

What Parents Want in a Television Rating System: Results of a National Survey

Joanne Cantor, PhD
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Suzanne Stutman, MA, MSW, BCD
Institute for Mental Health Initiatives

Victoria Duran, MSW, LCSW
National PTA

(Released November, 1996)

“We don’t need anything fancy. Just let us know what is in the show and we can then decide.” -- Mother of two from Tyler, Texas

Since the very beginning of discussions about ratings for television, one assumption on which virtually everyone has agreed is that ratings are for parents. Indeed, the section of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that mandates the development of a rating system for use with the V-chip is titled “Parental Choice in Television Programming.” The fact that ratings are intended for use by parents has been fully acknowledged and endorsed by the television industry, which on February 29, 1996, agreed to develop a rating system for television programs. The industry group’s statement on that date placed parents front and center (1). It referred to a plan to give “more information about TV programs to the parents of America.” It agreed that the ratings would be encoded to activate an electronic device which responds to “parental choice.” And the industry leaders declared themselves ready to participate in a national voluntary enterprise that would be “useful and valuable to the parents of America.”

Although many experts and many groups have expressed their opinions about how the new ratings should be designed (2), very little research has been conducted to assess the needs, desires, and attitudes of the group the ratings are being created to serve (3). If we want to develop a rating system that U.S. parents will find helpful, we have very little to go on. This research was designed to fill that obvious void.

Our goal was to identify a random sample of parents throughout the United States and to assess what their preferences would be for the design of the new rating system. Because we wanted to be able to go into some detail regarding the issues and alternatives involved in creating a rating system, we decided that a mailed, written questionnaire would be preferable to a phone survey.

Our focus was on asking parents to respond to our questions with regard to their own children. Many previous surveys have asked parents to give their opinions on television’s effects on children in general. Typically, respondents expect the effects of the mass media to be stronger on other people than on themselves or their own families (4). Reports of the effects of television on one’s own children are likely to be more accurate, given that parents are in a unique position to observe what goes on in their own homes. Moreover, since parents will use the rating system and the V-chip to protect their own families, it seemed most reasonable for our purposes to ask parents questions about their own children, rather than children in general.

Our survey had two types of questions. One group of questions dealt with the types of effects of television that parents are most concerned about. The other group of questions involved parents’ attitudes and beliefs regarding television ratings.

Competing Approaches to Ratings Design

In current discussions about different approaches to ratings, two distinct models have emerged. One model, the one talked about most by the Ratings Implementation Group, is based primarily on the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) Ratings. These familiar ratings involve four major levels: “G: General Audiences,” “PG: Parental Guidance Suggested,” “PG-13:

Parents Strongly Cautioned,” and “R: Restricted” (5). These ratings, in general, suggest the appropriateness of a movie for different groups of children. “G” suggests that all ages may be admitted. “PG” does not refer to any particular age group, but it implies that there may be some content that is inappropriate for some young children. “PG-13” suggests that caution should be exercised for children under 13. Finally, “R” indicates that children under 17 should not see the film unless accompanied by a parent.. The MPAA rating system does not indicate, however, what type or types of content have caused a particular movie to receive its rating.

The second model that has been discussed for a rating system is one that has been introduced over the past few years on the cable channels HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax. This system is somewhat similar to one that has been used in Canada in preliminary tests of the V-chip, and has a good deal of support among academics and child advocates. This cable system provides a series of letter codes and words to indicate the presence of different types and levels of content. Specifically, a movie can be rated “MV,” for “Mild Violence,” “V” for “Violence,” or “GV” for “Graphic Violence.” It can also receive an “AC” for “Adult Content,” an “SC” for “Strong Sexual Content,” an “AL” for “Adult Language,” a “GL” for “Graphic Language,” and/or an “RP” for rape. This system provides information about content, but it does not make recommendations or suggestions regarding the age or type of viewer who should or should not see the movie.

Because these two prototypes of rating systems are so prominent in current discussions, our survey dealt with the major differences between them. Specifically, we asked parents whether they prefer that a program receive one, overall summary rating or that it receive separate ratings for different types of content, such as sex, violence, and language. Second, we asked whether parents are more interested in learning about the content of a program or in receiving an indication of the age of the child that the program is appropriate for. Third, we asked whether ratings should be descriptive or evaluative, that is, whether the rating system should say what is in the program, or provide a warning or recommendation about it.

The questionnaire also gave parents a chance to evaluate the MPAA ratings and the cable-type ratings specifically, as well as other possible rating systems. The last question on the survey gave parents an opportunity to write in any comments or suggestions they had for the group conducting the survey or the committee developing the new rating system.

