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W A S H I N G T O N

Parents' Use of the V-Chip to Supervise Children's Television Use

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BACKGROUND

From 1999-2001, researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania undertook an exploration of the implications of the V-Chip mandate for families. With a grant from a private foundation, APPC sought to answer a fundamental question related to the V-Chip legislation: If parents of school-age children have access to a V-Chip equipped TV in their home, will they use it to control their children's viewing?

THE PHILADELPHIA EXPERIMENT

Researchers provided a sample of families with 7- to 10-year-old children with V-Chip equipped television sets and tracked their response to the device over a one year period from November 1999 to November 2000.¹ A sub-sample of these families subsequently participated in a month-long trial during which they committed to keeping their V-Chips engaged. A total of 150 families were recruited and assigned to different conditions of the experiment through a random procedure. Families represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Caucasian, African-American, Latino, Asian-American) and structures (single parent and two parents; single child and multiple children; one income and two incomes). All of the families were from the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

Three distinct groups were created to explore whether providing information and training about the V-Chip and the TV ratings would influence V-Chip use.

High Information Group

Fifty-eight families were given a 27-inch, V-Chip equipped RCA model TV. Mothers were shown how to program the V-Chip in their new TV and provided detailed information about the meanings of the TV ratings.

¹ Seventeen, or 10%, of the original 167 families dropped out of the study or relocated without forwarding information.

Low Information Group

Fifty-two families received the same V-Chip equipped set as the high information group, but they were not given special training in how to use the V-Chip. They were shown a variety of features of the television set, including the parental controls menu (which contains the V-Chip), color options and the sleep timer.

Control Group

Forty families did not receive a television set but rather monetary compensation for their time. Families were followed over the same period to see whether they would acquire and use the V-Chip on their own.

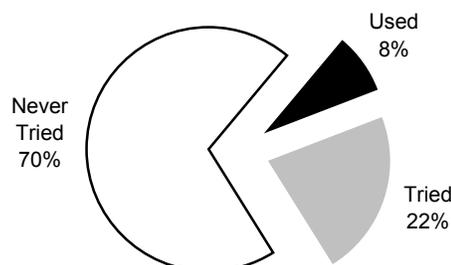
Each family was interviewed twice by phone and twice in their home. In addition, mothers were asked to keep detailed logs about their own and their child's media use in the home at two different points in time. The true purpose of the study was masked by the researchers. At the end of the study, parents were asked what they thought the study was about. Only 11% correctly guessed its true aim.

Over the course of the year, only five families from the control group acquired a V-Chip equipped set and, of those families, only two realized they had it. None of these families used the V-Chip feature of their TV. *We therefore focus this summary on those families who received a V-Chip equipped television set as part of the APPC study.*

FINDINGS***Did families use the V-Chip?***

Overall, 33 out of the 110 families (30%) who received a V-Chip equipped television set programmed it during the course of the year. Of these families, nine families (8%) had the V-Chip programmed and actively engaged when visited one year after receiving the TV. Twenty-four families (22%) tried out the device at some point during the year but did not have it on when we made our final home visit. Of these 24 families who tried the V-Chip, 14 were successful in engaging it but opted to turn it off. The remaining 10 reported that they had tried to use the device but could not get it to work properly. Finally 77 families (70%) reported that they never used the V-Chip during one-year period.

Figure 1: V-Chip Use by Philadelphia Experiment Families



Obstacles to Families' Use of the V-Chip

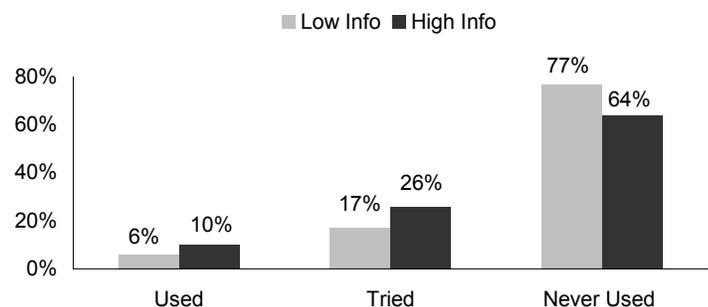
The overall low level of V-Chip use makes it somewhat difficult to draw firm conclusions about the characteristics of the families who used the V-Chip and those who did not. However, over the course of the year families provided insight into why the V-Chip may not have been more widely used.

