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New National Surveys of Parents and Children on TV Ratings System:

**Half of Parents Use the New TV Ratings,
But Many Say Changes Could Make Them More Helpful**

Parents Also Need To Know More About How the System Works

Washington, DC – As the first television season using the new ratings system draws to a close, half of all parents with children ages 2-17 (54%) say they are using the new ratings to help guide their children's viewing, and 45% say they have stopped at least one of their children from watching a particular show because of its rating, according to two new surveys of parents and children by the Kaiser Family Foundation. But more than eight out of ten parents who use the ratings say there are improvements that would make the ratings more helpful, and many do not have a good understanding of how the current system works.

The survey also finds that parental concerns about television content are rising. The number of parents of children ages 2-17 who say they are concerned "a great deal" that their children are being exposed to too much sexual content on TV increased from 43% in an October 1996 Kaiser Family Foundation survey to 67% in April, 1998, when this survey was conducted. The number expressing the same concern about violent content increased from 39% to 62% over the same period.

The TV ratings system was designed to help address concerns about television content by giving parents assistance in monitoring what their children watch. Nearly all of the parents who have ever used the ratings say they have found them "useful" (42% "very" and 51% "somewhat"). A smaller percentage of parents who use the system say the ratings have been "successful" in keeping children from being exposed to inappropriate material (13% "very" and 51% "somewhat").

"Parents say they are more concerned than ever about the impact of TV on their kids," said Drew Altman, President of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "The good news for the ratings system is that many parents are using the ratings and find them helpful; but they do not always understand the system, and there are changes they'd like to see made."

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One out of five parents say (18%) they have not heard about the ratings system. Twenty-seven percent of parents say they have heard of the ratings system but “never” or “hardly ever” use it. The most common reason given by these parents for not using the ratings is that they would rather decide for themselves what is appropriate or not for their children to watch (31% say this is the leading reason).

Many Children Also Use Ratings. In a companion survey of children, a third (36%) of 10-17 year olds report that at least once, one of their parents has stopped them from watching a show because of its rating. The survey also revealed that just over a third (36%) of all children say they themselves have decided not to watch a particular show because of the rating it received. But children have mixed reasons for tuning out: forty percent say it is because their parents wouldn’t want them to watch the show, while 26% say it is because they think the show is meant for younger kids.

Parents Say Changes Could Make Ratings More Useful. Most parents who use the ratings (73%) say they learn a show’s rating from seeing the symbol on-screen at the beginning of the show, but many (67%) say even when they are looking for the rating they miss seeing it. More than eight out of ten parents who use the ratings say they favor having the rating appear on screen more often (84%) or announced out loud at the beginning of the show (82%), but most do not favor having the rating stay on screen throughout the entire show (42% support, 57% oppose).

Many Parents Need More Information About Ratings. The survey indicated that many parents could use more information about how the ratings system works, including what kinds of shows are rated, who rates programming, and what the different rating symbols mean. Even among those parents who are aware of the ratings system,

- Less than half know that children’s shows (49%), talk shows (40%) and soap operas (23%) are rated.
- About half (54%) know what at least six of the eleven rating symbols mean, while 46% know five or fewer.
- Thirty-one percent know that the television industry rates programs itself, while 32% believe that an independent review board does the rating. Nine percent think the government rates shows, and 27% say they don’t know who does the rating.

Parents Say Ratings Accurately Depict TV Content. Seventy-one percent of parents who use the ratings say they provide “reasonably accurate” information about TV shows, although half (50%) say they have on occasion disagreed with how a particular show was rated. Only 12% of parents who use the ratings say they know who to complain to in such a situation.

Parents would use a v-chip. Nearly two-thirds of all parents (65%) say that if they had a v-chip in their home, they would use it to block certain programming. But most parents say they are either “not too likely” (24%) or “not at all likely” (45%) to go out and buy a TV with a v-chip (or a set-top box) in the next year or two.

The new ratings, which combine both age-based ratings and content descriptors, were implemented in October 1997 as the result of an agreement among advocacy groups, policymakers and representatives of the television industry. NBC and BET have declined to use the content descriptors. The ratings are designed to work in conjunction with the v-chip device, which will allow parents to block shows with certain ratings from their homes. The v-chip is expected to be available in some new TV sets and in set-top boxes within a year; all new sets will be required to have a v-chip within a year and a half. Following are the rating categories:

TVY: All children. This program is designed to be appropriate for all children.
TVY7: Directed to older children. This program is designed for children age 7 and above.
TVG: General audience. Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages.
TVPG: Parental Guidance Suggested. This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children.
TV14: Parents Strongly Cautioned. This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age.
TVMA: Mature Audience Only. This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17.
V: Violent content.
S: Sexual content.
L: Language.
D: Suggestive dialogue.
FV: Fantasy violence.

Methodology

Parents, Children, and the Television Ratings System reports on the results of two national random sample surveys designed by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), and conducted by PSRA by telephone between April 2-26, 1998. 1,358 parents of children ages 2-17 and 446 children ages 10-17 were interviewed. The margin of error for the survey of parents is plus or minus 3%, and for the survey of children is plus or minus 5%.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. These surveys were conducted as a part of the Foundation's Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health, which was established to examine the impact of entertainment media in society, and to work with the entertainment industry, researchers and policymakers on important public health issues.

Copies of the summary of findings and questionnaires for the surveys reported on in this release are available by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's publication request line at 1-800-656-4533 (Ask for #1398).