Sample

In identifying a national group composed of parents from which to draw our sample, the National PTA seemed an obvious choice. It is the largest volunteer child advocacy group in the United States, and the largest organization in the country whose membership is composed primarily of parents. Moreover, it is a nonprofit, noncommercial, nonsectarian, and nonpartisan organization. The PTA offers programs and guidance in developing family-centered programs and encouraging parent involvement in all areas of a child’s life. In sampling from the membership of the National PTA, we were not systematically drawing on parents who are anti-television activists or who have unusual views about television one way or another.

To draw our sample, mailing labels were randomly selected from the local-unit membership list of the National PTA. Questionnaires were sent out on September 5th, 1996. Recipients were asked to return the form in an enclosed, postage-paid envelope by September 23rd to ensure that their responses would be counted.

The questionnaire was four pages long and had the logos of the National PTA, the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives, and the University of Wisconsin at the top of the first page. The survey was introduced as follows:

“As you may know, television industry leaders recently agreed to develop a rating system for television programs. This survey is designed to find out what type of rating system would be most helpful to parents in guiding their children’s viewing. The results of this survey will be sent to the industry committee that is designing the rating system and released to the media nationwide.

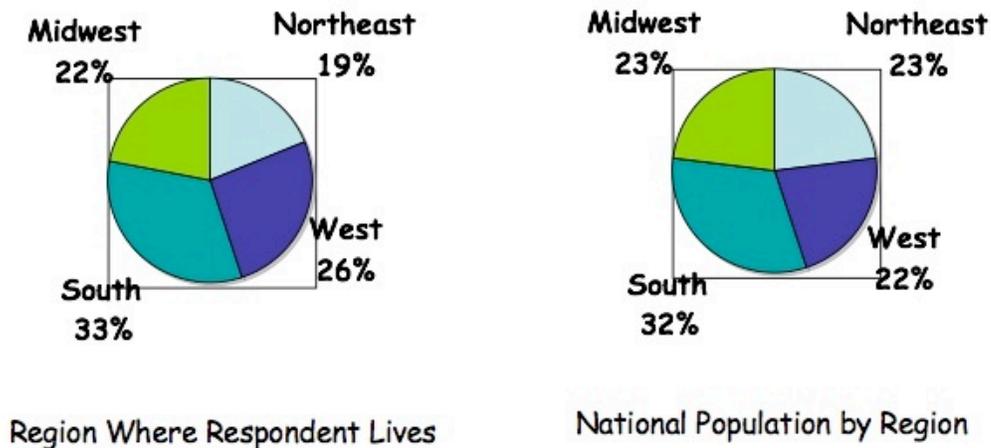
Your answers will be completely anonymous.”

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

A total of 679 questionnaires were completed and returned. Respondents first were asked to indicate their sex, their age group (under 21, 21-35, 36-49, or 50 or over), and the city and state of their residence. The respondents were predominantly female (93%), and mostly in the 36-49 age range (76%). Parents also indicated the age and sex of all of their children within the range of 3 and 18 years. All of the respondents had at least one child in that age range, with 17% having one child, 52% having two children, and 31% having between 3 and 7 children.

The questionnaires were returned from all fifty states and were ideally distributed to represent the country at large. Specifically, when the states were grouped by region of the country (as defined by Rand McNally) (6), the composition of our sample was remarkably similar to the overall U.S. population distribution in these regions. Figure 1 shows the percentage of our sample that came from each of the four geographical regions (Northeast: 19%, South: 33%, Midwest: 22%, West: 26%). These percentages are very close to the percentage of the U.S. population in each of these areas, as also shown in Figure 1 (Northeast: 23%, South: 32%, Midwest: 23%, West: 22%). These figures are based on 1995 population estimates (7).

Figure 1: Comparison of Sample with U. S. Population



Questionnaire

As stated earlier, we wanted parents to answer our questions, not in an abstract sense, but in terms of how each question related to their own child. We recognized, of course, that most parents would have more than one child. We also were aware that television is likely to be perceived as affecting children of different ages and sexes in different ways, and that parents of different-aged children may have different views of rating systems. Because it was important to

us to be able to compare the responses of parents of children in these different groupings, and because it would be extremely time-consuming for parents to answer the same questions repeatedly for each of their children, we asked each parent to respond in terms of only one child.

To provide a random method for selection of that one child, we created two versions of the questionnaire. All questionnaires read, "If you have more than one child in the 3-18 age group, we want you to select only one child to think about when answering the questions." One version went on to read, "Please choose the child whose birthday falls earliest in the year (starting with January 1)." The other version read, "Please choose the child whose birthday falls closest to July 1 (that is, on that date or the soonest date after it, counting from July 1 through June 30th)." The questionnaire contained repeated reminders to reply in terms of the one child who been selected. The two versions of the questionnaire were distributed at random to the sampled names on the mailing list. The questionnaires that were returned were equally divided (50%-50%) between the two versions. There were no significant differences between the two survey versions on any response.