1. Parents Don't Understand the Ratings or the V-Chip

Initial telephone interviews with families indicated that several of the ratings were unclear to mothers. Only seven out of 110 (6%) could name one of the ratings for children's programs (TV-Y, TV-Y7, or FV) and only five parents (4%) correctly identified the meaning of the D content rating (suggestive dialogue).

Families who received detailed information about the meaning of the TV ratings and how to use their television's parental controls feature (the high information condition) were significantly more likely to try the V-Chip than families who did not. Thirty-six percent of the high information condition families tried the V-Chip during the course of the year while 23% of the low information families tried it. None of the families in the control condition that acquired a V-Chip equipped TV during the course of the study tried it.

Figure 2: V-Chip Use Across High and Low Information Conditions



2. The V-Chip is hidden and difficult to program

Many families never tried the V-Chip because they didn't realize they had one. Over a third of the families who received the sets (35%) reported that their TV could not block programs based on the ratings system, even though we had told them during our home visits that their TV had this option. In addition, programming the V-Chip is a multi-step and often confusing process. No fewer than five menus must be navigated and parents must move quickly or programming menus disappear. In addition, parents must be familiar with the symbols for the age based and content based codes. And, once the V-Chip is programmed, the user must lock it with a password -- a final step that several families missed (rendering their programming efforts useless, unbeknownst to them).

3. Parents feel they don't need the V-Chip to supervise their children's viewing.

Approximately one-third (32%) of the families who never tried to use the V-Chip said that they didn't need it. Another 23% indicated that they trust their children to make appropriate decisions about TV. Despite this, several respondents indicated that the V-Chip would be useful when their children were old enough to stay home alone.

Experiences with the V-Chip: A Follow-Up Study

Interviews and home visits with families revealed that the V-Chip technology itself presented a serious obstacle to V-Chip use. When asked to program the V-Chip to block out TV-MA programs with violence, for example, only 27% of mothers felt they could do it. In addition, many mothers who might otherwise have used the V-Chip were frustrated by an inability to get it to work properly. Thus, we designed a follow-up study with 28 families wherein researchers went to families' homes, programmed the device according to the parents' wishes, and asked families to keep it engaged for a one-month period. At the end of this period, mothers participated in focus group discussions to describe their satisfaction and experience with it. From these conversations, several findings emerge:

1. Most mothers were satisfied with the device. In the pencil and paper survey given at the outset of the focus group discussions, participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the V-Chip on a scale of 1 (*least satisfied*) to 10 (*most satisfied*). The median level of satisfaction was 8, indicating that most of the mothers had positive experiences with their families' use of the V-Chip. In addition, mothers were asked if they thought they would continue using the V-Chip after the study was over. Sixteen mothers said they would be "very likely" to continue using the technology, seven said "somewhat likely" and two said they would be "not at all likely" to continue using the V-Chip.

2. Children's routine viewing habits and preferences were only minimally affected by the activation of the V-Chip. Most of the families in the follow-up study set the blocking levels fairly high – TVMA or TV14. Children's favorite programs were generally not blocked. Mothers saw the technology as having potential to protect children from *accidental* exposure to programs they might come across while channel surfing.

3. Generally, mothers liked having greater control over the kinds of things children might see when a parent is not physically present. In addition, many recounted that they became more aware of the content of the programs their children watch. In rare cases, that meant that mothers recalibrated their judgments of the appropriateness of certain shows for their child.

4. The V-Chip and ratings were not seen as a complete solution to mothers' concerns over children's TV viewing, however. Several mothers pointed out that since there are multiple televisions in the home (the average family had four television sets), a child motivated to watch a blocked program can find it non-V-Chip television. In several focus groups, mothers complained that the V-Chip did not block content about which they are concerned -- specifically commercials, promos for upcoming television programs and news. Finally, there was some dissatisfaction expressed with the ratings themselves, which many mothers found to be confusing.