



Bryant University

HONORS THESIS

Protecting Children in a Hyper-Media World: Is Media Literacy the Answer?

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Protecting Children in a Hyper-Media World: Is Media Literacy the Answer?

Bryant University Honors Program
Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore ways to protect young children from the harmful effects of media as they grow up in a hyper-media world. As a learned skill, media literacy must first be introduced to kids' lives before they can benefit from its effects. Children are developing their brains, and until the age of 7 they do not have the cognitive capacity to retain and apply media literacy skills. Not having these skills exposes them to harms from advertisements and general content shows, movies, and video games. This exposure leads to issues in their lives such as trouble falling asleep, overstimulation, lack of boredom, and obesity due to overeating and sedentary behavior (Garrison, 2012). There are many risks in children's increased screen times, and society puts all the problem solving in the hands of parents. As such, this project emphasizes the potentially negative effects of media exposure to children and attempts to determine which media literacy intervention parents find most effective while raising their children. Technology and devices have become progressively more important in daily life; therefore, simply banning children from using them potentially puts them at a cultural and social disadvantage. Displayed are results detailing what parents found effective in regard to raising their children in a hyper-media world.

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Throughout history technology has simplified peoples' lives; the wheel facilitated transportation and the printing press made possible the mass production of copies. In 1969, the Internet was created and would soon become an integral part of everyday life. From this invention, information is available through devices whenever a person needs it. The Internet also makes it possible to stay in touch with others. Advanced communication channels and social media make it possible to communicate instantaneously with people from across the globe.

But technology is a double-edged sword; overuse of the Internet can lead to detrimental effects, primarily for young people. According to the 2017 National Health and Nutrition Evaluation Survey, childhood obesity rates have been steadily increasing since 2000. Youth in the United States have become entranced by Internet devices and are using them for an average of seven and a half hours a day, being connected for over fifty-two hours a week. The Internet is only part of the issue; television is another platform where children are getting their screen fix. Sedentary behavior while viewing or being entertained by a device, accompanied with mindless eating, contributes to childhood obesity due to a lack of activity for extended periods of time. Studies have shown that eating while the television is on causes people to ignore their bodies' physiological signs of satiety and lead to overeating (Jordan & Romer, 2014).

Having a constant source of entertainment, even in the background, inhibits children's play behavior and limits their imagination (Jordan & Romer, 2014). For this reason, children look for other avenues to prevent boredom. The Internet provides access to a plethora of information on innumerable topics virtually in seconds. But the unregulated Internet also exposes children to violence, sex, and profanity and introduces them to issues such as body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and violence at a young age. Mass communication theorists call this the "Early Window" (Meirick, Sims, Gilchrist, & Croucher, 2009).

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Aside from the actual content children are viewing, both the Internet and television are flooded with advertisements from marketers, designed to persuade them to want their products. Each commercial break in a television show can be two to four minutes long, and some commercials are as short as 15 seconds. Children can be exposed to as many as eight different advertisements in each commercial period, absorbing information from several persuasive messages while viewing morning cartoons so mom or dad can prepare breakfast and get ready for work. But interpreting commercials is only one of the concerns raised by children's access to technology. Television is only one source of children's media exposure. This generation of children is digital natives; they understand how to use many devices and they know no other world but one full of technology.

This is problematic, specifically for young children who are undergoing cognitive development. For example, this age group is unable to comprehend that persuasion is the intended goal of advertising. Around age seven, children begin to develop the cognitive capacity to make educated choices through logic and inductive reasoning to create generalizations that apply to daily events (Dasen, 1975, p. 156). With this level of development, it is possible that media literacy interventions – strategies to produce a healthy behavior change on the interpretation and assessment of media - can help this age group more effectively understand not only the persuasive techniques and intent of companies selling a product, but other sophisticated forms of media content. But returning to our example of advertising, in the United States regulation on advertising to children is almost identical to standards set for adults, yet adults' brains have had the chance to develop over time. These younger children have not yet developed the proper skillset to understand advertising, and until that skillset has been learned they need to be protected.

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As such, experts attest that media literacy is a primary solution to protecting children in a hyper-media world (Silverblatt & Jiow, 2014, 2016). Media literacy is the learned ability to read, interpret, critically assess, and productively use media texts (Silverblatt, 2014, p. 324). Since media literacy is not an innate skill, children must be taught by those around them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One reliable method for improved media literacy is interventions, “efforts to reduce harmful effects of the media by informing the audience about one or more aspects of the media, thereby influencing media-related beliefs and attitudes, and ultimately preventing risky behaviors” (Jeong, Cho, & Hwang, 2012, p. 454). There are many different types of interventions; yet, not all of them are beneficial in enabling children’s critical thinking skills. Nonetheless, media literacy interventions have proven beneficial in a wide array of context, researchers found that intervention efforts are equally effective in different settings including both schools and homes, and including various topics such as sex, substances, and violence. Research Lynn Clark adds that parental mediation theory – the means of conceptualizing an active parental role in regulating and managing children’s experiences with television – must evolve as the society evolves. She additionally stresses the importance of interpersonal communication with children and parents (Clark, 2011, p. 323-324). Discussing what is going on is a good way to ensure everyone is on the same page. Parents do not have a formal classroom or guidelines to follow when raising children; they have only themselves. As such, parental mediation can be a useful method of mediation.

There are several different types of parental mediation, including co-viewing, active mediation, and restrictive mediation. Parents co-view media while asking questions to allow their children to critically think about what they are viewing and answering any questions that come

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up. Active mediation is talking to children about media content both with and away from media, while restrictive mediation is setting rules and restrictions on what a child can view and for how long. Raising children is no easy task, especially in a hyper-media world. This research should help discover why parents do and do not engage their children in these activities and when they do, which forms of intervention they think are most effective.

Parental mediation is important because, according to the American Psychological Association, when children are faced with media at a young age, they are lacking in cognitive development. As it applies to our marketing example, being able to understand advertising's intended goal of persuasion, and to better make meaning for more general content, children must first progress into the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. This stage begins around age seven. Children develop the cognitive capacity to make educated choices through logic and inductive reasoning to create generalizations that apply to daily events (Dasen, 1975, p.156). Psychologically, children are unable to adequately make decisions on the content they are presented. For children over the age of seven and having a higher level of development, it is possible that media literacy interventions – strategies to produce a healthy behavior change on the interpretation and assessment of media - can help them more effectively interpret advertisements and other forms of media content.

For example, an article published in The National Association for Media Literacy Education's *Journal of Media Literacy Education* demonstrates the well-documented negative effects of commercial exposure to children and the shockingly little regulation that governs marketing to protect children. The researchers used the TARES test of ethical communication behavior to see if showing parents that advertising to children is unethical will change their willingness to engage in media intervention. A big takeaway from this review is that other

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countries have taken steps to protect children from the harms of advertising. Italy, for example, bans advertising during cartoon programming, because young children are not yet equipped with the tools to differentiate commercials from the content they are viewing (Pearce & Baran, 2018). Other countries have taken steps to protect children, yet the United States has virtually the same media regulation for children as it does adults, despite adults' higher stage of cognitive development.

Since protecting children is an important task, parents should be made aware of the harms that are associated with media. *Media and The Well-Being of Children and Adolescents* is a compilation of various ways media technologies have changed the experience of childhood. Authors Amy Jordan and Daniel Romer, believing that boredom is a major factor in developing an imagination, dove into the importance of focused play as opposed to playing with the television on as background noise. Having the television on as background noise is associated with reduced social interaction and play behavior, disrupted cognitive skill development, and reduced executive function for children. It additionally draws parents' attention away from their children (Jordan & Romer, 2014). In addition to detailing harms associated with media consumption, the book provides statistics and survey results demonstrating the saturation of media and use of technology in homes. Another interesting area documents the percent of parents who say they are concerned with their children's involvement in media content. Astonishingly, fewer than half of the surveyed parents have a concern for their children's media content. Parents of 6-to 11-year-olds hold the highest concern, with 47.8% having concerns about what their child can see on the Internet. Of these questions, none address specific harms to children that parents should be aware of. Unfortunately, many parents may be unaware of specific risks associated with media content.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the potentially negative effects of media exposure to children and the variety of available media literacy interventions, it is logical to examine which intervention parents find most effective while raising children in a digital era. Since devices are an integral part of their world, children should be learning how to use them and the content they carry while being protected from their harms. To more fully examine these issues, this research offers several related research questions on the tactics parents find successful in protecting their children from heightened media exposure.

1. On what platform do children consume most of their media?

“Media” refers to the means of conveying messages through visuals, languages, and or sounds (Baran, 2021, p. 204). Since the coming of the Internet, media, or channels to engage in communication, that people tend to use have dramatically changed. In the past, print was heavily utilized as a source of information sharing; currently, there is a rush towards electronic platforms due to their easy accessibility. People have been inundated with new technology that has made it progressively easier to speedily obtain information. There are many ways to access media, including tablets, television, radio, smartphones, and computers. This raises the first research question: On what platform do children consume most of their media?

