they set blocks on adult channels, and one or two reported banning their children from watching their pornographic videos (i.e. the parents' videos).

There was a widespread view, among respondents in this sample, that action films are generally acceptable for younger children. As with horror, action films are perceived as fantasy by parents and children alike, and, with both younger and older children present, they are suitable for viewing by the whole family. Often, they are enjoyed for their entertainment value, and there were cases of *Terminator* and *Rocky*, for example, being viewed by children of 11 and less.

Violence was a matter for concern among a minority of these respondents, especially the realistic violence in such films as *Full Metal Jacket*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Godfather*. Nevertheless, these films can be acceptable to many people with younger children, and there were cases where families including an eight year-old had watched *Saving Private Ryan* together. Where older children are concerned, a certain number of parents worried about their viewing violence, especially in gangster films that include sex and drugs as well. The children may well watch such films, but it tends to be outside their own homes. On the other hand there was one case of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* having been given by a mother to her 13-year-old son to watch.

South Park The Movie was regarded as a special case. Considerable parental opposition to children seeing it was voiced in the groups, and yet, from elsewhere in the research, it seemed to have been viewed often, even by eight year-olds, usually at sleepovers or with an estranged or divorced parent.

9 THE INTERNET

The research found many issues and concerns that parents have with the internet, and yet it seems to be an area where few parents feel the need to intervene, mainly because they believe their children's access to be sufficiently restricted. In fact, in the sample under study there was remarkably high internet penetration. Access was the norm among older families, and it was widely prevalent in the younger ones. (The most recent of the ITC's annual attitude surveys, conducted just after this research in the autumn of 2000, found that 18% of people with a younger child at home had domestic internet access, while the figure was 25% for people with an older child at home⁶.)

GENERAL PERCEPTIONS The main reasons for having the internet were, first, as an educational resource for the children, and, second, as part of a parent's office or work equipment. It was rare in our sample for the computer with internet access to be based in a child's bedroom, although there were three or four such cases of 13 or 14 year-olds. As a rule, however, the PC with internet access was located in a place readily monitored by adults in the home, such as the living room, a spare room, the dining room, or a room used as an office.

The concerns voiced were varied. Perhaps the most basic and general reason people are apprehensive is that the internet is perceived as having no norms as yet, resembling some kind of latter-day Wild West.

How can you control it? Things are changing every day. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

The principal anxiety of parents is that their children might be exposed inadvertently to material which is embarrassing, offensive, dangerous, harmful – or just plain disgusting. Most are aware there are mechanisms that block unwanted sites on the internet, but lack the know-how to set up such defences, and thus feel vulnerable. Others are aware of filtering software and know how to install it, but do not believe it really works.

You can filter out about 90%. There's still 10% that's accessible, even with the parental lock on. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

Pornography (as defined by respondents) is the top-of-mind worry for most parents, and there is a widespread belief that children will inevitably encounter unpleasant, and potentially harmful, material.

I think there's been an instance as well where a site has been downloaded by accident. They typed in some type of name and it's come down and it's pornography. A lot of the top on sites are mis-spellings of very popular sites for that reason. Kids mis-spell them or type them incorrectly, miss the last letter off, and it takes you straight to a porn site. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

You do worry, because it's just so dangerous. It's very easy for them to just click on huge banner ads, and it's not normal porn – it's completely depraved. (AB, older family, multichannel)

⁶ *Television: The Public's View 2000*, Communications Research Group; Independent Television Commission, 2001

They can just download porn by accident. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

While the sheer newness and wildness of the World Wide Web may be the most general worry, some people have crystallised this concern into specific worries about the absence of rules and regulations, of a censor or a regulatory body, of someone or some external agency they can trust.

I think it should certainly be policed. I think there should be some sort of commission set up and people sitting all day and there must be loads of anoraks out there that just love to sit doing that all day getting rid of things. (C2, younger family, terrestrial only)

Of course there are particular concerns, as well, and especially the worry about making financial commitments, as was shown by research that employed a citizens' forum commissioned by the ITC and BSC in 1999⁷. The internet seems to make so much available, and yet there is a concern that the conventional rules of trading and transactions may simply not work.

You could put in your card number and people could take more money off your card than you wanted to spend. Because say like I want this T-shirt, it could be priced as £14 or something, they could take like £25 off you and you wouldn't know. (Family group, single mother, DE, older family, terrestrial only)

And a common feeling among parents is that they know and understand little about the internet that is not known to their children.