The sample of children that this procedure produced was 55% male and 45% female. Children of every age from three to eighteen were included. For purposes of our analyses, the children were grouped into three age ranges: the "youngest," age 3 to 7 (20% of sample), the "middle," age 8 to 12 (52%), and the "oldest," 13 to 18 (28%). These age groupings were chosen because they correspond with those identified by child development specialists as representing different levels of cognitive development and understanding, and these differences are important determinants of the effects television has on children (8).

Parents' Concerns About the Effects of Television on Their Child

After providing demographic information on the first page of the survey, parents were asked to rate their concerns about the effects of television on their child. The questions were introduced as follows:

"Many parents want to shield their child from certain television shows because they are concerned about the effects that these programs may have. What kinds of effects are you most concerned about for your child? In other words, how concerned are you that watching what you consider to be inappropriate programs would ..."

This introduction was followed by a list of eight possible effects. For each effect, the parent was told to circle one of four choices: 0, for "not at all concerned," 1, for "a little bit concerned," 2, for "moderately concerned," or 3, for "very concerned." Parents were also given the opportunity to write in comments about other effects that concerned them (9).

To simplify the presentation of the findings, we combined related items into composite measures (10). A "violence" scale combined three items, based on the most commonly discussed effects of viewing violence: "...encourage your child to think violence is acceptable," "...stimulate your child to imitate the violence," and "...cause your child to be less sensitive to people who get hurt." A "sex" scale combined two measures, reflecting frequently discussed effects of exposure to programs with sexual depictions or themes: "... teach your child prematurely about sexual matters," and "...encourage your child to engage in sexual activity or inappropriately seductive behavior." Three other possible effects were assessed with individual items: "...stimulate your child to use taboo language or profanity" (profanity); "...frighten your child or cause nightmares" (fright); and "...encourage your child to engage in illegal or risky behaviors" (risk-taking).

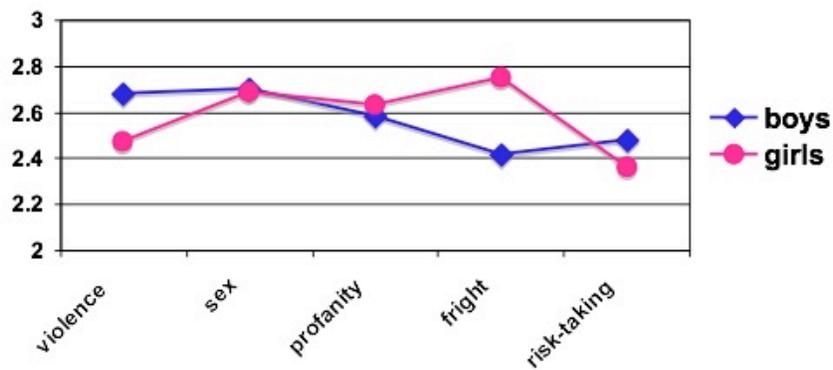
The analysis of these data that seems most relevant to the development of ratings is whether parental concerns are generally the same across different sex and age groupings or whether there are consistent differences between these groups. An initial analysis of all groups together revealed that there were substantial differences among the groups in terms of the effects parents were most concerned about (11). $p < .001$; sex X concern, $F(4,656) = 10.16$, $p < .001$. The age X sex X concern interaction was not significant. As might be expected, parents' level of concern was highest for the youngest group and became progressively lower as the age of the group

increased (youngest: 2.6, middle: 2.4, oldest: 2.1). Parents also showed marginally higher concern for their daughters (2.4) than for their sons (2.3). The overall level of concern was equal for boys and girls in the younger two groups, but parents of children in the oldest group showed significantly more concern for their girls (2.3) than for their boys (1.9).

Because the patterns of concern differed greatly as a function of the age and sex of the child, we looked at the concerns within each age group separately.

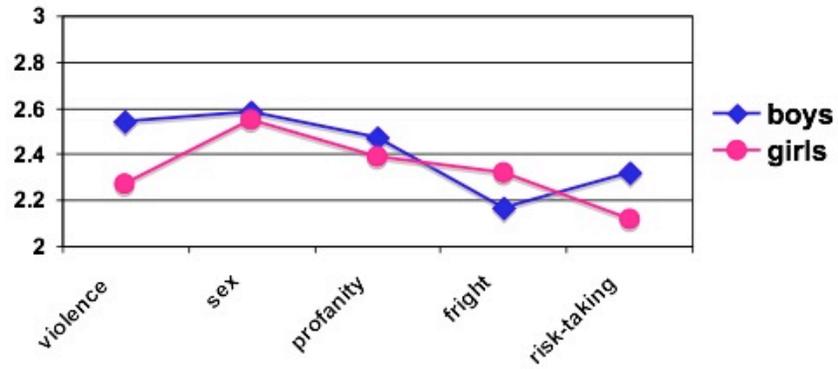
Figure 2 shows the concerns of parents of 3- to 7-year-olds. As can be seen from the figure, for parents of both boys and girls, sex was of great concern and profanity was of intermediate concern. Parents of boys and girls differed greatly with regard to violence and fright, however. Parents of boys were highly concerned about violence-related effects but much less concerned about fright, while parents of girls were most concerned about fright, but relatively unconcerned about violence (12).