2. Do parents believe raising children in a hyper-media world is a challenge?

Parents are faced with many decisions when it comes to raising their children. Different approaches to punishments and rewards shape how children turn out. For example, parents have to make decisions on whether their children will receive a flu shot and get certain vaccines and experts promote sunscreen to protect children from the harmful rays of the sun, and generally parents take steps to get their children vaccinations and defend them from sunburn. Similarly, media literacy experts discuss the importance of teaching and protecting children from the

harmful reach of media. How different is this situation? So, the question becomes: How big a challenge do parents believe raising children in a hyper-media world is?

3. Do parents think media have a negative effect on their children and on other children?

According to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, marketers spend over \$17 billion a year advertising to children. For advertisers, this expenditure is quite reasonable because children influence more than \$600 billion in spending per year (Linn, 2008, p. 1). This is not healthy for our nation's youth; many harmful side effects have come from this. Children view advertisements for Barbie dolls and are exposed to sexualized stereotypes of what they believe the "ideal body" looks like and begin to compare themselves to the toy. Video games condone and encourage violence through fighting, theft, and the killing of other players to achieve a high score. Video games often desensitize children by providing vivid images of guns and gore that appear to be a normalized part of life (Anderson, 2000, p. 395). Parents often know what children are up to when home, but do they know what their children are exposed to during playdates? Parents will not be there to monitor every show their children watch or song they listen to in another person's home. Therefore, parents cannot fully control what media their children are exposed to. This led to another research question: Do parents think media have a negative effect on their children and on other children?

4. How aware are parents of the value of media literacy?

As previously mentioned, media literacy is the ability to read, interpret, critically assess, and productively use media texts. People are not born media literate; it is a skill learned throughout life. Media literacy provides people with the tools to decode media messages and consider their meaning. Developing media literacy skills at a young age allows children to decide what is fake news and figure out that advertisements are intended to persuade them into purchasing their

product. Media literacy gives children the ability to recognize that marketers use product placement to subtly promote their products on television or through social networking applications. Often times, children fall victim to persuasion and keeping up with trends based on what their peers or celebrities declare is cool. This learned skillset is pivotal to understanding that advertising companies are focused on turning a profit rather than advancing the well-being of children. An obvious question, then, is: How aware are parents of media literacy's benefits?

5. Do parents believe media interventions work for their children?

Children view parents as an example and due to adults' tendencies to use devices for work, it makes them think constant media usage is normal. Many schools have computer courses or allow tablets to be used in class and much of children's media use is out of parental observation or control. But in contrast to the benefits of getting a head start on using devices, this use prematurely exposes children to a wide variety of content, including advertisements and the related sharing of personal information, again out of parental oversight. Completely sheltering children by banning Internet devices will disadvantage students and they will have to catch up in school. There are indeed established solutions. Then the question becomes: Do parents believe these interventions will be effective for their children?

6. Do parents engage in meaningful media literacy interventions with their children?

According to the National Center for Health Research, many parents are now encouraging their children to use electronic devices (Ravichandran & Bravo, 2017). They are using television and iPads as a way to passively "babysit" their children in order to get things done around the house. Parents are busy; they work, shop, cook, clean, shuttle their children to activities, pay bills, and have their own social lives. Entertaining children after a long day of work while trying to get dinner on the table can be an arduous task. Allowing children to use these devices is like

having a virtual babysitter making sure the children are not getting into trouble and allowing parents time to unwind. With all this on their plates, we can reasonably ask: Do parents have time to engage in meaningful media literacy interventions with their children?

7. What form of media intervention do parents find most affective and why?

Anyone growing up with siblings can attest that every child is different, and some parenting techniques work better for different children. For example, my younger sister loved to read books while my oldest sister enjoyed hanging out with friends. When either of them was in trouble my parents would have personalized punishments for them. My younger sister did not see being grounded as a punishment for her action because she could stay home and read. My oldest sister saw being grounded as the ultimate penalty because she was unable to socialize with her friends outside of school. After years of practice my parents were able to find a parenting style that worked best for them. The best way to discipline a child is not clear-cut, or every parent would engage in the same form of intervention. Does the same goes for media literacy interventions or is there one method that parents feel is more effective than the rest?

METHOD

This study was conducted with a focus on parents' opinions on raising their children in a world full of media. In a private online Facebook group with town parents called "Shelton CT Moms," parents were asked to participate in an anonymous survey on mass media and how they interact with their children. The survey was open over the course of a week and had a total of 34 questions, including demographic questions.

To collect responses from parents on their views of children growing up in the age of media saturation, a Qualtrics survey was shared in the "Shelton CT Moms" Facebook group. This was a means to collect primary data through items that related to the research questions.

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The “Shelton CT Moms” is a private group where 4,500 mothers and fathers join to keep up-to-date on events going on in and around the town. Parents additionally ask for recommendations and discuss other matters involving their children. Once approved by the Bryant University Institutional Review board, permission was obtained from the group page administrator and the survey was posted on December 18 and available until December 26, 2019.

A survey is an appropriate research tool for this topic because the goal is to collect feedback from parents on the challenges of raising children in a hyper-media world. The questionnaires offered a series of close-ended questions to both mothers and fathers about media literacy as well as demographic questions. The last section of the survey included an option to write in additional comments about the topic of parenting and media literacy. The open-ended segment allowed a consideration of parents’ reasoning for their style of parenting to further the analysis. Some of the questions included:

- In general, do you think media have a negative effect on kid(s)?
- In general, do you think media have a negative effect on your kid(s)?
- Have you heard of media literacy?
- Have you heard of parental mediation?
- Which of the following are you willing to do? This question allowed multiple option with the ability to write in an “other” answer. Offering options, with definitions, include co-viewing, restrictive mediation, and offering discussions of media away from the actual consumption activity.

Other questions will help gauge the number of television sets in the home as well as the number of Internet devices. Demographic questions for this survey included marital status, age, employment status, and income level.

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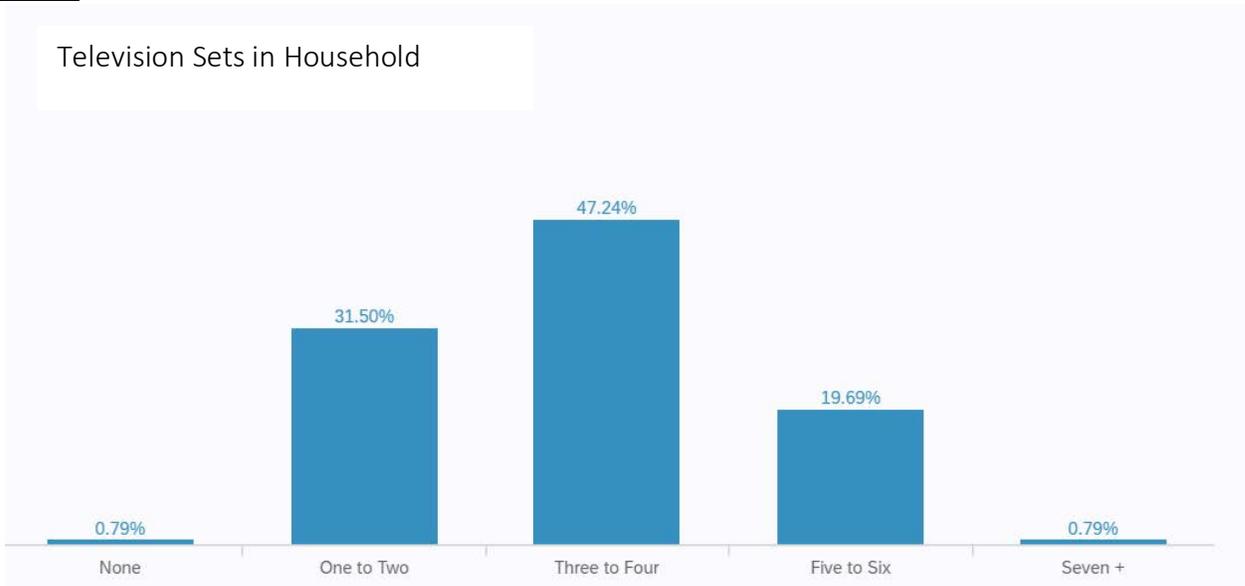
Following the closing of the survey, the results were analyzed using the appropriate statistical tests to show correlation between questions. The written responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed to see any common words and themes for parenting techniques that are practiced.

RESULTS

Over 100 responses from parents were obtained as primary data on questions regarding media use involving children. An analysis of the survey respondents’ demographics reveal that a majority of respondents are female parents. Approximately 80% of respondents are married parents between the ages of 35-55, with a majority being employed full time and with two children. Approximately 70% of the people surveyed “might or might not” or have “never” heard of media literacy, while about 1/3 of people surveyed answered “definitely yes” or “probably yes” to having heard of parental mediation before.