I know as much as her – we sort of fumble along together. (C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

In so far as parents seek to regulate their children's use of the internet, as with television viewing, it can take the form either of active intervention or of a more passive approach. It seems that the level of intervention a parent opts for is a function more of their own familiarity with the internet and their social grade than of the age of their children. Thus, many parents are actively involved in their children's internet usage, either insisting that they must not surf alone, or, for a minority, setting up selective blocks. It seems that often, however, these rules are not enforced, and parents just hope for the best. Others are not sufficiently computer-literate to understand how to censor what their children access, and still others, as we have seen in a quotation above, suspect that any barriers they may try to employ will prove fallible.

ACTIVE INTERVENTION A very small minority of parents, generally those who are in higher social grades and have younger children, have taken an active decision not to allow the Internet into their homes, at least not for the time being, expressing concern about the impact on their children of unsavoury content.

Maybe when she's older, but right now I am not willing to even enter into it you know I have heard so many things about the Internet, because I know that I would have to be there at all times and I am not willing to commit myself to sitting next to her for hours while she does things on the computer. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

⁷ *Attitudes to Internet Regulation*, Pam Hanley, The Independent Television Commission and Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1999

The more common form of intervention is precisely to be there all the time, and to prohibit a child's access to the internet when he or she is alone.

He wouldn't go on the internet on his own. I crawl under the computer and unplug the phone line. So he doesn't accidentally do it, like he did one day when I was cooking dinner. I heard the line go and shouted, 'So what are you doing?' 'I don't know.' And I said, 'I know what you're doing, you're dialling the Internet. Switch it off.' He hasn't done it deliberately, he just wanted to know what the icon was and he clicked on it. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

I'm always there. It's in the living room. So you are always around? Not watching over their shoulder but in the same room. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

He's never on his own on the Internet. That situation hasn't arisen yet. He doesn't know how to do it basically. He needs someone to type in a web address. He doesn't really know how to use any search engines or anything like that. It's very unlikely that he'd actually get to what he wanted and then he'd become frustrated by it so there's always somebody on hand. There's always somebody around though, James, isn't there? He's never on the computer with nobody. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

Some parents in the research had taken some specific action, such as employing the AOL certification, or loading the Net Nanny or other filtering software.

You can put separate blocks on at their age. I've put him on 13 to 14. So they can't surf certain websites. I didn't just give him free rein. (C1, older family, multichannel)

You have to be careful, it's not the sites it's the adverts, a lot of porn just jumps at you. There's a programme you can put in to stop pop-ups which I'm waiting for my mate to come and do it for me. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

In addition, parents do check their children's usage, or at least threaten to do so. Sometimes this results in bans being introduced, as with one respondent who banned chat rooms after discovering what was going on.

I was shocked with the swearing in the chat room – a friend came round and it was the first time Zoë's been, or the time I've seen her on the internet, and I could hear them giggling and everything and I went in there and went, 'Right, get out of there now.' It was just appalling. They were calling each other, 'slag', 'you're a slut', 'you're a slapper'. They're banned from going on now. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

The most extreme form of supervision without being actually present when a child accesses the internet is to check the history of which sites have been visited. This form of supervision is more often threatened than used, but its use is not unknown.

The little bar across that's got all your sites that were visited. All you do is open up the History and you can see where they've entered. (AB, older family, multichannel)

PASSIVE INTERVENTION Many parents say to their children that there are rules, but in practice do not enforce them, for one reason or another. Some, of course, are themselves insufficiently familiar with the internet to be able to take effective action, even if they were so minded.

I'm not up to speed with it [the internet]. I hate to have to admit it but you know – I haven't got a bloody clue how to use it. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Even if they have a basic knowledge of computers and the internet, many parents do not know enough to set up sufficiently impenetrable barriers to pornography, and lapse into a quiescent attitude of just hoping for the best. This kind of attitude is reinforced, especially for parents of younger children, by a belief that rules are not necessary anyway. They may be unnecessary because a parent trusts his or her child to abide by what are known to be family rules.

Obviously I could check in the History to see what they've visited but... I've no need to. I know he [a 10 year-old] wouldn't do anything like that. (Parent/child paired depth, C2, younger family, multichannel)

Or rules may not be necessary because a child knows too little to surf and therefore be at risk of finding inappropriate material. Other parents, fully aware of what the internet contains, vaguely monitor their children's activities but adopt a relaxed approach, in the belief that any actual harm can be obviated by discussions and explanations.

