



News Release

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FEW PARENTS USE V-CHIP TO BLOCK TV SEX AND VIOLENCE, BUT MORE THAN HALF USE TV RATINGS TO PICK WHAT KIDS CAN WATCH

Parents Worried About Sexual and Violent Images on TV but Split Over Uniform Ratings and Government Regulation

Menlo Park, CA – Forty percent of American parents now own a TV equipped with a V-Chip, according to a new survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation. However, despite high levels of concern about children’s exposure to TV sex and violence, just 17% of parents who own a V-Chip – or 7% of all parents – are using it to block programs with sexual or violent content. In contrast, more than half of all parents have consulted TV ratings to decide which shows their kids can watch.

“A year and a half after its introduction, the V-Chip is being used by a small minority of parents; TV ratings are more of a mainstream resource for concerned moms and dads,” said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

V-Chip Awareness and Usage

The survey found that more than half (53%) of parents who now own a V-Chip – those who bought TVs after V-Chips became standard equipment in January 2000 – do not know that their TV is equipped. Among parents who *know* they own a V-Chip, about one in three (36%) has programmed it to block shows they do not want their children to watch, while 64% have not used it.

The V-Chip became available in 1999 and has been a required part of nearly all new TV sets since January 2000. It lets parents use a ratings system, introduced by the TV industry in 1997, to block certain programs with sexual, violent, or age-sensitive content. To use the V-Chip, parents must choose to activate and program it.

Ratings and Regulation

A majority of American parents (56%) reports having used the TV ratings system to make decisions about what their children are allowed to watch. Usage levels are similar for parental advisories on music (50%) and video and computer games (59%), and much higher for movie ratings (84%). Nearly all parents (92%) who have consulted TV ratings find them useful: 48% say they are “very useful,” and 44% say they are “somewhat useful,” which is similar to satisfaction levels with other kinds of ratings. At the same time, many parents who have used TV ratings do not feel they are always applied accurately: half (51%) say that most shows are being rated in a way that accurately reflects their content, while 40% say most shows are not accurately rated.

(more)

Two out of five parents (40%) say that a uniform ratings system for all forms of media would be “more useful” than the current approach, in which each medium is rated differently. About the same proportion of parents (38%) say a uniform system “wouldn’t make much difference,” and 17% say it would be “less useful.” Parents are also divided about whether government should regulate TV content. About half of all parents (48%) favor and about half (47%) oppose “new government regulations to limit the amount of violence and sexual content in TV shows during the early evening hours.”

“American parents are clearly worried about what their children are watching and how it affects them. But when it comes to how to limit sex and violence on TV, parents are far from unanimous,” said Victoria Rideout, vice president and director of the Program for the Study of Entertainment Media and Health at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Concerns About TV Sex and Violence

More than four out of five parents are concerned that their children are being exposed to too much sex and violence on TV: 63% are “a great deal” concerned and 18% are “somewhat” concerned about too much sexual content; 59% are “a great deal” and 23% are “somewhat” concerned about violent content. These high levels of concern appear to reflect the belief that TV affects children’s behavior. Nearly half of parents (48%) say they believe that exposure to sexual content on TV contributes “a lot” to children’s getting involved in sexual situations too early. Similarly, 47% of parents think children’s exposure to violence on TV contributes “a lot” to violent behavior.

Confusion About TV Ratings

While many parents have used TV ratings to some degree, the survey finds confusion about key elements of the current ratings system. More than half of parents with children ages two to six do not understand or have never heard of the ratings designed for this age group (TV-Y7 for children 7 and older, TV-Y for all children, and FV for fantasy violence). In contrast, about two out of three parents with children of all ages can correctly identify the age-based ratings, which is similar to movie ratings (TV-14 for children 14 and older, TV-G for all children, and TV-PG for parental guidance suggested). In addition to these age-based ratings, there are others that refer to specific kinds of content. Parents’ understanding of this content-based part of the rating system ranges from just 5% for the D rating (suggestive dialogue) to 62% for V (violence).

Survey Methodology

Parents and the V-Chip 2001 is a nationally representative, random sample survey of 800 parents of children ages 2-17. The survey was designed by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), and analyzed by staff at the Foundation. Fieldwork was conducted by PSRA by telephone between May 7 and June 6, 2001. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 4 percentage points, and plus or minus 6 percentage points for parents of children ages 2-6.

Additional copies of the summary and topline (#3158) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's web site at www.kff.org or by calling the Foundation's Publication Request Line at 1-800-656-4533.

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