Q2: How many television sets are in your household?

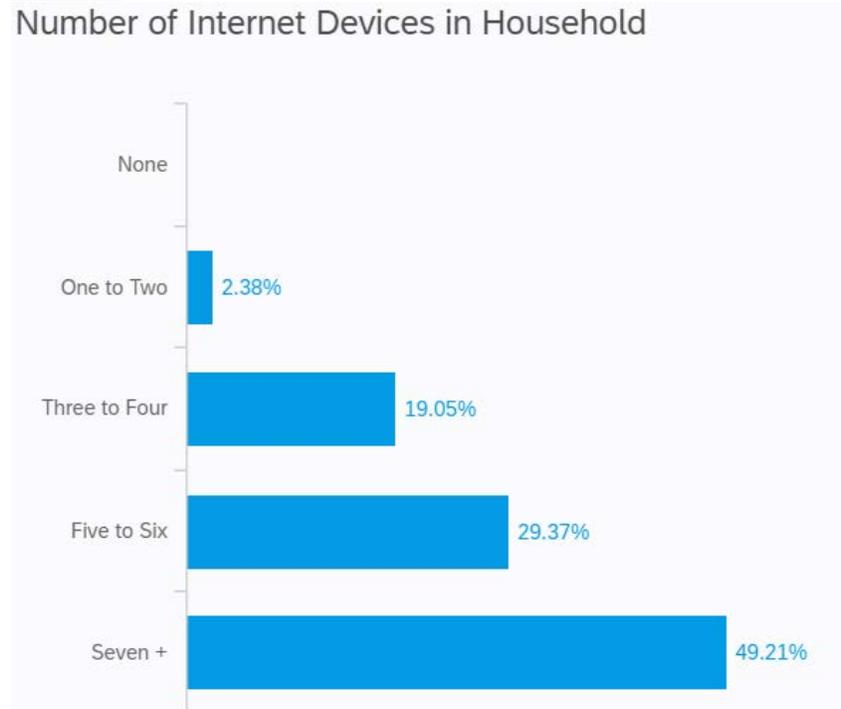
Table 1:



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Q3 How many devices are in your household allow connection to the internet (e.g. laptop, tablet, smartphone, etc.)?

Table 2:
Number of Internet Devices in Household



Q4 How many of your children have their own iPads or tablets?

Parents responded that the average number of their children who have their own iPads is 1.58.

Q5 What is the youngest age that your children received their own iPad or tablet?

The average number of children who have their own internet device is 1.58 with the minimum age being 1 and the maximum age being 22 for the oldest children. The maximum ages for the next siblings to get a device decrease from 19, to 18, to 14 while the minimum ages remain consistent at 1. The average age the oldest child receives a tablet is 7.4 and decreases to 5.2 years old for the youngest sibling.

Q6 How many of your children have smartphones?

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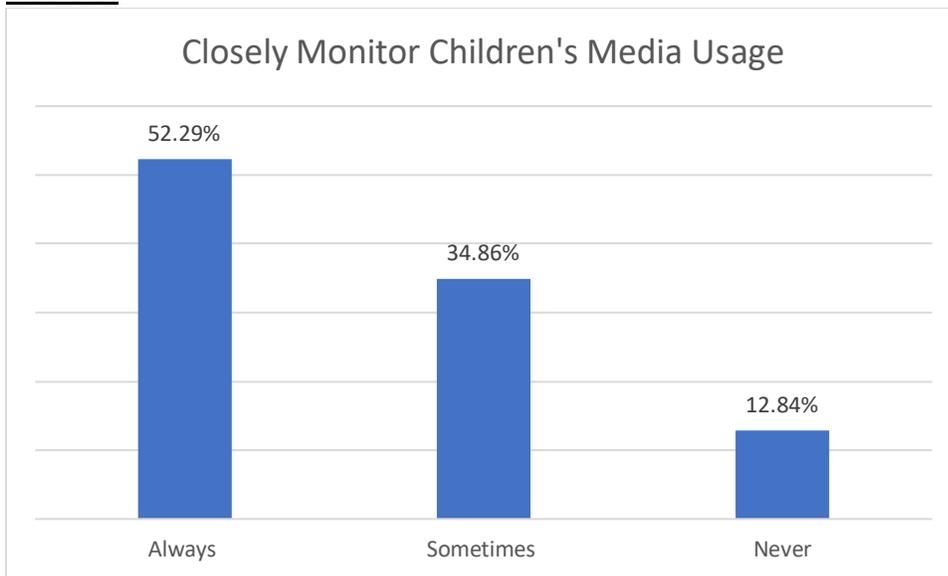
Parents responded that their average number of children who have smartphones is 1.76.

Q7 At what age did each of your children get smartphones?

The minimum age that any child received a smartphone was 5 years old while the maximum age was 17. The mean age for the oldest and second oldest child was close, with 11.63 and 11.50, respectively. This was due to having participants who have children who are now grownups. The mode age the oldest child received a cellphone was 13, while the second oldest received a cellphone a few years earlier, at age 10. The average ages for the third and fourth children appears to be skewed at 13 years old due to the fact that most people in this survey only have two children and the outliers that have older siblings who received cellphones at comparatively older ages in the teens.

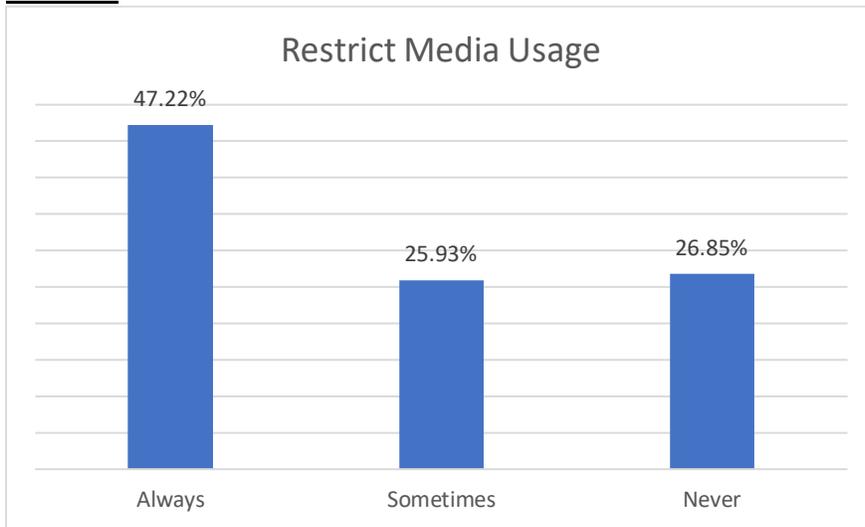
Q8 In general, how closely do you monitor your children's media usage?

Table 3:



Q9 In general, do you set restrictions on your children's media usage?

Table 4:

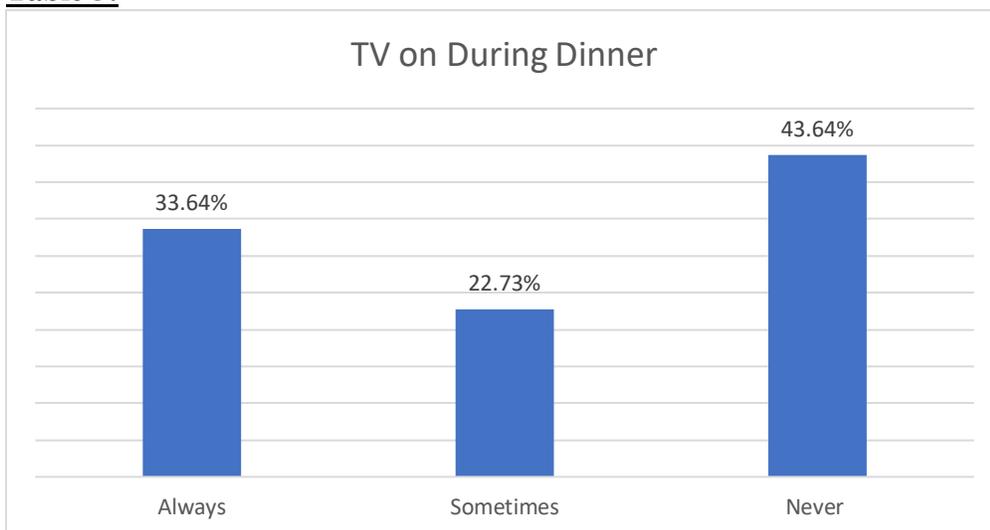


Q10 If yes, how do you restrict your children's media usage?

When asked this question, answers varied, but there was a common theme of using timers or setting restrictions of screen time allotted and parental restrictions to block sites and applications. Other parents do not allow play on devices during the school week, only on the weekends. Another common theme was collecting the cellphones and devices, especially during the nighttime.