I use the internet a lot and it's brilliant. But you know you've only got to hit the wrong button on the... literally, there's so many adverts that you click on and before you know where you are, you're in it. Without a doubt, when we first got it, Daniel, a 12 year-old, came round who was more proficient and they were looking at girls, naked girls and God knows what else. (C2, older family, terrestrial only)

Moreover, there is a suspicion that barriers such as filters and parental locks are fallible, which can lead to a passive acceptance.

You can get a few pieces of software that are available to block things but they're only good up to a point. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

They search for key words but they're not infallible. (C1C2, older family, terrestrial only)

The people that do these [porn] sites know how to get round things like Cyberguide so it makes it unusable. (AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

There are those who have rules, but to protect themselves for financial reasons rather than to protect their children.

Would you have different rules about the internet than for television?
Yes definitely. (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

Well it's cost isn't it? (DE, older family, multichannel/digital)

Some parents simply have no concerns about their children's internet use.

And do you ever sort of monitor what they look at or go on with them? I don't think – no we don't do it do we, we don't monitor them [8 and 10 years old] at all, they just get on and know what they're doing don't they? We literally leave them to it. (Parent/child paired depth, C2, younger family, multichannel)

And there are some who accept that their children will find pornography on the Internet if they look for it, and are reconciled to the fact, on the grounds that children who want to look at rude pictures will find them somewhere.

I think it's part of growing up. I can remember my brother sneaking porno magazines underneath his mattress. I remember my mum finding them and going mad. And I think with boys, I think – I'm sorry it's just part of growing up. Whether they find it on the Internet, on the telly, videos, in a magazine, they are going to find it. (AB, older family, multichannel)

THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

The research suggested that parents were correct in what they had said about their children's use of the internet, and there was little evidence of children visiting sites without their parents' knowledge.

The behaviour reported by a number of children measured up the trust that parents said they put in them. Some seemed genuinely not to be seeking unsuitable material, for example, and others, when they encountered something they had thought improper had apparently just clicked away, while still others said they reported to their parents – and showed them – anything they found which they thought unsuitable or weird.

It's got a lock on things like sex websites and things like that... How do you feel about that? Oh I'm quite happy – well not really glad but I wouldn't go on anyway. (Older boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

I've been in chat rooms before and people have asked, 'What do you look like?', 'What are you wearing just now?' and stuff like that... and that scared me. (Family group, single mother, DE, older family, terrestrial only)

It appeared that in general the internet was used for entirely innocent purposes. Email was a very commonly reported use, and children seemed to have accessed appropriate sites, such as those dealing with sports, music, and television, and respected children's sites.

There aren't any rules [about the internet] but I don't really go surfing that often. I just look at my emails and stuff. (Older girls paired depth, C2, multi-channel)

I go on the chat rooms. The teens one on AOL. Quite a lot of people swear on it but they wipe it out. They put stars on there... or they give you three warnings and then they kick you out. (Older Boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

Older children in this sample, however, and especially boys, seemed to be quite devious in evading vetoes that had been imposed on them. By their own account, at least, they were adept at deleting bad sites from the record held in History; they could cover their tracks by visiting more and more sites; they obtained parental passwords and thereby changed their parents' certification levels; they visited porn sites while their parents were out of the way.

Is there a way they (your parents) can check what you've been looking at?

They can look in 'History' but I know how to delete it from History. (Older boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

Or you look at loads and loads of other sites to cover it up. The History only holds a certain number. (Older boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

My dad put a block on it [the internet]. He had it set up for 13 or 14 year-olds [on Net Nanny] but I know his password and I've changed it to 18. (Older boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

10 COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES

The most recent of the ITC's annual surveys suggested that in 2000, when this research was undertaken, 55% of people living in a home with a young child present had a games console, and that the figure was 65% where there was an older child, so it is not surprising that a very high proportion of the respondents in this sample had computer or video games. Usually, but not always, they were in children's bedrooms, and while the most common pattern was for children to play with them either on their own or with friends and siblings, there were cases of games being shared by fathers and sons.

Playing on games appears to be one of the activities least regulated, across all ages of children. There is a belief among parents that video games represent a safe world of fantasy that has little or no impact on children, and consequently parents have little inclination to get involved in their children's use of games or to monitor what is being played. The research found a few cases where parents actively intervened in the use of games, but the majority could see no reason to do so.

