Notions of Children and Childhood
Parents Talking about Children’s TV-habits

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Introduction

Television is a fact of Swedish children's everyday life. Nearly all children have access to a television set. On an average day about 75% of the children between 3-10 years old watch TV and they watch in average around 90 minutes (Filipson, 1997). Consequently parents are faced with handling their children's daily TV viewing. I believe, based on the arguments below, that there are few child activities that have received so much public attention during recent years as children's TV-habits.

Numerous studies have been made in the field of TV-research. One area of investigation is concentrated on the eventual effect of watching TV, primarily the effect of watching violent programs. The ways to explain the effect have varied. The social learning model is one example. The assumption being tested is whether or not children imitate the acts shown on TV. Researchers have considered variations in portrayals of violence, program format and variations in children's age and sex (Kniveton, 1976). One of the main criticisms of them all is that they lack ecological validity, i.e., that it is difficult to generalize the results from a laboratory experiment to real life situations. A second explanation used is that watching TV would lead to a state of arousal which then in turn leads to aggression and violent behavior. Rice, Huston and Wright (1983) have for example studied the effects of television's format on children. They argue that loud-noised and action packed programs may induce arousal, which under certain circumstances will lead to aggressive behavior. A third approach to explaining the effects of watching TV is the cultivation hypotheses, i.e. that watching TV gradually affects our view of the world around us. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1986) claim that people who watch a large amount of TV are influenced in the sense that they judge the world around them partly based on their experience with the "TV-world". They might, for example, overestimate the number of crimes in society.

In Sweden there exists a large longitudinal project, started in the middle of the seventies, about the effect of watching TV on children called Mediapanel. The project has resulted in a number of reports dealing with both aggressive behavior, the risk of children being frightened as a result of watching TV-programs and the effect of watching TV on children's school performance. To summarize their results, these researchers talk about positive and negative
circle effects. By negative circle effects they mean that children who watch a large amount of TV become more aggressive and then watch even more television (Sonesson, 1989). A positive circle effect is, for example, that children who are encouraged to watch educational programs, like Sesame Street, are then later more successful in school and eventually are more inclined to use TV as a resource for knowledge, i.e. by watching informative programs (Jönsson, 1985). Roe (1993) also talks about negative circle effects but he stresses the fact that it is children who are already in trouble who watch the most TV, i.e., that watching TV is an effect not a cause.

Looking at effects of watching TV is not the only area of media research. Another is to study how the audience reads and understands TV-programs. This line of research suggests an active viewer who is capable of making choices on what to watch and who interprets what is seen in her/his own ways. Several studies have been conducted on what and how children understand when they watch TV (see for example Collins, 1983; Pingree, 1984). One recent study is Rydin (1996) who watched a Swedish children's program, a modern version of Sleeping Beauty, together with a group of six- and eight-year-old children. Afterwards she interviewed them about the program and they also drew pictures from various sequences of the show. Rydin's main interest is children's TV-literacy, i.e., to what extent they understand narrative codes used in TV-programs. The results show that the children retold the program in different ways. Some concentrated more on parts of the plot whereas others retold the whole story. According to Rydin (1996) it was mainly the older children who included several episodes in their story. The younger children concentrated more on some dramatic event. The children also showed variations in the capacity to detect that the underlying theme of the program was that of Sleeping Beauty.

In Sweden, as in other countries, there is an interest in this issue also on a political level. During the parliamentary session of 1994/95 at least 14 motions argued for more restriction of violence shown on TV. Under the Department of Culture there is a council Våldsskildringsrådet whose main duty is to work against the displaying of violence in moving pictures. In the fall of 1995 the council, together with Riksförbundet hem och skola (The National Home and School Federation), arranged conferences that concerned children and their access to the violence shown on TV. The interest in the issue of children and TV has also
led to other actions against the perceived dangers of television. Barnombudsmannen (the Children’s Commissioner) and Svenska barnläkarföreningen (the Swedish Pediatricians Association) (1994), for example, published a folder aimed at parents, personnel in day-care centers and child health service workers in which they inform that young children do not understand that some parts of what is shown on TV are not for real and that they might be frightened by things that adults do not necessarily perceive as frightening. Parents are encouraged to choose non-violent programs, limit their children’s time in front of the TV, and watch TV together with their children.

Lastly children’s TV-habits are also actively debated in newspapers, on the radio as well as on TV. A search in a database of Swedish newspapers and magazines 1979-1996 gave over 300 articles on the subject of children and TV. One of Sweden’s largest morning papers Dagens Nyheter recently published a series of articles discussing children and TV in which, among other things, researchers from Mediapanel presented their research findings (Lerner, 1997a). The article series also included an interview with the chairperson of Väldsskildringsrådet. She claimed that she did not believe in a simple connection between watching violence and being violent. She was concerned however that children might become frightened by watching too much violence on TV. She also stressed her belief in the importance of media education in school (Lerner, 1997b).

As shown above, there exists an active debate in Sweden today about children’s TV-habits and its possible negative effects. The fact that it is such a large issue and that current statistics at the same time show that children are watching a fair amount of TV makes it an interesting topic to focus on. Inspired by the words of Foucault (1976/1990, p. 11) that

"the central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said"
the purpose of this study is not to investigate the effects of watching TV, how children understand TV, or what actions should be taken to limit children’s access to TV. The interest is instead on the talk about children’s use of television. More specifically, I have chosen to focus on one group faced with handling children’s TV-habits in their everyday lives, namely parents. The purpose of this study is to investigate what notions of children and childhood appear when parents talk about children’s TV-habits.

Buckingham (1993, 1996) has conducted studies which in some parts are similar to this study. His main data consisted of group interviews with children, ranging from 6-16 years old, about various aspects of watching TV, such as what they like to watch on TV, what they find upsetting, the relationship between TV and reality. The interviews were analyzed in order to investigate how children perceive and make sense of what they watch on TV. The results show that children are aware of the perceived negative effects of TV. But like adults, children claim not to be affected themselves by TV, but displace the perceived effects onto other people, such as younger children. Another finding is that the children argued that even though one realizes that something shown on TV is fictional, it doesn’t always mean that one can distance oneself from the emotional response provoked by the program. The children also said that real violence on the news is sometimes more frightening than fictional violence. Buckingham (1993, 1996) also shows that talk about TV is a social act. For example, children sometimes use discussions about TV to gain status in relation to other children. In some of the interview groups, it gave a higher status to say that one was allowed to watch a program aimed at adults. Another strategy was to devalue the positions of the other children in the group by referring to their preferred TV shows as ‘childish’.