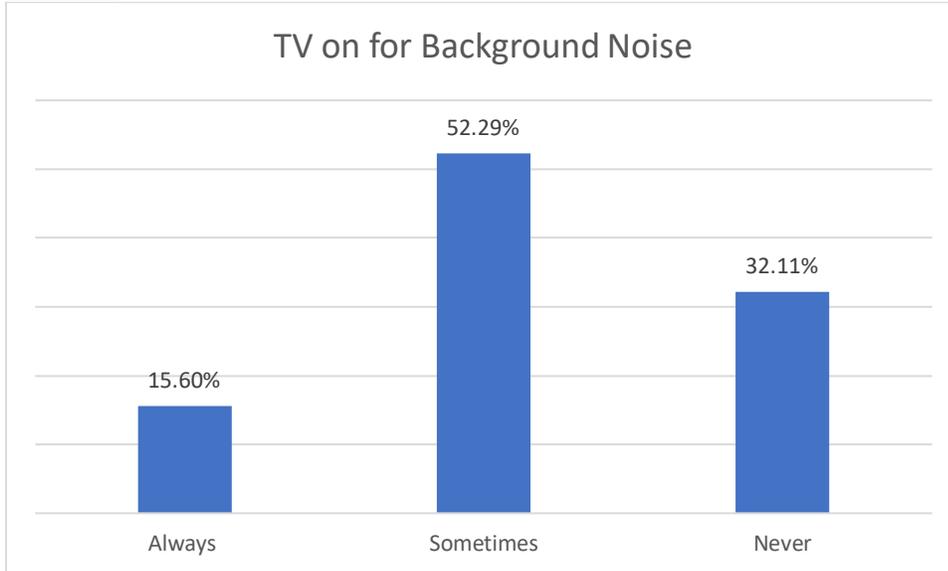
Q11 In general, how often is the television on at dinner time?

Table 5:



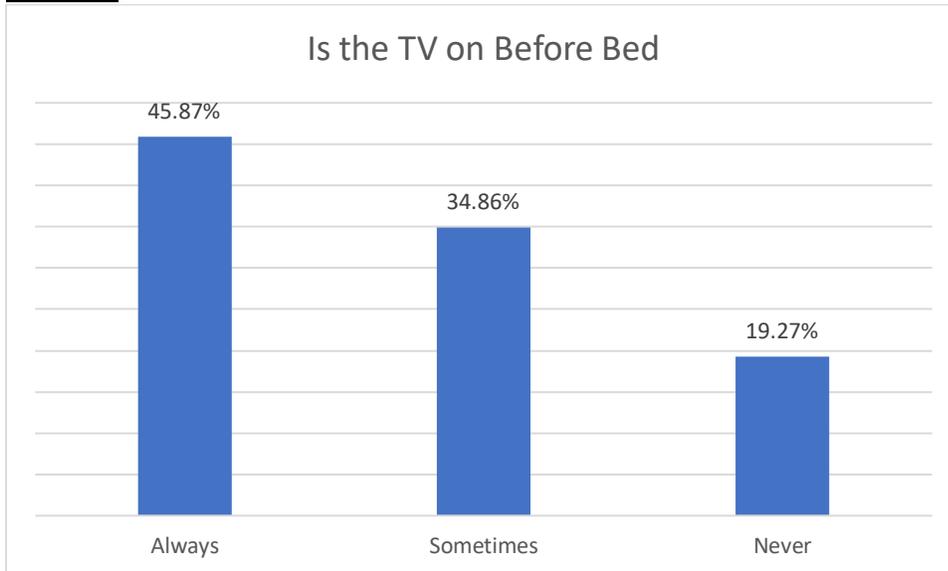
Q12 In general, how often does the television get left on for background noise when your children are playing?

Table 6:



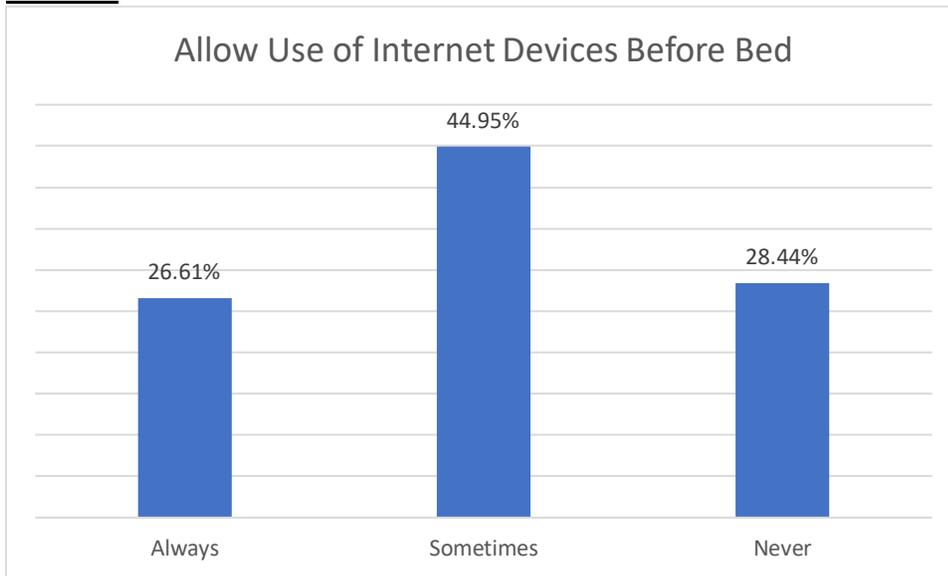
Q13 In general, how often do you allow your children to watch television before being put to bed?

Table 7:



Q14 In general, how often do you allow your children to play on an internet device before bed?

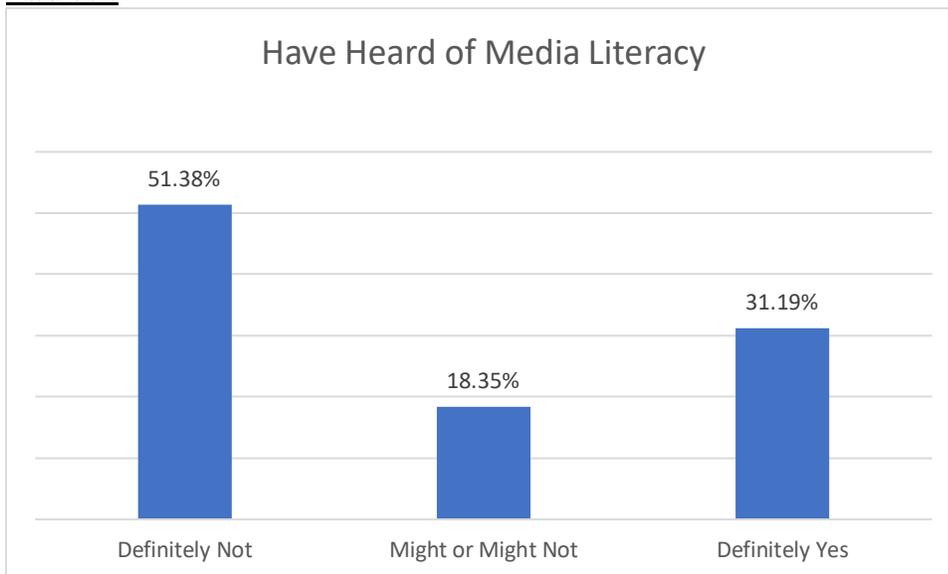
Table 8:



Q15 Experts attest that media literacy is the solution to protecting children in a hyper-media world. Media literacy is the learned ability to read, interpret, critically assess, and productively use media texts.

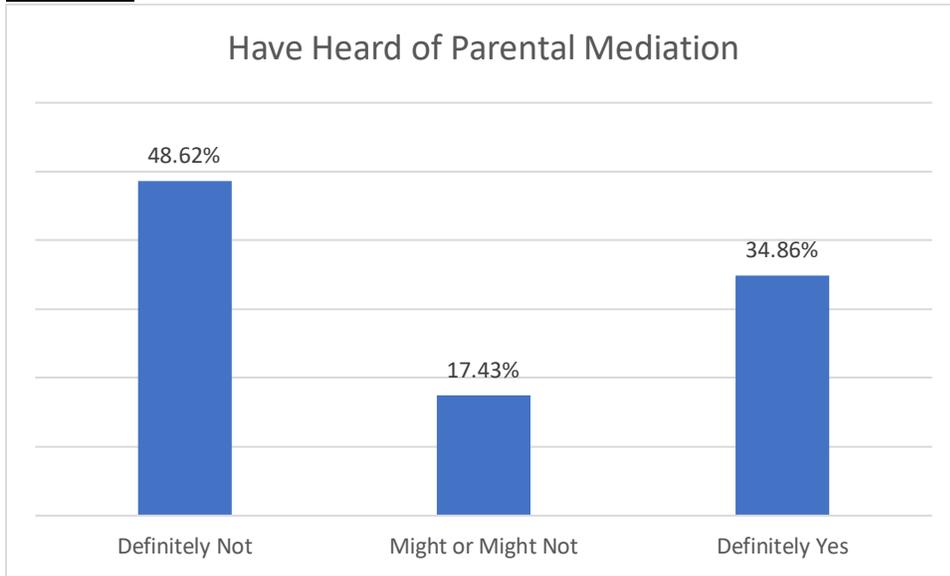
Q16 Prior to that brief introduction, have you heard of media literacy?