I would never let her have had a PlayStation. Never. I just think that it is just mind numbing. I just think there are so many books to read – do you know what I mean? And so many things to do besides sit in front of them. I just can't bear them. (Parent/child paired depth, AB, younger family, terrestrial only)

This attitude was uncommon, however, and the most active involvement found with any frequency – although even this was rare – was paying attention to the certificates carried by games. Some parents claim themselves to play a game first to check on its suitability; some insist that it is only they who choose and buy games; some refuse to buy games with an 18 certificate, or return it if one comes into the home; some parents conveniently lose a game they judge unsuitable.

There was one Duke Nukedom... I think it is a PlayStation game. I thought that was really gory. They blast everybody. And as he's blasting them, their heads are falling off and blood's coming out all over the place and – I just pretended I'd lost the game. (AB, older family, multichannel)

Most parents in this sample, though, do not feel it incumbent on them as parents to regulate the use of games at all, even by very young children. They are seen as just 'kids' games'.

He [three year-old] doesn't know. He just likes the idea of the banging [in shoot-em-up games]. But then he puts his arms up indoors doesn't he and he starts going bang-bang-bang because like the man on it goes like bang-bang-bang. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

By no means all parents are aware that games carry certifications, and, among those who knew, the research found very little use being made of certificates, and still less respect for certification in the first place.

Yes, they did get a game called Resident Evil – I got this for them you see. And that was an 18. And early on they were scared of it weren't they. And he [child under 11] still talks about that now. (DE, younger family, multichannel)

Some parents either fail to notice the certificate or manage to get it wrong, as in this interchange between a higher social grade mother and her 12 or 13 year-old son:

[Mother] *They don't go for the ones what would make you question the rating really, it's all more like the car ones. What's that one with the cars and the police, that one where you have to nick the cars?*

[Son] *Oh, Grand Theft Auto.*

[Mother] *Yeah, Grand Theft Auto and those sort of things they tend to go for as opposed to the violent ones.*

[Son] *Mum, that's an 18.*

[Mother] *I wouldn't have even known that was an 18.*

The more common reaction, however, is to feel that certifications are an irrelevance.

Some of those games [Grand Theft Auto, Resident Evil] they're quite violent, aren't they? And some of them are 18 certificates as well, I think. What do you think about those?

Nothing, I think the kids know that it's not reality, and it's just a game. And they are just – it is really just animation, at the end of the day, Tom and Jerry was violent when we were kids, so it's not really any different. (C1, older family, multichannel)

It's a cartoon-y thing. It's not real people. (BC1, younger family, multi-channel/digital)

I think that's going a bit too far – putting 18 certificates on those. (BC1, younger family, multichannel/digital)

And some parents are incredulous that anyone should even consider putting 15 and 18 certificates on games.

No, they're just silly to put a 15 or 18 certificate on them. It's so unreal, it's so obvious it's not real. Adam's got that... Grand Theft Auto – he's got that on the PC and I mean that's a certificate 18 and I can see that it's because of stealing cars and one thing and another but I can't honestly believe that a video game like that would lead a child to take somebody's car. I just don't see the logic behind that and I can honestly say that because we've let Adam play that he's certainly not going to go out in the street and rob somebody's car. And that's not being naïve. (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

There are those who believe that the certificates are not intended as a guide to the suitability of a game in terms of violent or sexual content at all, but to its suitability in terms of difficulty.

Because a lot of them [certificates] as well don't just mean they're bloody and gory. It means they're more difficult. It's harder to play – I mean I bought a

Batman and Robin *game just before I sussed out those code things on the back. I thought, 'Oh yeah, Batman and Robin is OK.' And when I actually looked at it, it said suitable from like 11, 15 and whatever and little ticks and crosses against the younger children's age. And I spoke to somebody about it and they said, 'No it means it's really hard and the younger kids won't be able to do it.' So it's not just about content. It's about how hard it is for them to do.* (AB, older family, multichannel)

It seems that even when people are aware that there may be potential issues with video games, still they are reluctant to take any action. Often adults want to play the games themselves, and, since they believe their children will get to play them somehow or other, they buy them for the children anyway.

THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Children themselves are often more aware that there are issues around games than are their parents – although they may choose not to let their parents in on this. Indeed, the ignorance about the content of many games of parents, and of mothers in particular, is a source of positive glee to many children.