Apart from the group interviews, Buckingham (1993, 1996) also conducted separate interviews with some of the children and their parents. These interviews focused on how the children’s TV-viewing was regulated at home. As it turned out, all parents were concerned about the issue of children’s TV-habits but the way they regulated their children’s viewing varied. The parental authority was not absolute either, both children and parents told about incidents where the children had watched programs that their parents had not approved of. The parts of Buckingham’s (1993, 1996) studies that concern parental ideas about children’s TV-habits are most relevant to my study. My research interest differs from Buckingham’s
(1993, 1996) however, in the sense that my study focuses more specifically on the underlying common assumptions about children and childhood that arise in parent’s discussions about children’s TV-habits. To begin with, it is therefore necessary to examine previous research and its contributions to the understanding of parental ideas and notions of children and childhood.

**Parental ideas of children and childhood**

Different parental ideas of children and childhood can be found in studies in more than one discipline. In psychology today the cognitive paradigm is widely used to investigate parents’ ideas about children and childrearing. Numerous attempts are being made to correlate different childrearing attitudes to different parental behaviors to children’s behavior, emotional development, school success (for reviews see for example Sigel, 1985; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Smetana, 1994). A common feature of these psychological studies however, is that despite their differences, they are done in a tradition where the focus is on the child and not on the concept of childhood.

In the field of anthropology it is possible to find studies that show that the definitions of childhood are not universal. These studies show how children and childhood are perceived differently in various cultures. LaFontaine (1986) argues that if we want to compare different ways of behaving towards children, it is important to take into consideration the different ideas or notions about children that exist in various cultures.

Mead, for example, has studied how much of what is taken for granted as being characteristic of children and childhood is a result of nature or of nurture. Her findings support the claim that the way we look upon children and how we raise them are to a large extent a result of culture. Mead (1949) for example showed that the stormy years of puberty, which at that time in America was seen as a biological fact, was unknown in Samoa.

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1 “Cognition refers to the mental processes of perception, memory, and information processing by which the individual acquires knowledge, solves problems, and plans for the future.” (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith & Hilgard, 1987, p. 8)
In other anthropological studies focusing primarily on language socialization, it is also possible to find different notions of children and childhood. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) have found that, depending on how children are perceived and what notions of children exist in a particular culture, the adults’ way of communicating with the children vary. Another researcher in the field of language socialization is Kulick (1992) who did fieldwork in a village in Papua New Guinea. He partly explains that the adults do not try to teach the children the dying village language by the fact that they view children as stubborn and big-headed. Therefore, adults see no point in trying to teach children a language which they, according to the adults, have chosen not to learn.

An area in which both anthropologists and sociologists study different notions of children and childhood is the field of ‘sociology of childhood’ (James & Prout, 1990). One of the questions investigated in this field is in what way shared notions of children and childhood in a particular culture, may influence how children and their activities are evaluated. For the purpose of this study, I refer to three studies and their findings of different and sometimes conflicting notions of children and childhood.

Alderson (1994) interviewed chronically ill 8-15-year-old children, their parents and some of the health professionals involved in the children’s medical treatment about what age they find it appropriate to include children in the decision making about their medical treatment. The results show that some children want to decide for themselves and some want to place the responsibility on their parents. Alderson (1994) argues that children are usually not seen to be able to make decisions about their treatment. One reason for that, she writes, is that psychological theories about children that claim that young children do not have a clear sense of identity have been influential. Therefore it is more likely that children’s integrity is violated because, if they are perceived as not having a sense of identity, there is no boundary that can be violated. In addition, if they lack a sense of identity they cannot have the ability to decide over their own body.

A similar argument is made by Morrow (1994) who studied children’s work outside of school in England. She let children aged 11-16 write essays about what kind of work they do. The results show that children do a considerable amount of work, which Morrow (1994) divides
into four categories: wage labor, self-employment such as baby-sitting, helping in family businesses, and domestic labor. Nevertheless, Morrow (1994) argues, the dominant view in England is that children do not work. This she explains by the fact that the notion of children is that they are irresponsible and since one has to be responsible to carry out a job, children’s work is made invisible.

Mayall (1994) has also reasoned in terms of different views of children. She shows that when children operate in different settings, they may encounter adults who have divergent views of children and who therefore demand different things of them. Mayall (1994) has spent time in a primary school talking both to the children, some of the mothers and teachers. According to Mayall (1994) teachers in their work, are guided by psychological theories about children. The primary task for teachers is to teach and socialize children according to what they consider to be “a good child”. At home, Mayall argues, children are seen more as individuals with agency. The mothers also have other responsibilities besides taking care of the children at home, which makes them appreciate the children’s own initiatives and independent activities.

Some studies have a more explicit focus on notions of children and childhood that appear in parents’ discussions about children.

Haavind (1987) interviewed Norwegian mothers of four-year-olds about how they organize life. The study concentrates on how mothers perceive, understand, and respond to their children’s development. Haavind (1987) describes what the mothers believe children are able to do and how they react when their expectations are not fulfilled. She argues that some mothers see development as coming naturally from children and some see it as their responsibility to take an active part in making development happen, i.e. by teaching and guiding the children.

Halldén (1991, 1992) conducted a similar study. She interviewed Swedish parents about childrearing and child development. By analyzing the accounts given by the parents, Halldén (1991, 1992) concludes that it is possible to see two broad notions of children and child development. She names the notions children as projects and children as beings. The notion
of children as projects implies that parents have a responsibility to direct, control, and plan children’s childhoods in order to arrange an optimal developmental situation. The notion of children as beings, on the other hand, is guided by the idea that development occurs naturally and is not affected by parental influence. Underlying both of these notions, according to Halldén (1991, 1992), are the ideas of children as individuals and children as being emotionally valuable.

Ribbens (1994), who defines her study as a feminist sociology of childrearing, interviewed English mothers about their daily life with children. She argues that the accounts given by the mothers give rise to three notions of children: children as natural innocents, little devils and small people. According to Ribbens (1994), these different notions have an impact on how children’s behavior is perceived and how parents react to that particular behavior. If children are seen as natural innocents the role of parents is to interfere as little as possible and to respond to a child’s needs as expressed by the child. The notion of children as little devils implies that children are in need of firm adult supervision and that adults are the ones who best define children’s needs. Seeing children as small people does not, according to Ribbens (1994), give rise to a clear ideology of how to handle children. Instead, she asserts that this notion of children implies a negotiating way of raising children. The boundary between children and adults also becomes less clear since a child is seen as just another individual.