Figure 2: Parents' Concerns about their 3- to 7-year-olds



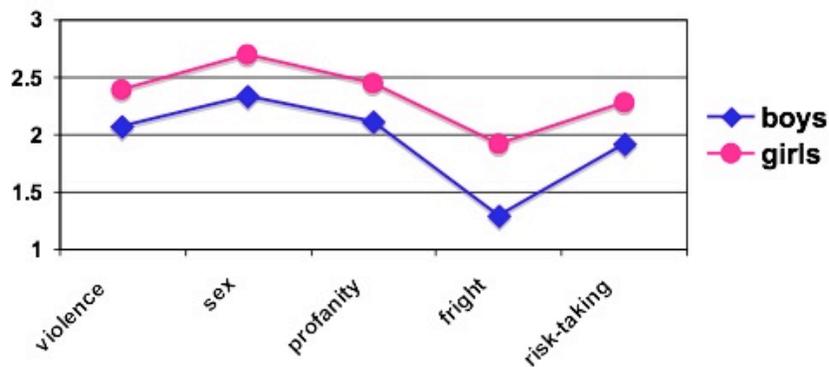
For parents of 8- to 12-year-olds (Figure 3), effects on sex-related outcomes were again of great concern for parents of both boys and girls. In this age group, parents of boys were significantly more concerned than parents of girls about both violence and risk-taking behaviors (13).

Figure 3: Parents' Concerns About Their 8- to 12-year-olds



Only in the oldest group were the patterns of concerns for parents of boys and girls parallel (Fig. 4). Parents were more concerned about effects on daughters than on sons in all five areas. For both boys and girls, sex was of highest concern, violence, profanity, and risk-taking were intermediate, and fright was of lowest concern (14).

Figure 4: Parents' Concerns about their 13- to 18-year-olds



What these data reveal, then, is that parents of different subgroups of children are concerned about different effects of television. Even within the same age group, parents have different concerns about their sons vs. their daughters, and this is especially the case for the youngest and middle age groups. These different areas of concern should be kept in mind when determining how a rating system can best serve the needs of parents.

Attitudes About the Importance of Ratings

After indicating their concerns about the effects of television on their child, parents answered three questions regarding their feelings about the importance of ratings. Each question could be answered by choosing 0, “not at all important,” 1, “a little bit important,” 2, “moderately important,” or 3, “very important.” The first question read, “How important is it to you that there be a rating system for television programs?” Looking at parents overall, 89% felt that a rating system was either very important (62%) or moderately important (27%). The level of importance did not vary as a function of the child’s age or sex.

Because there has been some discussion in the press of exempting cartoons from the rating system, we included a second question in this section, which read, “Given that there will be a rating system, how important is it to you that there be ratings for cartoons or animated programs?” Eighty-four percent of parents thought that ratings for cartoons were either very important (53%) or moderately important (31%). As might be expected, the level of importance of rating cartoons decreased as the child’s age increased, probably reflecting both the fact that

cartoon viewing decreases with age and the fact that parents likely perceive the effects of cartoons as diminishing as the child's age increases (15).

Because there has also been some speculation that reality-based programs might be exempted from ratings as well, we included a third question, which read, "How important is it to you that there be ratings for dramatized reality-based programs (such as police, crime, and rescue shows)?" Ninety-two percent of parents thought ratings for reality programs were very important (69%) or moderately important (23%). These ratings did not vary as a function of the child's age or sex.

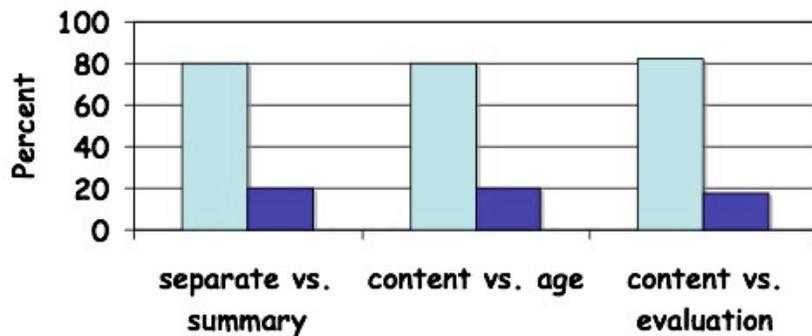
Preferences for Different Approaches to Ratings

The major portion of the questionnaire asked for opinions about how a rating system should be structured. It began with the following introduction:

"Under the current plan for rating television programs, members of the television industry will be the ones who assign the ratings. Various issues are being debated regarding how this system should look."