Does your mum ever look at your games? No she hardly ever goes in my room anyway, only to Hoover or something and that's about it, she doesn't look at my PlayStation or anything. She bought it for me knowing that I'd be buying games for myself, I mean she wouldn't go into a shop and buy me a game. (Older Boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

My brother has played Resident Evil. I don't think my mum realises they have certificates on them. (Older girls paired depth, C2, multichannel)

They are well aware that their access to games is less regulated than is their television viewing, and they are quick to take advantage. Parental ignorance and lack of concern is fully recognised by children, many of whom can name several games about which they believe their parents would have severe misgivings if only they were aware of their content. Among the games mentioned were *Grand Theft Auto* (by children aged 11 and older), *Resident Evil* (seen by a six year-old), *Command and Conquer* (seen by a five year-old), *Mortal Kombat*, *Metal Gear Solid* (seen by a five year-old), *Duke Nukedom*, and *South Park*.

Do you know any 18 games?

Yes, Grand Theft Auto because you kill them and they swear at you because you steal cars. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

You kill them and throw them on the floor and then drive off in a lorry or van. I lent it off my friend. (Younger boys paired depth, D, multichannel)

Die Hard Trilogy is one [18 certificate]. He shoots people to get to the top of the building because he's the man who's the only cop... there's all robbers and you've got to shoot all the robbers. You get like lives and stuff. My dad lets me play it. (Younger girls paired depth, C2, terrestrial only)

I've got Grand Theft Auto... where you've got this little man and you go out robbing every car... If you see a car you can go and stand in front of it, get the guy out and shoot him and then you go in the car and you have to kill all the police. You're a gangster, and you've got to do all these bank robberies and that.

And there's thing like you know you've got a machine gun and a pistol, rocket launchers and everything. And your aim is to kill the police and everything and it uses terms like pigs for the police and all that so that's why it's an 18 but they sold it to me so... I was 12 when I bought it. (Older boys paired depth, B, terrestrial only)

Even when a game has been banned, children can readily evade the ban with the help of friends or older siblings, or even relatives.

When I go to my cousin's I play the PlayStation games that have got blood in them. I wouldn't be allowed those at home by mum. But if my dad's come to pick me up I would ask like my cousin if I could borrow that, dad will say, 'Yes, you can borrow that off Matthew if you like', and then he'll let me (Parent/child paired depth, C1, younger family, terrestrial only)

11 OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We can sum up the findings of this research under three main headings.

SOURCES OF VIEWING AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN IN THE HOME

- It is normal for children to have free access to multiple sources of viewing, and for those over 10 or 11 years of age in this sample very little of it is regulated. It appeared that children aged 10 years and over generally have access to a television set receiving terrestrial channels in their bedrooms; while not typical, it is fairly common for a child to have the use of a VCR, either in his or her own bedroom or in a sibling's bedroom; many children over 10 years of age in multi-channel homes have access to the same additional channels in their own rooms, although only the channels being watched on the main set can be accessed; most children have unrestricted access to a games console; a high proportion of children have access to the internet, but in an area of the home subject to parental supervision.
- In addition to the actual presence in the home of a range of sources of viewing, the location of these different video display units (VDUs) within the home has led to very significant changes in viewing and leisure behaviour, and parents noted a number of key differences compared with their experience in their own childhoods. There has been a fragmentation of family life in general, with individual family members each doing his or her own thing, rather than sharing activities as a family; there is a tendency to 'cellular' or atomised living and viewing; children enjoy greatly increased autonomy which is encouraged by peer pressure; there is much less shared family viewing; what shared, joint viewing continues tends to be viewing of pre-watershed family programming (such as soaps and series between 7 and 9pm and sport).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN'S VIEWING AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND INTERVENTION

- Rather than respond to the proliferation of technology by increasing the range and scope of regulation, many parents in this research – especially the parents of children aged 10 and over – leave their children to their own devices. When conflicts about what is to be watched arise, issues are resolved only rarely, and instead the various parties, across the generations, split off and watch separately.
- The viewing relationship between parents and children varies with the age of the child. The researchers noted a discrepancy between parents' views of what constitutes suitable viewing, particularly for children of 13 or 14, and the criteria for 'suitability' employed in current broadcasting regulations. Thus, while with 7 to 8 year-olds there may be fairly active parental involvement and the watershed may be used quite extensively, at 10 or 11 children start to enjoy a degree of autonomy, with the beginning of secret viewing and post-watershed viewing in their own bedrooms. In all but the strictest of families, by the time children reach the age of 13 or 14, parents in this study are found to have effectively relinquished active control of children's viewing and ceased to exercise vetoes.
- Parents, especially those with older children, excuse – or rationalise, after the event – their lack of intervention in use of media, including the use of electronic games and the internet, in a variety of ways. They confess to a feeling of