To summarize this introduction, my study takes its point of departure in the assumption that the meaning given to what it is to be a child and what constitutes childhood, is part of culture and, as such, is transformed through time and space. It is assumed that there exist in society notions about what children ought to do or not to do, what they ought to know and not to know about, what is normal and not normal in relation to children, etc. These notions taken together can give an image of what is seen to be an appropriate or an inappropriate childhood.

The general purpose of my study is to examine what different notions of children and childhood emerge when parents talk about children’s TV-habits. More specifically, this paper concentrates on two aspects of children’s use of television in which parents’ concern about protecting children becomes evident. The two aspects are: the question of whether children
should be allowed to watch the news and the question of limiting the time children are allowed to spend in front of the TV.

**The study**

I interviewed a group of children and their parents. The interviews with the parents are the subject of this paper. Contact with the families was established through two public day-care centers, two public after-school centers and two public grade-school classes. The staff at the centers and the teachers were informed about the study and asked to distribute written information about the study to the parents. The parents were asked for written consent for their child to participate in the study. The children were asked orally before the interview if they agreed to participate. After the interviews with the children had been conducted, their parents were contacted over the telephone. They were asked if they also wanted to participate. The interviews with the parents were conducted at a time and location of their choice, in all but two cases this was in their home. The other two interviews took place at the interviewee’s workplace.

Nineteen interviews with parents were done. In ten of the families their six-year-old child were also interviewed; in eight, their ten-year-old and in one, both their six- and ten-year-old. In nine of the interviews both parents participated, in the other ten only the mother participated. The aim was to interview children and parents from a variety of families: those with younger and older children, girls and boys, single parents. This was done to obtain information from families with varying backgrounds. As it turned out, eight families were single parent families, four families had an immigrant background in the sense that at least one of the parents had immigrated to Sweden. In eight of the families, the interviewed child was a girl, in ten a boy, and in one a girl and a boy. Three families had only one child. All families, but one, lived in a fairly recently built area of multi-storey buildings and row houses. The remaining family lived in an older multi-storey building in a nearby area. Parents of eight of the interviewed children chose not to participate in the study. The main reason given was language difficulties.
The interviews were semi-structured. The aim was to create a situation where it was possible for the interviewee to reflect on the topic talked about and to feel free to express a variety of accounts. Since there exists an active debate about the negative effects of watching television, I as a researcher risked being seen as someone who had the opinion that children should not watch television. To open up a more unconstrained interview, I tried to emphasize that it was not my aim to find a right way of handling children’s television consumption but that I was instead interested in different ways of thinking and reasoning. I tried to ask open-ended questions and to follow up the answers or initiatives from the interviewees. A sample of topics guided the interview. Examples of these topics are: who did the parent think should decide what the children were allowed to watch; what were the children not allowed to watch and why; what did the parents think watching TV could lead to. The topics were not covered in a predetermined order. Sometimes the parents themselves introduced a topic and then I followed up their line of thinking. In order to avoid discussions about an issue only in general terms, I asked the parents to describe how they acted in specific situations. This led to reasonings both about goals and ambitions and about concrete occasions in which the parents sometimes claimed not to live up to their ambitions. The interview was concentrated around the six- or ten-year-old child, but ended up also being about siblings’ television habits and the parents’ own preferences. No clear distinction was made between watching TV-programs and recorded, rented or bought video-programs. Because of the open character of the interview, the interviews turned out differently. The parents could choose to focus on various aspects of children’s use of television.

The interviews were recorded and averaged about one hour. All the interviews were transcribed in extenso by an assistant. Thereafter, I listened to the tapes and completed the transcriptions. In the analysis the aim was to find different themes in the accounts and to understand parents’ ways of reasoning and how they explained their accounts. This was done by careful reading and rereading of the transcriptions. In that process different topics were found, categorized and coded. Lastly the analyzing of these different accounts and different ways of reasoning made it possible to formulate different notions of childhood. In line with the purpose of the study and the method applied, it is the presence, not the frequency, of an account or notion that is relevant. For the purpose of this paper the two topics, news watching
and time-limiting, in which parents' concern of protecting children became evident, are analyzed.

**Reflection upon interviews as research method**

Kvale (1996) uses two metaphors when he describes the implications of different theoretical understandings of interview research. In one the interviewer is seen as a miner who is supposed to dig for information that is believed to be hidden inside the interviewee. Knowledge is thus seen as given or existing and waiting to be found. It then becomes the interviewer’s task to find a way to gain access to this knowledge. What is said in the interview is perceived to be a direct reflection of reality. Silverman (1995) calls this a positivist view of interviews. The alternative, Kvale (1996) suggests, is to see the interviewer as a traveler embarking on a journey. During the journey the interviewer talks to people and listens to their stories about their lives. These stories are then taken home and are later analyzed and reflected upon by the interviewer who finally shares them with others. The journey has then led to new knowledge and has opened up for the possibility that previously taken for granted knowledge is seen in a new light. It might also change the interviewer and the interviewee, since both of them get a chance to reflect upon their beliefs of the topic talked about. Silverman (1995, p. 107) calls this an interactionistic view of interviews. He claims

"that this suggests that we need not hear interview responses simply as true or false reports on reality. Instead we can treat such responses as displays of perspectives and moral forms".

Here the interview situation is seen as a social event, and the outcome of the interview is not only seen as a reflection of a interviewee’s inner beliefs but also as a result of a collective act of conversation. This is the view applied in this study. If one adopts this latter view of interviews one is likely to be faced with the question of whether or not what is said during an interview is relevant outside a specific interview situation. Some researchers who focus more on discourse analyses (see for example Potter & Wetherell, 1987) argue that every situation where people communicate has its own dynamics and what is said does not necessarily reflect what people believe, but is instead a result of their use of the situation to present themselves in
a specific manner. Following this argument the accounts given in an interview are a result of the situation.

For the purpose of this study it is recognized that the accounts given in an interview are influenced by the dynamics in the interview situation. The accounts are, however, also perceived to be related to the person's frame of reference and to have a meaning outside the interview situation as well.