Three issues were then presented. The data for all three issues are presented in Figure 5. The first had to do with whether there should be "an overall summary rating of a program," or whether there should be "separate ratings for different types of content, such as violence, sex, and language." The parent was asked which of the two types he or she would prefer. Parents overwhelmingly chose separate ratings for different types of content (80%) over one summary rating (20%) (16). What is more remarkable, when the data were broken down by every possible demographic or background factor, the strong and significant preference for separate ratings was always there. Specifically, a strong and statistically significant preference for separate over summary ratings was observed among parents of boys and parents of girls; among parents of children in the youngest, middle, and oldest groups; among male and female respondents; among parents under age 35 and those who were 36 and over; and among parents from the Northeast, South, Midwest and Western regions of the U.S. Moreover, this significant preference existed among parents with one, two, and three or more children, and among people who returned the questionnaire on the first two days as well as those who returned the survey after the deadline.

Figure 5: Parents' Preferences for Different Approaches to Ratings



The second question regarding approaches to ratings asked whether a rating should indicate “what age of the child the program is appropriate or inappropriate for” or whether it should just indicate “what the content of the program is (i.e., amount or type of sex, violence, and language).” As Figure 5 shows, parents again showed a strong, consistent, and highly significant preference. With all parents combined, 80% preferred content-based over age-based ratings. Again, the same significant preference was observed within all subgroups into which the parents were divided.

The third question regarding approaches to ratings asked whether a rating system should provide “content information (e.g., amount or type of sex, violence, and language)” or “an evaluation (recommending a program vs. warning about it).” Here again, parents showed a strong and significant preference, even slightly stronger (82%) than what they revealed for the first two questions, for content information over evaluations. (Also in Figure 5.) Again, this strong and significant preference was observed within all subgroups.

In summary, for all questions regarding approaches to ratings, about four times as many parents chose the approach exemplified by the cable model (indicating content and specifying different types) as chose characteristics of the MPAA model (providing one summary rating involving guidance for viewing by different age groups). Moreover, this preference was astonishingly consistent throughout all subgroups in the sample. Among all the comparisons within all the subgroups of the sample, the lowest percentage favoring the cable approach was 73%, leaving the highest percentage preferring the MPAA approach at 27%. Even this weakest split reveals a preference of almost three to one for the cable approach.

Comparison With Other National Surveys

It is interesting to compare these numbers with the one other national random survey of

parents that has been reported regarding preferences for a rating system (17). A survey conducted between August 12 and 14 for U.S. News & World Report asked parents which system would be most useful, a system naming some specific age groups, like the MPAA ratings, or a system naming content of the program, such as adult language or violence. Overall, 62% of their sample favored the content-based system and 27% favored an age-based system, a greater than two-to-one preference. This strong preference for content information over age-based advice was observed among both male and female respondents, and among all age groups. The preference for content over age guidelines was stronger among parents with children age 12 and under (66%) than among those whose children were in their teens (52%). This other, totally independent survey, shows how pervasive the preference for content-based ratings is, even among parents not involved in child-advocacy organizations such as the PTA.

Attitudes Toward Specific Rating Systems

Another set of questions dealt with parents' attitudes about existing, proposed, or possible rating systems. Two questions were asked about each system. The first was a question about how "helpful" each type of rating system would be for the parent in making a decision about whether his or her child should watch a particular program. The second was a question about how "objective (fair and impartial)" such a system would be. The concept of objectivity was further explained in the statement, "Remember that members of the television industry as well as different viewers watching the same program need to be able to agree on what a show's rating should be." The respondents were asked to rate four different systems according to how helpful and objective they would be. Choices for ratings of both helpful and objective were 0, for "not at all," 1, for "a little bit," 2, for "moderately," and 3, for "very."

The four systems to be rated were described as follows:

(MPAA): "A system like the one currently used for movies, the MPAA ratings (G: General Audiences, PG: Parental Guidance Suggested, PG-13: Parents Strongly Cautioned, R: Restricted)"

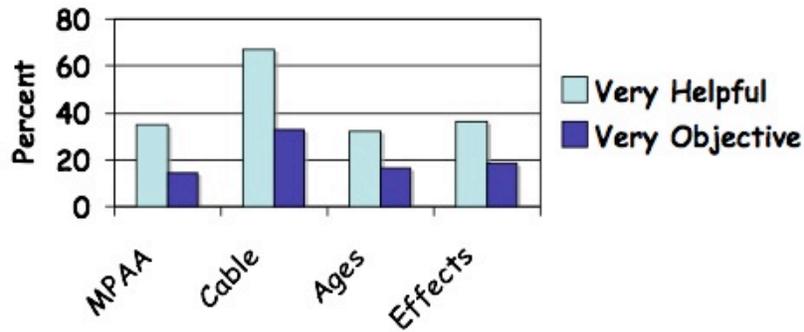
(Cable): "A system like the one currently used for movies on some cable channels (like HBO and Showtime), which specifies the type and level of different types of content (e.g., mild violence, violence, graphic violence; adult content, strong sexual content; adult language)."