powerlessness in the face of proliferating technologies which they see as characterising society as a whole, and in the face of pressure from their children's peers; they experience a fragmentation of their families and, consequently, of parental views on what rules should be imposed, and they find they cannot reconcile the differences which are thrown up; they honestly trust their children to make their own choices about what they will view; they feel unable to 'molly-coddle' their children by protecting them from television content which conveys images of what they perceive to be the real world, or indeed they profess pride in not protecting their children from such material; they tend to take the line of least resistance, giving in to their children's demands simply for the sake of an easy life; they let their children do what they want in order that they themselves need not compromise the viewing choices that they find enjoyable.

- The relationship between parental control and children's viewing is weakened by the persistence some children display in evading the bans and vetoes which parents seek to impose. The researchers noted, however, that many children under the age of 11 display a remarkable inclination to veto themselves in line with what they perceive to be their parents' wishes, while children in general, and older children in particular, seem usually to find ways of watching programmes their parents would like to ban.
- In pursuit of their own choices, children employ a wide and versatile range of strategies. They watch secretly in their bedrooms; they watch when their parents are out, especially when it involves time-shifted viewing and other viewing involving a VCR; they view outside their own homes, in the homes of their peers; they are adept at playing their parents off against each other; they use older siblings and relatives to gain access to what their parents would regard as unsuitable material.
- It is important to note also that in some cases there is no need for children actively to avoid parental vetoes. Especially true of children aged 10 years and over and those in C2DE or multichannel households, there may be virtually no rules laid down in the first place, and parents and children collude in a policy of, 'You don't ask and I won't tell.'
- The body of the report contains the details, but the following table sets out schematically what appear to be the levels of regulation that are normal for the various sources of viewing and entertainment.

	Younger family (11 and younger)	Older family (12 and older)	Other observations
Terrestrial television, non-film	<p>Ban for significant numbers on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme sexual content • Nudity • Post-watershed violence • Post-watershed language • Some scary/disturbing content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For most, extreme sex/porn • For under-14s, some sexual content • Very little else 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Television generally unregulated beyond the watershed • Especially for older families • Even less control in C2DE and multichannel households • Violence/bad moral example/realism tolerated
Multichannel television	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority only • PINs • Close attention to film content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As terrestrial television • Adult/porn channels 'blocked' in many households 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar concerns/attitudes expressed as for terrestrial television but less active regulation • Pay-Per-View not an issue
Film/video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very blurred boundaries • Common for young children to see horror, sexual content, action and violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very little control • 18 certificate films the only taboo • But often seen by 13/14 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the most ambivalent/unregulated areas • Many general rules broken with regard to film content (see viewing scenarios) • Widespread ignorance and non-use of certification
Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High parental involvement and control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High parental control over hardware • But less in terms of content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the more controlled environments • But children able to bypass regulations
Video games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority with active controls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No control or perceived need to intervene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtually unregulated • An area of total child control

HOW DO PARENTS RELATE TO FAMILY VIEWING POLICY AND USE IT?

- Family Viewing Policy, as with parental views and their intervention in children's viewing in general, is actively 'used' and valued among three sub-groups: families with younger children (versus families with older children); homes of those in higher (versus lower) social grades; homes having access to only terrestrial channels (versus multichannel homes).
- Active participation in Family Viewing Policy revolves around the understanding and use of the nine o'clock watershed, which is seen as a protector of younger children and an aid for parents, or a reminder to them. In general, parents of both younger and older children want the broadcasters and the regulators to share with them responsibility for the protection of their children – the very purpose of Family Viewing Policy.
- For many parents of older children (those aged 10 and over), however, the watershed is seen increasingly as irrelevant, both to them personally and to their children. They are unsure how to apply the implied guidelines; they do not feel that the implied rules apply to their own children; the watershed fails to reflect the post 9pm viewing that is habitual for their children.
- This does not lead to requests for diminished or relaxed regulation, but it does mean that guidelines are felt to be of less practical benefit or use to this group of respondents than once they were.