From the field of attitude research, Fazio (1986) claims that people have a collection of attitudes that guides their evaluation of things, situations and their behavior. Fazio (1986) also claims however that some attitudes are more accessible than others and that different situations trigger different attitudes. Applied to an interview situation this means that the situation itself might trigger some attitudes and not others. The same goes for when a topic is introduced by the interviewer or the interviewee. Depending on what kinds of attitudes are actualized, people might answer slightly differently and might present different beliefs about the topic talked about. It is also important to note that the collection of ideas people hold or agree to might be contradictory. Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, and Radley (1988) argue that people are always surrounded by ideological dilemmas. In a given culture conflicts exist between and in-between ideologies, scientific knowledge, commonsense ideas, etc. According to Billig et. al. (1988), people are constantly acting in the presence of these dilemmas, i.e. people have different ideas which are sometimes in conflict with each other. In an interview these conflicting ideas might show up in different ways. For example, a person may present only one side of her/his ideas, different sides may show up in different parts of the interview, or a person may at some point reason around the different ways s/he looks upon a question.

The claim that what is said during an interview is a reflection of a person's frame of reference is also in line with Bourdieu's (1977) term habitus, which stands for a system of dispositions. According to Bourdieu (1977), a person, from the time s/he is born, encounters different phenomena and is faced with handling different situations. The habitus is the incorporation of these experiences. When faced with a new situation, a person's habitus generates strategies for how the person will interpret the situation, how it is evaluated, and how the person will act.
The way people act, how they think and talk are therefore not just a reaction to external or internal factors, but a result of a meeting of different people's habitus and the setting they are in at the time. Applied to an interview this means that the interviewee and the interviewer come to the interview situation with different habitus and what is said is a result of the situation and the persons' frames of references. This opens up the possibility for a person to have and express more than one view, but not give unlimited kinds of accounts, during an interview.

Following the arguments above, the conclusion is that in this study what is said in an interview is neither seen as only a product of the interview situation, nor as a true or false report of reality, but as one of several but not unlimited possibilities of responses a person might give. This means that when people are asked to reflect on children's TV-habits, they may think about children and childhood in a different way than if they were asked to reflect upon children's school achievement. That does not mean that one rather than the other is a person's truer reporting of her or his ideas about children and childhood. The researcher's task is to analyze the accounts as one way of reasoning about children and childhood that is influenced both by the interviewee's lived experience and the ongoing debate about children and TV.

News watching

The purpose of this study is, as mentioned, to analyze accounts that appear in discussions with parents about children's TV-habits to identify what notions of children and childhood emerge. According to the interviewed parents, one problem parents are faced with when it comes to children's use of television is to decide what to allow the children to watch. One area in which this point becomes clear is in the discussions about whether their children are allowed to watch news reporting on television. The issue is, as I see it based on my analysis, to what extent children are seen to be in need of protection from knowing about frightening events in the world and to what extent parents think it is inappropriate parental behavior to limit children's access to reports about unpleasant events or phenomena. It is also a question about parents' responsibility to protect children from becoming frightened, even at the times when they are allowed to hear about some news.
Within the variety of parents’ accounts concerning children watching the news, one line of thought, exemplified in the following excerpt, is that children should not watch the news at all. The parents below say that they do not want their child to watch the news. The news broadcast is said to be filled with reports about events that the child shouldn’t have to see until he gets older.

I: But is it a conscious choice that you don’t watch the news?²
F: Hm.
M: Yes...I think there are so many horrible things...and incomprehensible...and awful things.
I: Hm.
M: And that one might as well save.
(Interview 15, parents of a six-year-old boy)

This way of banning news programs is supported by accounts that children are small/young and as a consequence need a harmonious and safe environment, protected from the knowledge of evil things, to thrive as well as possible. It is also motivated by accounts that children are not mature enough to understand the news. One aspect of that is that children are seen as incapable of placing and understanding the news events in a relevant context, as exemplified in the excerpt below.

F: Yes Henrik usually watches this Lilla AktuellIt (a news program aimed at children, authors note).
M: Never watches any other news.
I: Why?
M: No that’s not for children I think.
I: No.
M: No I really don’t think so...and that I tell them...these programs are not for children when they ask.
I: Because it is too much?
F: No but they don’t understand anything...they can’t place it in a context.
I: Hm.
M: And then there are so many things one can see...they shoot people directly and operations...and a whole lot of weird things they don’t understand anything about...which only makes them confused.
(Interview 3, parents of a ten-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl)

²M: Mother, F: Father, I: Interviewer. In the excerpts all names are fictitious. All excerpts include information about the age and sex of the interviewed child. // means that a part has been omitted. Text in parentheses are the author’s clarifications. The excerpts were translated from Swedish. The aim was to keep them as true to the original as possible. Slight changes, such as omitting repetitions, have been made.
On the opposite side of the question - whether or not children should be allowed to watch the news - is the view that children should be allowed to watch news reporting on television. The parents in the excerpt below say that they watch the news together with the child and then discuss the news events.

I: Does Hans usually watch the news?
M: Yes he does.
F: What we do is that...why there is violence...we see the corpses...and we usually watch together...and discuss why it is in this way...and why it has become this way...and so on.
(Interview 7, parents of a ten-year-old boy)

This view is associated with claims from the parents that the events shown on the news are facts of life. It is said to be a reality that is happening and that it is wrong for parents to try and hide this from the children. Instead, parents it is claimed, have the responsibility to explain the news for children so that they can understand what is going on. In other words the parents say that they have to teach their children to understand and cope with different aspects of life. The mother in the excerpt below says that her children are not interested enough to watch the news on their own initiative but that they watch together with her when she watches the news. She acknowledges that it might be a problem since violence is shown and that it can be frightening, but says at the same time that one has to gradually gain knowledge about the world as one grows up.