(Ages): "An indication of what ages the program is suitable for (e.g., "age 8 and up," "age 13 and up")."

(Effects): "An indication of potential effects of the program, e.g., 'may be frightening,' 'may induce copying'."

An analysis computed on the ratings of how helpful these four systems would be revealed that the rating systems were evaluated very differently (18). The cable system received significantly higher evaluations of helpfulness than the other three systems. When the data were again broken down into all the separate subgroups, the patterns for all subgroups were again remarkably similar, with the cable system always being the highest rated and always significantly higher than the other three. Figure 6 illustrates this relationship, showing the percentage of parents who would find each system "very helpful."

**Figure 6:
Percent Finding Ratings Helpful and Objective**



Although the systems all received lower ratings for “objectivity” than for “helpfulness,” a very similar pattern emerged when systems were rated for how objective they would be (19). Again, the cable system was always significantly higher than the other three choices. This pattern was again repeated within all subgroups. Figure 8 shows the percentage of parents who rated each system as “very objective.”

Parents’ Additional Comments

Almost half of all respondents to our survey (49%) took the opportunity to write in comments. These comments are revealing because they amplify the thinking behind the numerical ratings, and many of them reflect the intensity with which parents hold their opinions. The letters in parentheses indicate the state of residence of the writer.

Comments about ratings in general. Although the overwhelming majority of parents indicated in their numerical choices that they considered ratings for television programs moderately or very important, there were a few (11) who wrote in comments that were critical of the idea. The most typical criticism was that ratings would be unnecessary if parents just took the time to monitor what their children were viewing, and that the most vulnerable children would be unaffected by the presence of ratings. For example:

“The main reason that I’m not as concerned about violence and sex on TV for my child is that I monitor what she sees closely, and discuss what she watches (especially if she’s seen something I’m uncomfortable with.) I think ratings probably won’t help the children who need it most: the ones who watch unlimited TV without supervision, or the ones where TV is a babysitter.” (NE)

The idea of rating programs was also criticized as not going to the core of the problem -- the content of television:

“If the industry provided good programming without sex, violence or bad language, it would be watched. Try to encourage production of better content rather than rating for questionable content.” (NY)

Only one parent seemed to think that a rating system was an invasion of her rights:

“Please consider the millions of people who DON’T want interference in viewing. I don’t as a parent of four, want any subjective rating, explanation or recommendations on any viewing involving my family whatsoever!” (KY)

Of the parents who wrote comments about the idea of ratings, three out of four thought ratings were a good idea. Of the 29 positive comments about ratings, many were unabashedly enthusiastic. For example:

“Ratings for both movies and television would be a true aid to parents and assist them in making wise choices for their children, or in guiding children in making wise choices.” (GA)

“I think a rating system for television is an excellent idea!” (PA)

“Get this rating system into effect ASAP.” (NJ)

“The sooner the better.” (IA)

“I would love to see a rating system developed!” (FL)

Others who were supportive of the idea expressed the feeling that ratings were only part of the solution. For example:

“These can only be used as guides. Parents must take control and turn off TV.” (AR)

“The ratings would be helpful but better quality shows would help more.” (UT)

“Ratings would be helpful but are so dependent on the rater!” (TX)

Comments About the Industry Rating Itself. A number of parents (18) expressed skepticism about ratings that would be applied by the industry to its own programs:

“I hope the fact that the television industry itself does the ratings will not take away from the intent of the ratings. Self-policing doesn’t often work, especially in an industry where violence and questionable behavior and actions bring in money.” (NY)

“I don’t think that people within the industry should rate programs. It’s very difficult to be impartial of something you’re involved in.” (PA)

Comments About MPAA Ratings. Ten parents made favorable comments about the MPAA ratings, although four of these comments advocated making significant changes to the way they are currently designed. The most common reason for support of the MPAA ratings was that they are familiar. For example:

“I would prefer a parallel system to the MPAA since we already know what to expect and it is very simple.” (CA)

The parents who supported the MPAA system with changes advocated the addition of content-specific information to the established MPAA rating levels:

“The system should be consistent. A combination of the current rating system for movies with additional information such as age appropriate and type/level of content would be wonderful.” (OK)

Another parent advocating a system similar to the MPAA ratings expressed her ambivalence as follows:

“A system the same or similar to movies will make it easier to understand for parents, especially those who aren’t very involved in the first place. Without input from child development specialists, the system will only be half as accurate and worthwhile as it could be. Of course, the industry wants people to watch their shows!” (NV)

Even counting the ambivalent comments about the MPAA ratings as favorable, there were more than twice as many unfavorable (21) as favorable comments about the MPAA ratings. The criticisms centered on not providing enough information, on standards that are too lenient or have eroded over time, and on disagreements with the criteria used by those who set the ratings. For example:

“MPAA ratings do not give parents information they need to make decisions. A movie could be rated ‘PG-13’ for many different reasons. Some may make the movie unacceptable to us, others may not. Also the industry doesn’t have a clue if my 12-year-old is mature for his age or not. So saying it’s suitable for a certain age group means nothing to me.” (NC)

“The MPAA is useless. Their criteria is becoming more lax every year.” (OR)

“As of now, I do not trust the MPAA’s ratings at all. Not even G.” (CA)

“Our experience has been that PG-13 has little value. We find some movies with that rating no less objectionable than the ones rated R. Other PG-13 movies are like PG. No way to tell. I’m very much in favor of more specific information about content.” (OH)

Comments About Cable Ratings and Content Information in General. Although the overwhelming sentiment in parents’ comments was for information about specific content, three parents simply wanted guidance without content information. For example:

“The system should be simple so that I can say to my pre-teen, A&B ratings are okay but C,D,&E ratings are not. Content is too confusing.” (PA)

The cable rating system was mentioned explicitly by ten parents and all comments were favorable. For example:

“I feel the rating system through cable, such as HBO, is much more helpful than MPAA. I never know what to expect with MPAA.” (TX)

“The ratings should deal only in facts, not moral judgments. The HBO type of system has been very helpful in our house.” (FL)

Without specifically mentioning the cable system, the largest group of comments reflected the opinion that what is most valuable is information about the content of programs. There were almost 50 comments of this type. Often parents indicated they wanted information only and not a recommendation about who should see a program. These are typical:

“I want to know the content, not someone else’s opinion if it is suitable or not. What is acceptable to many parents is NOT acceptable to me.” (TX)

“I feel a rating system would be wonderful. But everyone sees violence and gory things

differently. I want to know if there's that kind of thing in a program and I'll decide whether or not my children will watch it." (CA)

"We need to know the type of content, then I can choose. I don't want to rely on someone else's impression of what certain ages can or should see." (MI)

"We don't need anything fancy. Just let us know what is in the show (language, violence, sex) and we can then decide." (TX)

"More specific information is better so that there is less discretion for them and more available to us." (NY)

Summary of Findings and Implications

The findings of this survey are compelling and clear. Parents in the United States overwhelmingly prefer ratings that tell them what is in a program, rather than those that give them advice on whether any of their children should be shielded from seeing it. One reason for this preference seems to derive from the fact that parents know that different types of television effects are of concern to different parents. Our data showed clearly that parents of different age groups of children are concerned about different effects, and that even within each age group, there are important differences between parents' concerns about their sons vs. their daughters. More importantly, parents are of the strong belief that they know their child better than anyone. They want to be the ones who decide about the appropriateness of a particular program for their child. They do not want to rely on the opinions of others, particularly members of the television industry, who have a stake in the impact of ratings.

On every question that compared the MPAA model, based on one summary rating suggesting age-appropriateness, to the cable model, giving specific content information in several areas, parents overwhelmingly preferred the cable model, and there were no exceptions to this preference, no matter how the overall sample was divided. No age group or gender group (of parents or of children), or region of the country was an exception. There were no subgroups in which the two models were even close. The preference for the cable model is as deep as it is wide, as evidenced by the parents' voluntary comments. One typical parent's comment sums up the majority view quite well:

"I don't want to be told if it's appropriate for my child. I want to know what's in it so I can judge myself." (CA).

Isn't that the essence of our American democracy?

As this report was going to press, the Caucus for Producers, Writer, & Directors, an organization of members of the creative community whose work supplies a high proportion of network programming, approved a proposal for a television rating system that is very much in line with parents' wishes (20). Their system would provide ratings that involve separate labels for sex, violence, and language, and give a measure of intensity with additional words such as "occasional," "frequent," or "widespread." This is a very welcome turn of events, given that distinguished members of the creative community feel that an approach that parents want is both appropriate and feasible.

In evaluating whether a rating system will ultimately satisfy parents' needs, we can look to food labeling as an analogy. Because parents are concerned for the physical well-being of their children, they appreciate the information provided by food labels, which is based on nutritional science. In other words, parents want to know how much fat and sodium there is in a can of soup, for example, as well as the availability of protein and carbohydrates. They also need to know the effects of these various components of a food item on a growing child so that they can make decisions that are in their child's best interest. But in the end, they value their freedom to create their own family's menus.