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE BREAKDOWN, BY METHOD EMPLOYED

Parent peer groups

1	Younger family	AB	Terrestrial only	Manchester
2	Younger family	BC1	Multichannel/digital	London
3	Younger family	C1	Terrestrial only	London
4	Younger family	C2	Terrestrial only	Glasgow
5	Younger family	DE	Multichannel TV	Birmingham
6	Older family	AB	Multichannel TV	London
7	Older family	C1	Multichannel TV	Glasgow
8	Older family	C1C2	Terrestrial only	London
9	Older family	C2	Terrestrial only	Birmingham
10	Older family	DE	Multichannel/digital	Manchester

Family groups

11	Older family	AB	Multichannel TV	Birmingham
12	Younger family	C1	Multichannel TV	Manchester
13	Younger family	C2	Terrestrial only	London
14	Older family (single mother)	DE	Terrestrial only	Glasgow

Paired depth interviews

15	Parent/child (girl 10/11)	AB, Younger	Terrestrial only	Glasgow
16	Parent/child (boy 8/9)	C1, Younger	Terrestrial only	Birmingham
17	Parent paired depth	C2, Younger	Multichannel TV	Manchester
18	Parent paired depth	DE, Younger	Multichannel TV	London
19	Parent/child (boy 12/13)	AB, Older	Terrestrial only	London
20	Parent paired	C1, Older	Multichannel TV	Glasgow
21	Parent (single mother)	C2, Older	Terrestrial only	Birmingham
22	Parent/child (girl 14/15)	DE, Older	Terrestrial only	Manchester

Children's pair depths

23	Girls 8-9	C2	Terrestrial only	Cardiff
24	Boys 9-10	D	Multichannel TV	Cardiff
25	Girls 10-11	C1	Terrestrial only	London
26	Boys 12-13	B	Terrestrial only	London
27	Girls 13-14	C2	Multichannel TV	London
28	Boys 14-15	B	Terrestrial only	Cardiff

APPENDIX II

EARLIEST TRANSMISSION TIMES OF TELEVISION PROGRAMMES (FROM 1999) AND BBFC CLASSIFICATIONS OF CINEMA FILMS AND VIDEO GAMES

Television programme/series title	Channel	Earliest tx time
Da Ali G Show	C4	22:32
Animal Hospital	BBC1	16:15
The Bill	ITV	19:31
Blue Peter	BBC1 & 2	07:33
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	BBC2	18:46
Byker Grove	BBC1 & 2	10:24
Casualty	BBC1	19:31
Channel X	N/A	22:00
Chewin' the Fat	BBC1	22:51
Children's Hospital	BBC1	11:06
Comic Relief	BBC1 & 2	12:02
Cops	BBC2	20:59
EastEnders	BBC1	12:05
Eurotrash	C4	22:03
Generation Sex	C4	21:32
So Graham Norton	C4	21:31
Hollyoaks	C4	08:59
Ibiza Uncovered	C4	23:05
Jenny Jones	C5	09:53
Jerry Springer	ITV	13:29
Lock, Stock – The Series	C4	21:03
Oprah	C5	09:29
Paddington Green	BBC1	21:33
Playboy Channel	N/A	22:00
Queer as Folk	C4	22:00
Ricki Lake	C4 & C5	08.50
Sex in the City	C4	21:59
Simpsons	BBC2	09:56
Sopranos	C4	21:59
South Park	C4	21:01
They Think It's All Over	BBC1	21:19
WWF	C4	09:54
Xena Warrior Princess	C5	09:54
The X-Files	BBC1 & 2	20:59

Film title	Certificate
Armageddon	12
The Exorcist	18
Friday 13th	18
Full Metal Jacket	18
Grease	PG
Halloween	18
I Know What You Did Last Summer	15
The Mummy	12
Poltergeist	15
Pulp Fiction	18
Rocky	PG
Saving Private Ryan	15
Scream	18
South Park The Movie	15
Terminator	18
Texas Chainsaw Massacre	18

Title of video game	Certificate
Command and Conquer: Part 1	11
Command & Conquer: Redalert	18
Command & Conquer Part 2: Retaliation	11
Die Hard Trilogy Part 1	18
Die Hard Trilogy Part 2	15
Duke Nukedom: 3D	18
Duke Nukedom: Time to Kill	18
Duke Nukedom: Land of Babes	15
Grand Theft Auto	18
Metal Gear Solid	15
Mortal Kombat	15
Resident Evil	15