M: Yes of course it’s difficult with the news...because there is violence and so...that can be shown there...and it might be more scary since it’s for real...but then when the children grow older...well as it is right now they would never actually watch the news by themselves because they are not interested enough...but if they watch the news it’s because I also watch...and then I would think that it’s OK when we watch together...because at the same time as one gradually grows up one has to gain knowledge about the world...how it is and so on.
(Interview 13, mother of a ten-year-old girl)

There are also accounts that are somewhere in between these two opposing ones described above. These are accounts that state that the children are allowed to watch or at least hear about some news. The aim is however still presented to be to limit the news watching. The family in the excerpt below lets their son watch the news when some major event has occurred. They say that such events attract so much attention and are talked about everywhere that it would be strange not to watch the news reports and talk about the event at home.
F: But then of course when it's major things...like we talk about Estonia (a ferryboat catastrophe in the Baltic Sea in 1994, author’s note) and things like that...then they're allowed to watch...he has been allowed to watch...and then we've been sitting here telling a little bit and so on...it isn't possible to avoid...we can't do that here at home...he hears about it all the time outside...and that seems a bit strange.
(Interview 1, father of a ten-year-old boy)

This way of handling the question of letting children watch the news or not is explained in two different ways. The first is that parents say that they prefer the children not knowing about the news but because it is not possible to hide knowledge from them completely - they hear it from friends, teachers, they can read it on newspaper headlines or hear it on the radio - it is better that they get the information from a parent who can explain to them at the same time. The second way of explaining is parents that say that they think children should be informed about what is going on and therefore they tell the children about the news or allow them to watch some of the news report when some major event has occurred. The reason for limiting the children’s access to news is, in this case, not followed by accounts that children should be protected from knowledge about events, but by accounts that children should be protected from seeing frightening, bloody pictures. The primary worry is thus that children are going to become frightened by the pictures, not by knowledge of live events.

F: // I think that children should be informed...and I think they should get a newspapers picture of what is going on...but perhaps you don’t have to go and feed children with bloody pictures and...and not the worst of it either...even if it is reality...in a way it gets somewhat exploited...to create a sensation and attract viewers...it's apparently some need we humans have to watch these things as well otherwise it wouldn't get as much publicity as it does.
(Interview 15, father of a ten-year-old girl)

The accounts that children risk being frightened, whether by knowledge or pictures, can be supported by descriptions of how the individual child is and/or by descriptions of times when the child has been frightened. This is not necessary though, it can also be explained from the parent’s point of view. If s/he becomes upset by something, children are perceived to react in the same way. Yet another way of reasoning is to refer to children as a collective group having certain characteristics in common for example the inability to understand the news. These different ways of explaining one’s action are not mutually exclusive. In the interviews it is possible to find accounts where the same parent uses more than one way of giving reasons for their actions. The mother below uses two of them: first, she refers to children as a collective
group and says that nine- and ten-year-olds are not so big/mature, then she takes her own point of view and compares children with herself and how she reacts when she sees frightening things.

M: But then I think it is better to sit around a newspaper...because all these scenes that are on TV...it becomes so very clear...and I don't think one is that big at the age of nine to ten years old...even I switch sometimes when they show the most scary things.
(Interview 1, mother of a ten-year-old boy)

Not all parents in the interview group had clear-cut accounts on the question of whether children should be allowed to watch the news or not. There is a group of parents who, in the interviews, do not have an outspoken opinion about whether children should watch the news or whether parents should explain the events. One reason is that their children do not, by their own choice, watch the news on a regular basis, which means that the question has not been raised. In other families the children watch the news, alone or with their parents, but the parents do not state a particular opinion about it. It should also be pointed out that the different types of reasoning above are not mutually exclusive, one parent can on different occasions in the interview slide over from one category to another and reason in more than one way.

Notions of children and childhood

To take this analysis a step further, these parents’ accounts can be compared with other studies of notions of childhood. The accounts that children should not be allowed to watch news reporting give rise to a notion of childhood that can be said to be similar to Ribben’s (1994) notion of children as natural innocents. Accounts that children should be protected by adults from knowing about evil things give an image of the innocent natural child. Children are seen as fragile and incapable of handling this kind of knowledge. Alternatively, they may be able to handle it if forced to, but the adults see no reason why children should be exposed to it sooner than necessary. Especially since it can be argued that in this notion there is also the image that as the child eventually grows up and inevitably gains knowledge about the world, s/he also leaves the phase of childhood that is seen as more admirable and precious than adulthood. This process should therefore be delayed as long as possible.
The second view that children should be allowed to watch the news can be compared with Ribben’s (1994) notion of children as small people. Children are not seen as a special category in need of protection, but as individuals living in the same world as the adults. Eventually children are said to have to face the facts of life and it is not up to parents to delay the process but to introduce children to the world. In the accounts from parents who allow their children to watch the news, there is also a heavy emphasis on the parents’ responsibilities. These parents stress the importance of adult supervision during news-watching. This can be compared with Halldén’s (1992) notion of children as projects. In this view, parents’ actions are seen as important for the outcome of the children, i.e. children’s behavior and development are explained as a result of parental effort.

The third view, which is somewhat in-between the above two, is that children can be allowed to watch some news, but the parents were concerned about the risk of children becoming frightened by the pictures. The view that children should be protected from horrifying pictures also gives rise to a notion of children in need of protection. This time, however, the notion that arises is not that of an innocent child protected by the adult since by watching some news the children are allowed to gain knowledge and access to the adult world. It is more a way of seeing children as little people reacting to the news in a similar way as adults do. The parents compare with themselves who also sometimes become upset from watching the pictures and therefore want to protect their children from experiencing the same fear.

Handling dilemmas

The parents who said that they let their children know about the news because they would find out about it anyway illustrate one dilemma people have to deal with, namely that aims and daily praxis very often are in conflict with each other. This not only applies to this group of parents. Regardless of the view on letting children watch the news or not parents say that it is hard to live up to their own principles. It easily happens that the children watch the news even though the parents disapprove, it is also difficult to always be able to watch together with the children even though they would like to. This is exemplified by the parents below who say that they do not want their children to watch the news but know that they sometimes watch before the children’s programs anyway. The parents say that ideally parents have the
responsibility to prevent their children from watching the news, but when it comes to practice they recognize that the news is shown at a time when it is hard always to be in control.

F: They shouldn't watch Aktuellt (a news program, author's note) but it happens around six o'clock.
I: Those that come on just before the children's programs?
F: Yes that I might not really think of as being appropriate...that it is scheduled before the children’s programs.
I: You were talking about the subject of parents’ responsibility...that one should be there.
M: Yes.
I: But if they don't have the time?
F: Yes...well ideally speaking...but that's not how it is...in practice.
I: No.
M: In our home it's also the case that if the TV is turned on and the kids are sitting there watching...then you don't have the time to be there all the time...because precisely at that time there are so many things to do.
I: Yes exactly.
M: If you're not eating then you're cooking or are on the way somewhere.
(Interview 12, parents of a six-year-old boy)

Confrontations between aims and daily praxis are not unique for the parents in this study. Descriptions of similar dilemmas can be found in earlier research. Goodnow, Bowes, Dawes and Tayler (as cited in Goodnow & Collins, 1990) for example, have studied the dilemma mothers have between wanting a teenager to help around the house and the effort it takes to get her or him to do it. They claim that mothers weigh the need for the task to be done against the hassle of getting the teenager to do it before they try to get some help.