Table 9:



Q17 Have you heard of parental mediation?

Table 10:



Q18 Parents commonly use mediation techniques, although they may not be familiar with the names of them. **Coviewing** media is when parents view media with their children, asking questions and answering any children’s questions that come up. **Active mediation** is talking to children about media content both with and away from media. **Restrictive mediation** is setting rules and restrictions on what a child can view and for how long.

Q19 Of these techniques, which do you most generally partake in? Check all that apply

Table 11:

Which Technique Parents Generally Partake In

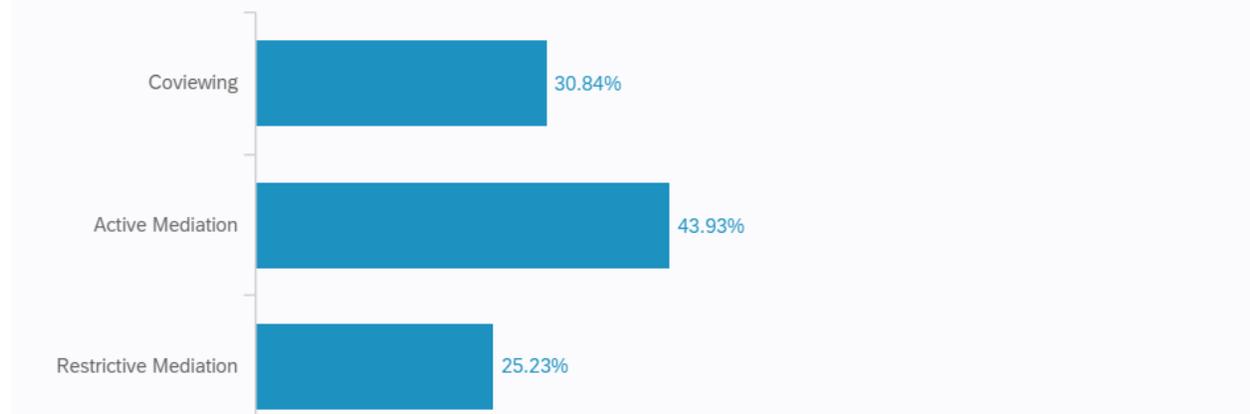


Q20 Which technique, if any, do you find most beneficial to your child?

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Table 12:

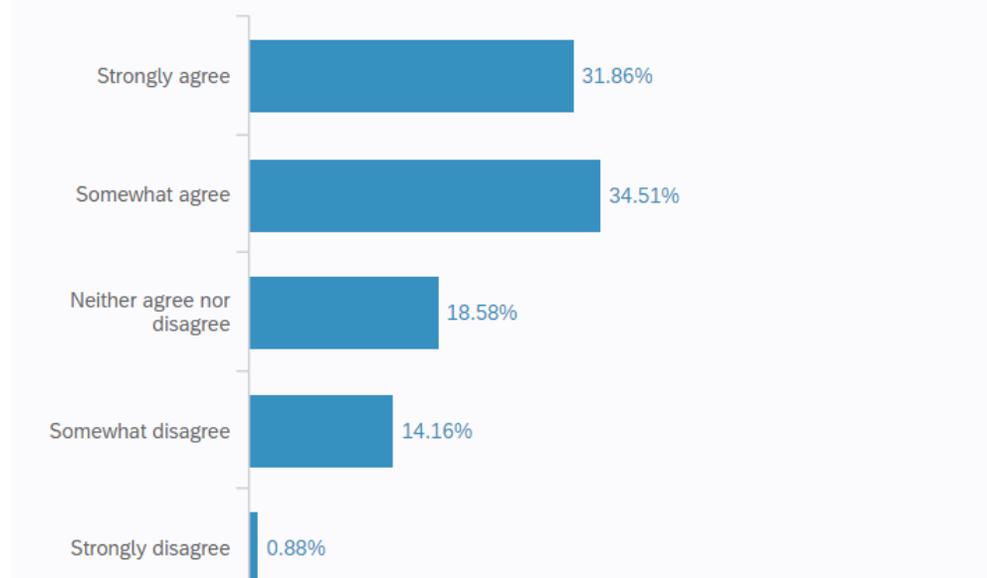
Most Beneficial Technique



Q21 In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *most* kid(s)?

Table 13:

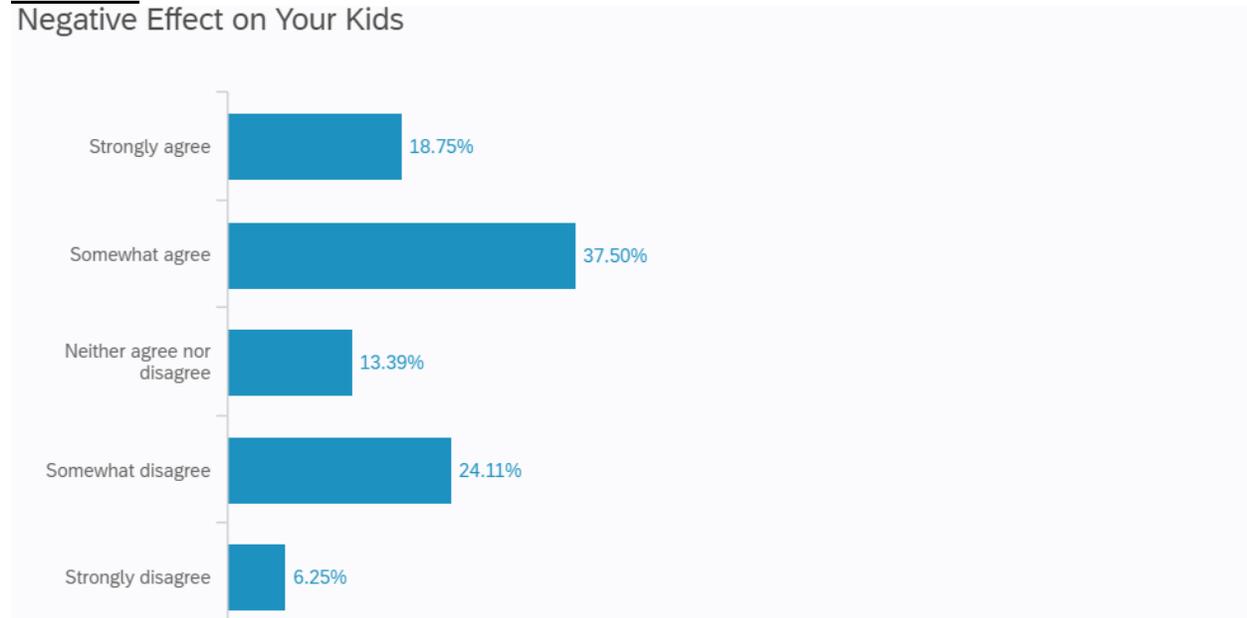
Negative Effect on Most Kids



Q22 In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *your* kid(s)?

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Table 14:
Negative Effect on Your Kids



Q23 What is your gender?

98.17% of participants were female while the remaining 1.83% were male.

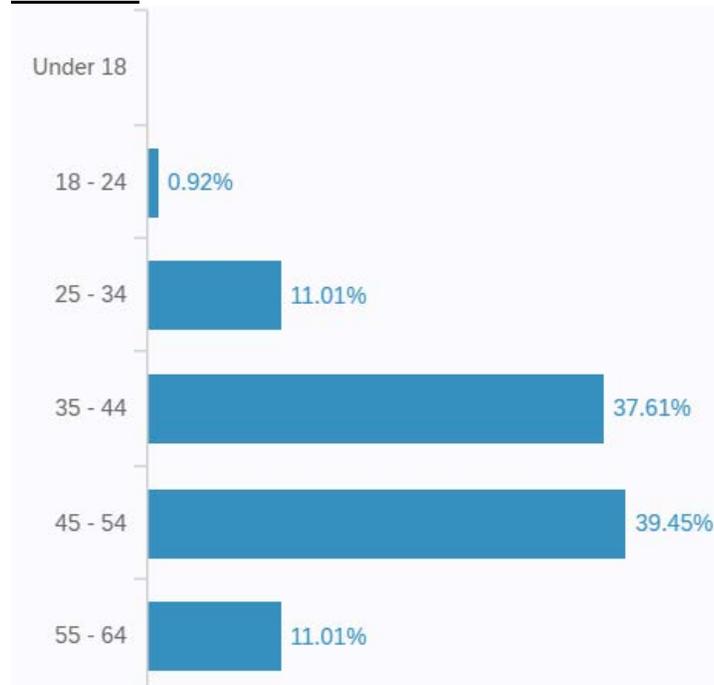
Q24 What is your marital status?

