
Television and Its Effects on Sport and Physical Activity

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Experimental television was first introduced to the public in 1928, and by 1939 the first sport telecast was produced in the United States. By 1940, football, hockey, track, baseball and boxing were being televised. The early increase in television set sales may have been partially attributed to the introduction of sport programming. Today, sport is considered an American institution. Not only does television produce and broadcast many weekly hours of sporting events, but the advertising agencies and the programmers also utilize sport and recreational activities as part of regularly scheduled programs and the intervening commercials. A study conducted by this author (1976), revealed that 24% of all the commercials viewed during prime time, soap operas, game shows, cartoons, and sporting events were either directly or indirectly related to sport and recreational activities.

In reviewing the literature on sport and the media, one finds such titles as "Sport and the Mass Media", "Television's Effects on Spectator Sports" and "TV Made it All a New Game". These articles describe the historical effects that television has had on sporting events. For example television has financially supported sport, it has raised professional players salaries, it has changed the rules of certain games, and it has broadened public interest in sport and recreational participation. However, there has been little research undertaken to determine the more subtle effects that television has on the individual in relation to physical fitness and gross motor skill development.

Television viewing inevitably produces inactivity for both adults and children. Culkin stated that in 1967 a ". . . 6 year old spent 3000 to 4000 hours before the TV set before he entered school. By the time he graduates from high school, he has clocked 15,000 hours TV time and 10,800 hours of school time." By 1972 Lyle and Hoffman stated that first graders spent just less than 24 hours a week watching television, while sixth graders spent approximately 30 hours a week. In 1969, Roper found that the average television viewing time for adults per day was two hours and forty seven minutes. Later in 1971, LoScuito found the average adult viewing time to be three hours and twenty minutes a day.

Not only does television produce inactivity, it also has the potential to reinforce it. While investigating movement patterns of the major characters in children's television programs, this author (1977) observed very little strenuous activity performed by either sex. Most of the characters were sitting or standing and used mechanized vehicles to travel from one place to another.

Television may also be partially responsible for the disappearance of traditional games played by children. Sutton and Smith indicate that children in today's society have fewer games than their predecessors. The game culture of youngsters is limited by the mass media's presentation of very select sports. In regard to simple games, today's children tend to imitate what is viewed on television and play "Bionic Man" or "Bionic Woman" as opposed to the types of creative or traditional games that children have played in the past.

It may be proposed that television is the source of a new type of play in which children interact with the television itself (computer games). This needs to be critically examined. Electronic games require little strenuous activity on the part of the solitary participant. The substitution of a machine for other children in a play situation may have significant sociological implications.

Numerous other issues need to be examined. For example, do children imitate and adopt the movement patterns they observe on television? Are these movement patterns sex-stereotyped? If so, in what manner is the movement sex-stereotyped and to what extent does stereotyping exist? Television viewing occupies a great deal of an individual's leisure time, consequently an obvious need exists for further research in this area.