Another form of dilemma is that the same person may have more than one view of children at the same time and those might even be views that are in conflict with each other. Billig et. al. (1988), referred to before, use the term ideological dilemmas when referring to conflicts between different ideas. Dilemmas between ideas about children can be found in the accounts from the interviews. The mother in the excerpt below reasons around what she really thinks about the question whether her son should be allowed to watch the news.
M: I don’t think he is mature enough for news programs yet...those he isn’t allowed to watch...because he can’t really understand it...well if he’s sitting and watching...then we try to talk about it...but it’s almost as you jump yourself when watching news programs.

I: What is it you react to then?

M: I...for example war victims I think...I think it’s very difficult to watch...injured people...especially children who...well not because I want to keep him away from reality but...well what do I really want...yes maybe you do that but...gradually...I don’t know if you can...if you sit and watch like that all the time...it doesn’t seem real...but just something that comes from the TV...I believe that it’s important that he...that this is actually what happened in Bosnia (1995, during the war in former Yugoslavia, author’s note)...to children and so on...and if they just sit and watch without your supervision of the news program...well I don’t think so...I think that it’s important that you sit and talk about what you’re sitting and watching...yes...yes I think that’s what I think.

(Interview 6, mother of a six-year-old boy)

The mother in the excerpt above first argues that her son is not mature enough to watch the news. This can be characterized as a notion of children as fragile and in need of adult protection. Then she realizes that he does watch the news sometimes. She says that they try to talk about what is being shown. She says that she sometimes becomes upset herself when she watches some news. On the other hand, she claims that she does not want to ‘hide reality’ from her son, but then adds that she might want that to some extent. Here there are two notions of children at the same time; on the one hand children should be protected from unpleasant knowledge, but on the other hand parents should introduce them into various aspects of life including the negative sides. Lastly she says that it is important not to see too much and to ensure that an adult watches the news together with the child to be able to explain.

An important point to add to this discussion is that a dilemma concerning children and childhood does not have to be only about different views of children. There can be conflicts between what is seen as good for a child and what is good for the rest of the family. People are therefore operating in a system of ideas trying to decide what is most appropriate and manageable for the moment.

The amount of time spent in front of the screen

In the previous section about news watching, the issue revolved around the program content and whether or not children should be allowed to watch them. It turned out that the parents’
accounts gave rise to different notions of children and childhood. The parents in this study are
talking however, not only about what their children watch but also about the amount of time
they spend in front of the screen. There are several aspects of this issue. The parents discuss,
for example, how much of children’s time is appropriate to be spent in front of the TV, how
that time should be used and what children should do instead. Following from that, it is also
possible to find accounts on whose responsibility it is to limit the time in front of the screen
and whether children can take part in that decision.

One type of account found in the interviews is that children should not watch too much TV.
The excerpt below is taken from the end of an interview. I ask the mother if she wants to add
something. She responds with an argument that it is not only the content of the programs she
is concerned about. She also says that it is annoying that the children watch too much TV, and
includes the fact that they also spend time playing video-games and work/play on the
computer. She presents these as similar activities and she questions whether it is healthy and
says it takes time from other activities.

I: Is there something I should have asked about...that you wanted to have a chance to say
that I haven’t asked about?
M: Well there might be this other dimension...but you may not be interested in this in
your particular study...if you look at the violence on TV...but I also wonder...it’s one
thing what they watch...but then I can kind of reflect about this that they watch at
all...that they sit there in a way...that’s something I can think is sometimes even more...or
irritating in itself...that it takes time away from other things.
I: Yes that it becomes too much.
M: Yes exactly.
I: Regardless of whether or not they are good programs?
M: Yes exactly...it kind of doesn’t matter...it’s the amount in a way...that I can feel that
it...and include video games as well because that’s kind of the same thing...and it usually
sometimes comes to my mind that it can’t be healthy to sit there with...yes...and then I
mean like the computer as well...because we got a computer too and they think it’s fun to
sit by that as well.
(Interview 9, mother of a ten-year-old girl)

The accounts that parents think children watch too much TV are of different kinds. It can be,
as in the excerpt above, that ones own children are perceived to watch too much television, or
it can be expressed in terms of children in general who watch too much. Yet another way is
when parents say that children should not watch too much TV but their own children are not
perceived to do so. The extent to which the issue of the time spent in front of the screen is
expressed as a family problem is partly dependent on the agreement between the parents and their children. Children in some families are said to want to watch more than the parents think is appropriate, whereas in other families the parents claim that the children do not pursue the question of expanding their time in front of the screen. One important factor to remember is that the amount of time that is seen as too much TV-watching varies across the families. In the interviews, there are accounts that the children are allowed to watch TV in the mornings and others that it is not permitted. Some parents say that they let the children record programs they are unable to see to watch them at another time and others say they do not allow that. In other words, the amount of time in front of the screen that is seen as appropriate in one family can be perceived as inappropriate in another but both families might, at the same time, agree that children should not watch too much TV.

What then are the reasons given for thinking that children should not watch too much TV? One is that watching TV in itself is not seen as a proper activity. It is claimed to make children passive and dumb. The father in the following excerpt says that he does not want his child to spend too much time in front of the TV, which he calls ‘dumburken’. Watching TV he claims, makes his son passive because he just sits there. Note however that in contrast to the mother in a previous excerpt who said that computer games were comparable to watching TV, this father says that playing computer games is a more active activity.

F: No we try...some children here...it’s not totally forbidden but the idea is that they shouldn’t sit in front of ‘the idiot box’ all day long.
I: Why don’t you want him to do that?
F: Well he becomes kind of passive...he just sits there and watches...he can sit in front of this PC...he got computer games...there he can also spend an hour...he goes to some acquaintances who have it and then he doesn’t want to leave but wants to return the next day again...but it’s a little bit different...at least then one is doing something...but here one just sits still...no we don’t want him to watch that much and sit passively in front of it.
(Interview 18, father of a six-year-old boy)

Televison is also described as a threat to children and family life. One way this is done is to stress the importance of not allowing the TV to rule the family. There are times when the parents want to undertake activities together as a family and they do not want them to be

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3 In Sweden *dumburken* is a known term for a TV when it is described in a negative way, literally ‘the stupid can’. Can be compared to the English terms ‘goggle box’ or ‘idiot box’.
scheduled around the time a particular show is shown on TV. This is also an argument used for not allowing children to watch TV on weekend mornings. If the children watch TV in the morning, it is said to be hard to motivate them to do other things with the family. In the excerpt below, the mother has explained that they had more TV-channels where they lived before. I ask her if they considered having Channel 3, which shows a fair amount of cartoons, in their new home as well. She responds with an argument that there are enough children’s programs on the channels they have. If they had Channel 3 as well, the son would have access to more children’s programs on weekend mornings and that would interfere with family activities.