Likewise, parents are seeking information on television content areas so they can reduce their children's access to programming that they consider inappropriate. But, just as food labeling is not helpful without any knowledge of the effects of various nutrients on the body, a television rating system must also reflect what research has shown about the effects of different aspects of media content on different groups of children. Refinements in a rating system as dictated by research findings will undoubtedly prove valuable, and ultimately, very useful to parents. And any rating system will need to be reinforced by public education about the risks posed by different types of content.

But in the final analysis, the system that is adopted must respond to the needs and desires of the group that will use it. Parents have strong feelings about what would be useful to them. It is pointless to develop a system that parents will not use.

Acknowledgements

Many people worked especially hard to bring this project to fruition. Special thanks are due to Rhoda Baruch and Michael Benjamin of IMHI for their thoughtful contributions and support of this project. Many thanks are also due to Amy Nathanson and Linda Henzl at the University of Wisconsin for the high levels of intelligence and creativity they put into producing the survey and preparing the report. Leaders of the National PTA are to be commended for their insight, commitment, and dedication to the issue of improving children's television programming and for working to address the needs of parents. We are also indebted to the grassroots members of the PTA for the opinions, suggestions, and feedback they provided in this survey.

Footnotes

- (1) A statement by all segments of the television industry, February 29, 1996.
- (2) See, for example, Rideout, V. Making television ratings work for children and families: The perspective of children's experts. *Children Now Report*, June 1996.
- (3) The one current exception is a recent phone survey conducted by U.S. News & World Report and reported in Silver, M. & Geier, T. Ready for prime time? *U.S. News & World Report*, September 9, 1996. The results of that survey will be discussed in the context of the findings of this report.
- (4) See Perloff, R. M. Third-person effect research 1983-1992: A review and synthesis. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 5, 167-184.
- (5) A fifth level, "NC-17: No Children Under 17 Admitted," has recently been added. However, it was not included in this survey because it is so new, and because it has rarely been used even with theatrically released movies.
- (6) *1996 Commercial atlas and marketing guide* (127th Edition). Rand McNally, 1996.
- (7) Population figures are estimates based on 1995 figures from *The book of states*, 1996-97 Edition. Vol. 31. Lexington, KY: The Council of State Governments.
- (8) See, for example, "Language, sex violence, children" *Dialogue*, 1996, 4(3). Institute for Mental Health Initiatives.
- (9) An analysis of these comments and other details of responses not as relevant to the issues addressed in this paper will be included in a later report.
- (10) For the "violence" scale, $\alpha = .87$; for the "sex" scale, $r = .62$.
- (11) A 3 (age group) X 2 (sex) X 5 (type of concern) analysis of variance was performed, with the five different types of concern as repeated measures. For the main effect of age group, $F(2,659) = 18.97$, $p < .001$. For the main effect of sex of child, $F(1,659) = 2.67$, $p = .10$. For the interaction between age and sex, $F(2,659) = 7.02$, $p < .001$. The other interactions were as follows: age X concern, $F(8,1314) = 10.83$,
- (12) The precise patterns of differences among the means are as follows: Ranked from lowest to highest, cells with no letter in common are different (at $p < .05$). Comparisons are within gender only: Youngest boys: fright (a), risk-taking (a), profanity (ab), violence (b), sex (b). Youngest girls: risk-taking (a), violence (a), profanity(ab), sex (b), fright (b).
- (13) The patterns of mean differences are as follows: Middle boys: fright (a), risk-taking (b),

profanity (c), violence (cd), sex (d). Middle girls: risk-taking (a), violence (bc), fright (c), profanity (cd), sex (e).

(14) The patterns of mean differences are as follows: for oldest boys, fright (a), risk-taking (b), profanity (b), violence (b), sex (c). For the oldest girls, fright (a), risk-taking (b), violence (bc), profanity (c), sex (d).

(15) In a one-way analysis of variance with three age-levels, the main effect of age group was significant, $F(2,673)=4.47$, $p=.01$. Mean levels of importance of rating cartoons were as follows: youngest, 2.5, middle, 2.3, oldest, 2.2.

(16) When this outcome was compared to what would be expected by chance if there were no overall preference in the population, the difference was highly significant at $p < .001$ by binomial test. All either-or preferences reported in this section were significant beyond the .001 level.

(17) Silver, M. & Geier, T. Ready for prime time? *U.S. News & World Report* (9/9/1996)

(18) In the repeated measures analysis of variance on rated helpfulness of the four systems, the main effect of type of system yielded $F(3,646) = 155.43$, $p<.001$.

(19) The main effect of type of system on the ratings of objectivity yielded $F(3,608) = 105.84$, $p<.001$.

(20) Dealing in V-chips." *The Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1996

(c) Joanne Cantor, from www.yourmindonmedia.com