Table 15:



Q25 What is your age?

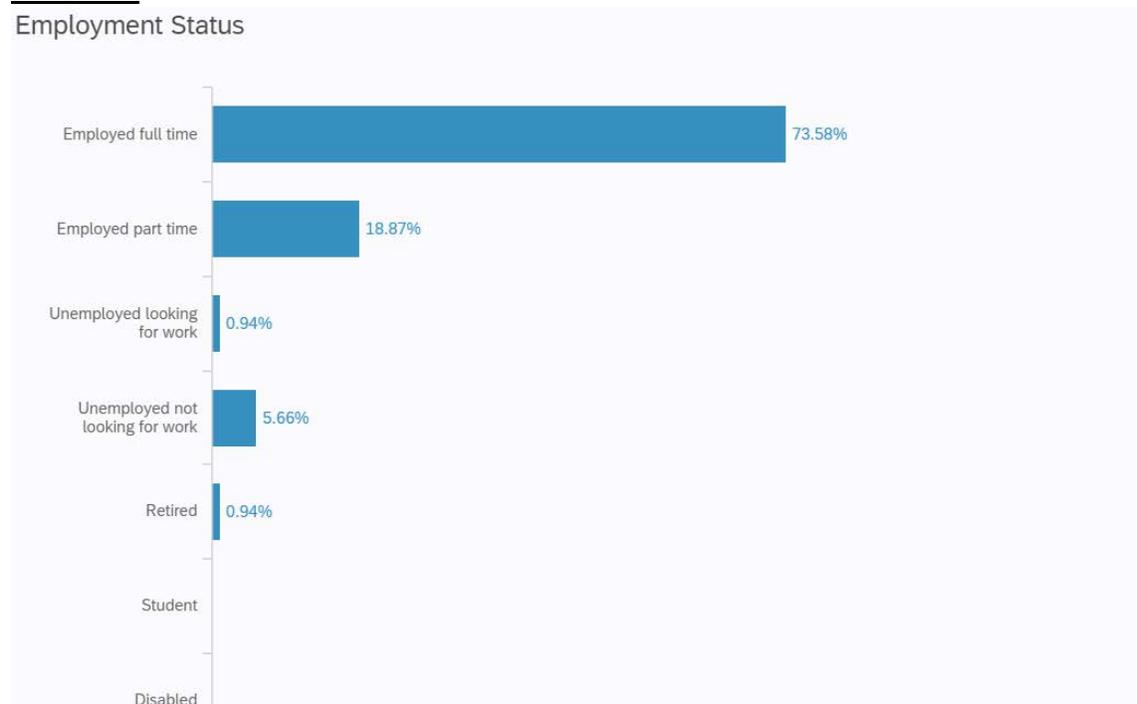
Table 16:



Q26 What is your employment status?

Table 17:

Employment Status



Q27 How far is your commute to work, if applicable?

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40.4% of participants have a work commute of 0-5 miles from home while 12.1% of that group have no commute and work from home. 21.2% of participants have a commute of 20 miles or longer. More than half of respondents have a work commute of 10 miles or less.

Q28 What is your annual household income level?

Table 18:

1	Less than \$10,000	0.00%
2	\$10,000 - \$19,999	1.04%
3	\$20,000 - \$29,999	1.04%
4	\$30,000 - \$39,999	2.08%
5	\$40,000 - \$49,999	4.17%
6	\$50,000 - \$59,999	4.17%
7	\$60,000 - \$69,999	6.25%
8	\$70,000 - \$79,999	5.21%
9	\$80,000 - \$89,999	2.08%
10	\$90,000 - \$99,999	14.58%
11	\$100,000 - \$149,999	21.88%
12	More than \$150,000	37.50%

Q29 How many children do you have?

The average family has 2 children in this study. The maximum number of children is 5, with the minimum number of children being 1 child.

Q30 How old is your youngest child?

According to the parents surveyed, the youngest age of their children in this study was less than a year old.

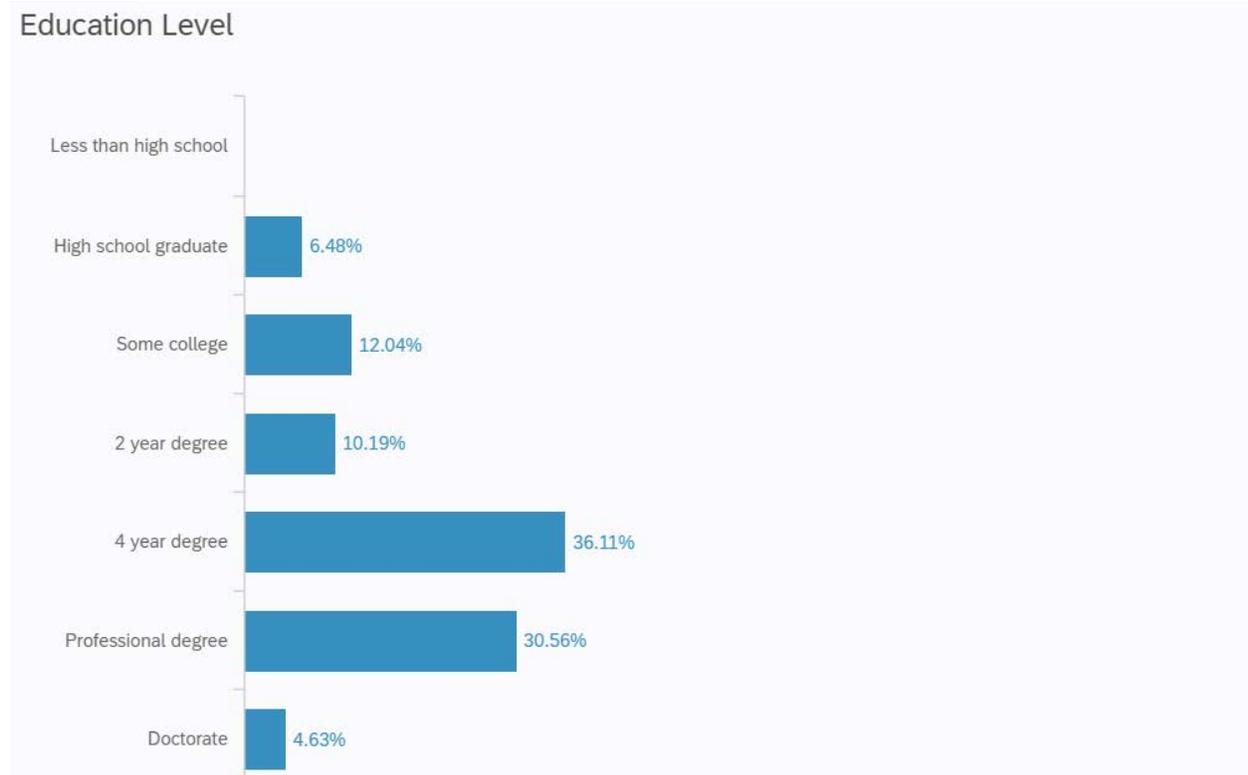
Q31 How old is your oldest child?

The oldest children in the families surveyed were 31.

Q32 What is the highest degree of education you have obtained?

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Table 19:



Q33 What is your occupation?

No significant findings.

Q34 Please feel free to leave any additional comments

Additional comments provided insight about the age and media habits their children had, along with positive and negative views of media. Collectively, parents feel the type of media children view matters. Parents are typically okay if their children are watching educational shows as opposed to mindless television. Parents feel their children easily get lost in noneducational content and “block out” what is going on around them. For example, one parent wrote that her son gets lost watching shows about gaming and will not hear her when she says his name.

Correlation Analysis:

	<i>Closely Monitor</i>	<i>Restrict</i>	<i>TV on at Dinner</i>	<i>TV Background Noise</i>	<i>TV before Bed</i>	<i>Device before Bed</i>
Closely Monitor	1					

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Restrict	0.64365035	1				
TV on at Dinner	-0.11564168	-0.16270373	1			
TV Background Noise	-0.01434635	-0.03847036	0.46506784	1		
TV before Bed	-0.08036391	-0.29552717	0.28725169	0.30048384	1	
Device before Bed	-0.46976562	-0.56475788	0.16838676	0.10272757	0.47118107	1

A subsequent correlation analysis was conducted to identify significant correlation between intervals. The survey showed that parents who monitor their children’s media usage monitor or limit their access and usage throughout all platforms. In contrast, people who are casual are casual everywhere. Specifically, there is positive correlation between closely monitoring their children’s media usage and setting restrictions on their children’s media usage. There is also positive correlation between people who leaving the television on at dinner and leaving television on for background noise throughout the day and allowing their children to watch television before bed. There is also negative correlation between closely monitoring and restricting their children’s media usage and allowing the use of a device or television before bed.