I: You don’t consider having channel 3 so that he could get that?  
M: No...no I don’t think that’s necessary...you’re working and they are at the day care and so on...and then in the evenings...as it goes on...and then they always show some children’s programs in the evening every evening...on Friday it is Disney-hour (One hour of Disney-cartoons, author’s note)...then the children’s programs are a little bit longer...a little bit later but that doesn’t matter because then the weekend comes...well on the weekends there isn’t anything in the evening right...except for reruns which usually run in the mornings...I think that is quite enough...if you’re going somewhere in the middle of the day then the child isn’t coming because then there are children’s programs and so on...then it’s better the way it is because otherwise one is controlled by it.  
(Interview 16, mother of a six-year-old boy)

There are also accounts of families who have tried to ban the TV for some evenings to be able to do other things together. Sometimes it is perceived to be a success but other times, as one family described it in a self-ironic way, the image of the happy family who is engaged in parlor games is destroyed by arguments about the rules of the game.

Another aspect of the TV as a threat is when children are described as victims of the TV. The TV is then described as a ‘magnet’ which attracts children who then, when it is taken to the extreme, are unable to stop watching. Together with the ambition that children should limit their time in front of the screen, this leaves the parents with the responsibility to control the access to the TV. The excerpt below starts right after the mother has asked me if I read a particular magazine about culture and literature for children.

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4 The term is found in interview 9.
M: And it’s great to have it...really great...and there Mats Wahl...who is a writer of books for youth once said that he believed that it was so important for us adults...that we must act as a filter for the children...and I think that it was so well said...since they watch so much rubbish...which is poured on the children...so we have to be there and serve as a filter and sort...and do the first sorting...otherwise they will go under.

I: Yes they can’t see that for themselves?

M: No.

I: Why not?

M: Yes why not...well I don’t think so.

F: Yes but it’s some kind of a perspective from above isn’t it...that’s a little bit part of our responsibility...we have an ideal and we to some extent want to forward that...isn’t that what it’s all about...(I: Hm)....(M: Hm)...we don’t want him to end up as a slapphuvud

M: A victim...because that’s how it feels.

I: Hm.

F: Because it all comes down to giving them alternatives...that this is one but there are so many others...discover them as well and then when you are an adult you can make your own choices anyway.

(Interview 15, parents of a six-year-old boy)

The above excerpt also touches on the next reason for not wanting children to watch too much TV: it is said that watching TV takes time from other activities the parents would like their children to engage in. In the interviews there are accounts about the wish that children would play more. The parents say that they want their children to be outside in the fresh air, moving around and playing with friends. They also want them to experience the world of books and engage in creative activities. Watching TV is said to be too one-sided, and that children need varying activities. The mother in the following excerpt has just said that she thinks that her daughter watches too much TV. She has also said that it is hard to motivate the child to do anything else and explained that by saying that she thinks that there are not any places around for children to be at. In the excerpt she explains why she does not want her daughter to watch too much TV.

I: Why don’t you think she should watch that much TV?

M: She needs to move around...she needs to play and to be with other children and not to sit in front of the TV.

(Interview 4, mother of ten-year-old girl)

It is also possible, however, to find accounts in the interviews that children are not controlled by the TV. There are parents who claim that they think that their children choose between programs they want to watch and are capable of turning off the TV. The TV is presented not

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5 Slapphuvud may be translated to lazy head and should in this context be understood as intellectually weakened, said in an ironic tone.
as a magnet but as a 'machine'\(^6\) like any other household appliance that is under control and turned off when there is no interest in using it.

M: // It is often the case that I actually think that the children are starting to become a little bit more discriminating so that they sometimes can think that it's trash...if I say that this isn't any good...are you really going to watch this...can't you do something else instead...and then it can happen pretty often that they say...no this is actually not good and turn it off...I still think that they watch a little bit too much TV...but they don't like everything and that at least raises some hope for the future. (Interview 13, mother of a ten-year-old girl)

Even though this mother does not present her children as victims of the TV, but instead as able to control their watching, she still thinks that they watch too much and she would like to limit their watching. In other words, believing that children are not controlled by the TV does not mean that parents do not think that their children would watch more than the parents feel is appropriate if they were allowed to decide completely by themselves. Therefore, parents can think it is their responsibility to limit their children's watching, even though they believe that their children are able to regulate their own watching to a certain extent.

So far, the fact that parents say that they want to limit the time spent in front of the TV, why they want the children to do something else and whether or not children are able to limit the time by themselves, have been covered. Another type of reasoning around the issue of the time spent in front of the screen is how that time is used. One aspect is to sit idly and watch TV, i.e. sitting and watching unreflectively at whatever is shown. There are accounts in which parents explain the ways they are trying to limit this type of watching. One way is to have an ambition that the TV should only be turned on while someone is watching, that is it should not be used as background noise. Another way, which is exemplified in the following excerpt, is to have a rule that the children are allowed to watch only a certain number of programs every day in order to be forced to actively choose the programs they want to watch.

\(^6\) The term is found in interview I.
M: // We usually do not create a whole set of rules but we have tried to do so that when they start to get out of line you usually say no stop here...because for a while we thought...it happens periodically as well...I mean seasons and so on...during the dark season they watch much much more...they do...it's obvious...but then they watch very little in the summer and then...what was it I was going to answer...no but we started to do this for a while...because it concerned both the TV and the video and video games...we told both Elin and Pontus that they could choose and watch only two programs every evening...because they feel kind of that it's good this to try...we try to fight this that they sit and watch one and then they get stuck watching the next one and the next one and the next one...but you should more...know which shows I want to watch...this and that I'm going to watch.

(Interview 9, mother to a ten-year-old girl)

This mother went on to explain that this was not an absolute rule in the sense that it did not really matter if the children watched two or three programs, but that the main point was that they were forced to make a choice in order to prevent them from sitting and watching whatever is shown the entire evening. It is interesting to note that there are times when the parents seem to accept idle watching of TV and that is on Friday and Saturday evenings when the whole family watches some family entertainment program together.