The media literacy technique that parents found most beneficial was active mediation, or talking to children about media content both with and away from media. The technique that parents answered was the next beneficial is coviewing media; this is when parents view media with their children, asking questions and answering any children’s questions that come up. Because there are a number of possible parental interventions and different levels of parental monitoring, it was impossible to determine if there was a relationship between monitoring and preferred intervention style. Table 20 reveals that parents have different strategies for protecting their children. Roughly 12% of respondents answered “never” or “almost never” to monitoring their children’s media and their oldest children’s ages ranged from 14-20 years old with the

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average age being 16. In opposition, parents who answered “always” had a lower age for their oldest child, between the ages of 2-14 with an average age of 6 years old.

Table 20:



DISCUSSION

In interpreting responses to this survey there is an important concept to understand, which is the third person effect. Stephen Croucher describes it, saying, “Recent research shows parents manifest parental third-person perceptions on behalf of their children; that is, they believe their children are less affected by media, sex, and violence than other children” (2009, p. 218). Third person effect can cause bias in the survey and is the primary reason the survey includes two related questions: “In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *most* kid(s)?” and “In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *your* kid(s)?” Parental perceptions of their children may skew their ability to accurately select the appropriate choice because parents hold “projective illusions” for their children and see them as above average. For this reason, parents perceive that negative media messages have a more negative effect on other children than on their own, but at the same time see their own children being positively affected by prosocial content, meaning positive media where something desirable is more likely to happen (2009, p. 218). For this reason, the results confirmed there is a bias in the survey as the mean responses for *most* kids versus *your* kids are 2.16 and 2.62 with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. This shows that more people perceive their children as better equipped

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against negative media influence than are other people’s children. An independent t-test was conducted to determine if third person bias between people believing *Most* (M= 2.16) kids are negatively affected by media versus *Your* (M=2.61) kids being negatively affected by media. A result of an independent t-test confirmed that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t = -2.92$, $p = < .003$ (Table 21).

Table 21:

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances		
	<i>MOST</i>	<i>YOUR</i>
Mean	2.169642857	2.616071429
Variance	1.133124196	1.481901544
Observations	112	112
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	218	
t Stat	-2.921615157	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.001924364	
t Critical one-tail	1.651873373	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.003848728	
t Critical two-tail	1.970905601	

In response to the research question, “On what platform do children consume most of their media?” respondents indicated that their children consume most of their media on personal devices as opposed to the television or other media. The survey concluded that young children are given a tablet at a younger age than they receive a cellphone. The minimum age that a child received a cellphone was five years old, while the minimum age a child received a tablet was less than one year old. The average child received a phone at age 11.5, while the average age a child received a tablet was age 7.4. Based on the fact that the first iPad was released in 2010, this could skew the average age to be marginally higher due to the fact some of the children surveyed were older when the iPad was released.

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In response to the research question, “Do parents believe raising children in a hyper-media world is a challenge,” the survey concluded it is indeed a challenge, based on the effort reserved for media literacy interventions and an analysis of open-ended responses. The use of devices is observed in basically every public setting people find themselves in. For example, people are on their phones at restaurants and on their laptops at coffee shops. One parent wrote, “Media makes it very hard to raise your children with the values you yourself possess and would like to pass on to them, because they are constantly bombarded with ideas and values that don’t align with yours as their parent.” As children become of age to attend school, new challenges are thrown at parents because technology becomes more prevalent in their kids’ lives. In regard to online school assignments, another parent added, “It has become increasingly harder as he grows older to keep him away from screens, especially since so much of his schoolwork is done on a computer.” Creating guidelines for your children and their media usage is hard enough alone; the added influences from society and necessity of device use by educators make this problem more challenging.

A third research question asked if parents think media have a negative effect on their children and on other children. As discussed along with the topic of the third person bias, parents feel other children are more negatively impacted by media than their children.

Research question four asks, “How aware are parents of the value of media literacy.” The survey concluded that over half the people surveyed have never heard of the term media literacy. Approximately one third of parents have heard of parental mediation, and despite not knowing the term for these practices, almost all of them partake in some form of parental mediation. When asked the question of how parents restrict their children’s media usage, there were reoccurring themes of setting physical restrictions by taking devices away, time restrictions by

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limiting time allotted for device use, and online restrictions by blocking websites through parental controls. There was also a trend with parents saying they monitor what their children are posting and look over their shoulders to see what they are viewing. Although parents did not specifically employ media literacy terms, it is clear they are working to instill media literacy practices in their children.

Research question five asks if parents believe media interventions work for their children. Based on the fact that almost all parents answered that they partake in media literacy interventions in one form or another, parents must believe they do. One parent summed up the responses by saying, “I feel that children need to be directed to the appropriate types of media.” Providing children with media direction is an essential part of building a foundation for media literacy. Although parents may not use the dedicated terms, they still put limits on their children’s media, actively discuss media content, and take the time to view media with their children.

Research question six is, “Do parents engage in meaningful media literacy interventions with their children?” Most parents do indeed engage in meaningful media literacy interventions with children. Even though only one fourth of people answered that they feel restrictive mediation is the most beneficial technique, three fourths answered that they restrict their children’s media use. To recap, restrictive mediation is setting rules and restrictions on how and what media children can view. In the open response, parents wrote in that they set timers and block websites through the use of parental controls or install applications such as YouTube Kids to limit what their children can view. Although 73% of the parents are supporting their families with full time jobs, busy parents still find a way to intervene and protect their children from

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potentially harmful media exposure, regardless of the fact that they may not be physically present to make sure their children are protected.

Research question seven asks, “What form of media intervention do parents find most effective and why?” Parents answered that they general partake in active mediation, which is talking to their children about media content both with and away from media. From the open responses, many parents wrote about the importance of communicating about media with their children. Parents want to shelter their children from the negative effects of media by teaching them how to navigate the Internet, among other things. One parent said, “The Internet has really helped, but the parents have to be available to talk about it with their children,” highlighting the importance of providing guidance to obtain the benefits of online learning. Parents believe that when used correctly, the Internet provides a wide array of access to various teaching tools. By teaching their children to navigate to educational media, parents feel their children are becoming more intelligent. Another parent remarked that her youngest child is more educated than when the oldest was the same age. This parent said, “I believe this is all because she was taught how to use electronics at a young age and I was available to do some experiments with her that we both saw on the internet especially YouTube and home schooling channels.” This suggests that taking an active role in your children’s media presence can be beneficial.

Parents have mixed responses about their children’s media use, yet two common themes emerge: educational media helps enhance children’s intelligence, while mindless forms of media absorb children’s full attention span, with no positive outcomes. Responses included comments such as, “Our child can block out the world when on her media devices” and when on devices, “Kids don’t interact with others as much as they should.” Parents found themselves allowing younger children to access the Internet, but were heavy in restricting content and screen time.

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But for the older children, there were fewer restrictions and more freedom to make their own decisions. This phenomenon was confirmed qualitatively in response to Question 10, “If yes, how do you restrict your children's media usage?” by a parent writing, “Content restriction for the youngest (6 yrs old) and time limits. Random access/review for oldest (14 yrs old) plus electronic curfew.” As children get older, their parents get more lenient for three reasons: trust of use, the inability to monitor use at all times, and children reaching the age where they need a cellphone. Parents wrote that that they felt the need to get their children phones at younger ages for travel purposes. Parents appear confident in their children’s selection of media as they mature due to the guidance they were provided with in the early years of their lives.

The results additionally showed that parents direct children towards proper content on media devices, yet they are unaware of harms associated with screen exposure prior to bed and leaving the television on for background noise. As seen in Table 6, two thirds of parents allow the television to be left on for background noise while a child is playing. The noise from the television, even in the background, inhibits children from entering boredom and having focused play. This may be harmful to children because they are distracted by outside influences, and always having a source of entertainment disrupts cognitive skill development crucial for interpreting and understanding information. Aside from having the television on when children are playing, focusing on screens prior to bed disrupts the body’s ability to fall asleep, most likely because screens emit blue light that interferes with the body’s natural production of melatonin, a hormone that aids with sleep (Jordan & Romer, 2014, p. 9). Table 7 shows that only one out of five parents never allows their children to watch television before bed. This leads me to believe that four out of five are unaware of the effects screens have on their children and their ability to

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fall asleep. Based on these findings, there are several overlooked harms from media that parents need to be made aware of in order to protect their children.

As this work is being analyzed during a time of nation-wide quarantine due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the need for parental intervention is more important than ever due to their kids' increased media consumption. As of March 2020, the United States has been put under mandatory quarantine; schools are closed, learning has been moved to online platforms, and the responsibility to regulate media and entertain children once again falls into the hands of parents. Parents are working from home, nonessential businesses are closed, and people are urged to social distance and stay inside. Now, more than ever, parents have lost the screen time battle; televisions are on, internet devices are connected, and almost everyone is consuming increased amounts of media of all kinds. As outdoor activities are being limited, and the weather is temperamental, people are stuck inside with movies, magazines, books, video games, toys, and boardgames for entertainment.

As times are changing and screen usage is increasing, parents need to be made aware of potential harms of media that they may be unaware of to protect their children. Existing science clearly demonstrates that increased screen time is associated with several adverse effects on children, such as reduced sense of personal wellbeing, higher levels of anxiety, and lower levels of self-control, curiosity, and emotional stability (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). These harms specifically lay with increased screen time; additionally, different forms of media, such as video games, are linked to specific behavioral issues in children. Not all video games are bad; some contain content that can educate children and employ critical thinking skills; other games are for pure entertainment and result in different learned behaviors. Violence, much like other behaviors, is learned through visual exposure. Again, existing science clearly demonstrates that

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there is causal relationship between aggressive behavior and viewing violence; those preschool students and adolescence who heavily consume media violence are more aggressive than those who are light viewers (Huston, 1992, p. 54-55). Furthermore, this early exposure to violence desensitizes children to media. Desensitization is the “mitigation or reduction of anxious physiological arousal in response to depictions of violence, both mediated and real-world, as the result of habitual consumption of mediated violence” (Baran & Davis, 2021, p. 192). Consuming violent media instills an idea in children that this is the new norm; violence is part of everyday life and causes them to become less emotionally responsive to it. Clearly, the content children are observing may have an impact on their future behaviors.

Not only do parents receive zero instruction on how to raise their children in a hyper-media world, but in the United States they also are alone in protecting them from the harmful effects of media. Other countries have laws and regulations in place that make it illegal to show advertisements on children’s programs. For example, Italy bans advertisements during cartoon programming; in Great Britain it is illegal to include or place products into children’s television programming, while both Sweden and Norway provide much regulation by banning all advertising on programs that are aimed for children under 15. Other countries have strict, established guidelines that relieve some frustrations parents deal with in raising their children in a world filled with media (Pearce & Baran, 2018). The United States government is not providing restrictions of the same caliber; America is alone in providing the same regulation for children as they do for adults, despite the fact that adults are at an advanced level of cognitive development. Since parents are encouraging children to use devices, it falls to them to protect their children from unsafe content.

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In completing this study, I began to think about how I could further this research. In the future I would like to hold focus groups to discuss with parents the challenges of raising children in a hyper-media world. I hope to gain insight by hearing more specific examples of frustrations and see if other parents in the group relate to the overarching topic in a similar way. I am interested in finding at what age parents begin to trust their children with the media practices they instilled in them. I would also like to dive deeper into the harms associated media exposure such as body dysmorphia and violence to see if parents are aware of these issues and how they are protecting their children from them.

This study has several potential limitations. To begin, the survey had only two male parent respondents and their parenting style could differ from that of their partners'. Some of the respondents' oldest children are in their high twenties to low thirties and did not grow up in a digital age; therefore, the responses may not be as relative to this predicament. Additionally, the questions did not specify the category of media consumed, whether it is educational or for entertainment purposes. Further, the means by which the survey was distributed was via an online platform and potentially excluded parents who do not have a Facebook account and are more media conscious.

Another potential research limitation in distributing the survey in the "Shelton CT Moms" Facebook group is town bias. Shelton is a city located in the Fairfield County section of Connecticut. According to the United States Census Bureau, the city is over 90% white with a \$89,252 average annual household income when the nation is 75% white with a \$57,652 household income. The City of Shelton additionally has a much lower poverty rate and a higher median housing value than that of the nation. However, the percent of households with a computer is virtually identical. Due to these factors, as well as other, the survey may not

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accurately represent the national population and the findings may not adequately represent the same assumptions for other towns.

Despite these limitations, one thing is clear, parents do their best to protect their children from harm. My survey findings are optimistic; they revealed that the educated, wealthy parents in my community are making an effort and willing to try new methods to protect their children from potential harmful effects of media. Experts attest that the way parents protect their children, “must be refined to accommodate the fast-changing landscape that is populated by complex and intensively used media forms such as video games, social media, and mobile apps” (Jiow, Lim, & Lin, 2017, p. 309). My results reflect that parents are willing to put in the effort to ensure their children are being protected from damaging media content as it evolves over time. Although they may not be aware of the technical media literacy terms, they still provide an environment for their children to partake in safe media practices, especially for their younger children. For example, there is no correlation between commute time and parents protecting their children from media; this shows that parents who want to institute practices to protect their children will, no matter the limitation. Additionally, there are many parental mediation techniques that parents can engage in; although this survey only gave the option for three, parents’ employment of all three showed that parents are willing to situationally adjust their styles to their children’s benefit. Due to the guidance they had provided their children when they were younger, parents trust their older children to make responsible media decisions. Given the awareness of the problem and parents’ willingness to protect their children, perhaps media literacy educators want to focus more on educating parents as much as kids. Parents can then receive greater knowledge on the topic and can make more informed decisions regarding children and their media practices.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Survey Items

Q1 You are invited to participate in a study regarding children's increasing exposure to media. I am interested in learning how parents are dealing with the challenges of raising children in a screen-filled world. Your individual responses will be kept completely confidential. They will not be disclosed to the general public and will not be traced back to you. In any written reports or publications, no participant other than the researcher will be identified, and only anonymous data reports will be presented.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. This study is in the format of an online survey. This should take you around 8 minutes to complete. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you are uncomfortable with the questions, you may stop the survey at any time. If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please e-mail mgrasso@bryant.edu (Marissa Grasso, student). If you have any additional questions, I will be happy to answer them.

Please consent below if you decide to participate. By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are a parent, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason, without consequences.

- I consent, begin the survey
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Q2 How many television sets are in your household?

- None
- One to Two
- Three to Four
- Five to Six
- Seven +

Q3 How many devices are in your household allow connection to the internet (e.g. laptop, tablet, smartphone, etc.)?

- None
- One to Two
- Three to Four
- Five to Six

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Seven +

Q4 How many of your children have their own iPads or tablets?

One

Two

Three

Four

Five +

Q5 What is the youngest age that your children received their own iPad or tablet?

Child 1

Child 2

Child 3

Child 4

Child 5

Q6 How many of your children have smartphones?

One

Two

Three

Four

Five +

Q7 At what age did each of your children get smartphones?

Child 1

Child 2

Child 3

Child 4

Child 5

Parents & Media

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Q8 In general, how closely do you monitor your children's media usage?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes
- Almost Always
- Always

Q9 In general, do you set restrictions on your children's media usage?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes
- Almost Always
- Always

Q10 If yes, how do you restrict your children's media usage?

Q11 In general, how often is the television on at dinner time?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes
- Almost Always
- Always

Q12 In general, how often does the television get left on for background noise when your children are playing?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes

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- Almost Always
- Always

Q13 In general, how often do you allow your children to watch television before being put to bed?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes
- Almost Always
- Always

Q14 In general, how often do you allow your children to play on an internet device before bed?

- Never
- Almost Never
- Sometimes
- Almost Always
- Always

Media Literacy

Q15 Experts attest that media literacy is the solution to protecting children in a hyper-media world. Media literacy is the learned ability to read, interpret, critically assess, and productively use media texts.

Q16 Prior to that brief introduction, have you heard of media literacy?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

Q17 Have you heard of parental mediation?

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- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

Q18 Parents commonly use mediation techniques, although they may not be familiar with the names of them. **Coviewing** media is when parents view media with their children, asking questions and answering any children's questions that come up. **Active mediation** is talking to children about media content both with and away from media. **Restrictive mediation** is setting rules and restrictions on what a child can view and for how long.

Q19 Of these techniques, which do you most generally partake in? Check all that apply

- Coviewing
- Active Mediation
- Restrictive Mediation

Q20 Which technique, if any, do you find most beneficial to your child?

- Coviewing
- Active Mediation
- Restrictive Mediation

Q21 In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *most* kid(s)?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q22 In general, do you agree that media have a negative effect on *your* kid(s)?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree

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- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q23 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

Q24 What is your marital status?

- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married

Q25 What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 64
- 65 - 74
- 75 - 84
- 85 or older

Q26 What is your employment status?

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Unemployed looking for work
- Unemployed not looking for work

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- Retired
- Student
- Disabled

Q27 How far is your commute to work, if applicable?

Miles

Q28 What is your annual household income level?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 - \$19,999
- \$20,000 - \$29,999
- \$30,000 - \$39,999
- \$40,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$59,999
- \$60,000 - \$69,999
- \$70,000 - \$79,999
- \$80,000 - \$89,999
- \$90,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$149,999
- More than \$150,000

Q29 How many children do you have?

Q30 How old is your youngest child?

Q31 How old is your oldest child?

Q32 What is the highest degree of education you have obtained?

- Less than high school

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- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2 year degree
- 4 year degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate

Q33 What is your occupation?

Final Comments

Q34 Please feel free to leave any additional comments

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