Notions of children and childhood

When the parents talked about the time spent in front of the TV and the possibility for children to control the amount of time, two opposite notions of children and childhood emerged. One is the notion of children as victims of the TV. These are children who are perceived to be seduced by the TV and unable to stop watching of their own free will. It is also an image of children who are overwhelmed by the information coming from the TV. Children are thus seen as vulnerable and an easy target for the messages shown on TV. When children are seen as victims of the TV, parents become important since they are left with the responsibility to limit the time in front of the screen and filter the information and once again Halldén's (1992) notion of children as projects reappears. Similar notions of children have been found elsewhere. Buckingham (1994) claims that a view of children as blank slates can be discovered in much of the research on the effects of watching TV. He also says that a view of vulnerable children in need of adult protection can be found in media debates concerning the general negative influence of watching TV.

The other view that emerges is the notion of competent children. Here, children are perceived to be able to value a program and to have the potential to decide what to watch and for how
long. This notion of children is more in line with how, according to Buckingham (1994), researchers in the field of Cultural Studies look upon TV-viewers. There, emphasis is put on the assumption that texts can be read in varying ways and that meaning is actively constructed by an active viewer. If one perceives that children are similar to adult viewers in the sense that they too are active viewers, the view can be compared with Ribben’s (1994) notion of children as small people.

The accounts of children watching too much TV, that watching TV takes time from other activities and that watching idly is not appreciated by the parents, are also interesting. Together, these accounts give rise to a notion of a childhood where it is important that time is used efficiently and that children are kept active. The activities that are most valued are those in which children are perceived to do things and take initiatives; examples put forward by the parents are playing, moving around and/or creating something. If they watch TV, which is not seen to be as suitable as the other activities, they should at least have taken an active decision on what to watch and preferably this should be something useful like a children’s program they can learn something from. As I see it, this is not childhood as being, but a well-structured efficient childhood where an emphasis is put on the responsibility of parents to make sure that children make the best use of their time.

Handling dilemmas

In the discussions about the amount of time spent in front of the screen, the parents once again stress their responsibility as parents to control the children and their access to the TV. On this issue, however, the conflict between aims and daily practices becomes clear. In a family numerous activities are going on simultaneously and one is faced with the problem of compromising between the wishes of more than one family member and one’s own ambitions. The parents talked about how it is easy to turn to the TV when they need for example to get something accomplished around the house. Then they know where the children are and that they are quiet and occupied for a while. Some parents in this study also explain that it takes effort to set limits for the children and especially to enforce them. In situations when children want to watch more than what is allowed, parents have to mobilize some effort to say no, otherwise it easily happens that the children end up in front of the TV no matter what the parents’ initial intentions were. The mother in the excerpt below exemplifies this when she
says she sometimes has to make an effort to make sure her son does not watch too much TV. She says that she would prefer him to be outside playing.

M: I wouldn’t say that it’s something easy...that you just...and if the family is a bit stressed out and maybe...well in one way or another and you don’t have the energy to be aware...yes sit in front of the TV then it gets a little bit quieter...that I can understand because I have to make an effort.
I: Yes in order not to?
M: So that he won’t sit and watch all kinds of things...and that I wouldn’t want...I don’t want that...so that’s why you make an effort.
I: Why don’t you want him to watch?
M: Well I want him to play...to be outside and play I think those things are the best...that I have gotten into my mind that that is to play...to build and play and be outside and ride a bike and be with friends...that I think is much better than to watch TV.
(Interview 6, mother of a six-year-old boy)

There are elements that are perceived to help parents limit the time in front of the screen. Firstly, the access and the interest from the children to watch TV is limited by factors such as bedtimes and seasons. The parents explained in the interviews that they believed that their children watched more TV in the winter then in the summer because then it is easier to be outside playing in summer. Parents with children who are engaged in different activities like sports and other organized hobbies talked about how that limited the time spent in front of the screen. There are also parents who have deliberately chosen to have only a few TV-channels to limit the amount of situations where they are forced to set restrictions.

The stress on parental responsibility is also interesting from another aspect: the extent to which children are believed to also need time away from parents and their authority? The ideological dilemma is between the responsibility one is believed to have as a parent to create a sound existence for children, and the perceived need for children to have some space where they can decide for themselves without demands from adults. It is possible to find accounts that it is good for children to play outside because then they are away from adult supervision. This is motivated in various ways. First of all, they are freer to do what they want and, secondly, they are forced to settle their own conflicts and come up with things to do. There are also parents who reason around the question if children watch TV as a way to obtain a space of their own where they can find relaxation and escape from the demands put on them by adults. In the excerpt below there is a reasoning around the fact that children who are in day-
care in Sweden and have parents who are engaged in their children’s life are sometimes overwhelmed by adults, who with good intention, overstimulate them.

M: But not Jens (the older brother, author’s note) I don’t read to him anymore.
F: No he goes to school now so he gets pretty much of that thing there...and they get so much...they read to them at the day-care center and everything like that so by God it finally pours out from their ears...sometimes one thinks that they need to be left alone for a while away from all this pedagogic overzeal that exists at all times.
M: Yes they actually need to be left alone sometimes.
F: Maybe that’s what the media offers them then...it gives them some peace and quiet from all these ambitious adults who want to read to them and teach them everything from morning to evening...so it’s also about that...so much is offered to them...not only by media but also by adults who will invest their lives to kind of making it good for them.
(Interview 10, parents of a six-year-old boy)

This excerpt is drawn from one of the interviews in which the parents had a clear opinion about children and their TV habits, and even though they recognized that children might want to use the TV to relax they wanted to limit their son’s access to the TV as much as possible.

**Concluding discussion**

From the arguments above, it is clear that different notions of children and childhood arise when parents are asked to reflect upon children’s TV-habits. Notions which tell us something about common cultural assumptions about children and childhood. In both the discussion about whether or not children should watch the news and about what is the proper amount of time in front of the screen, it is possible to find notions of the innocent child who needs adult protection. Children were for example said to be too young and immature to watch the news. They needed to be protected from information about unpleasant events, i. e. they should have a harmonic and happy childhood. In the discussion about time limits, the need was to be protected from the magnetic power of the TV, which was said to make children passive. Children were not perceived as being able to control their own TV-habits. Watching TV was said to steal playtime from children and family time from the whole family.

In the reasoning around both of the topics, the notion of the competent child can also be found. Here the dividing line between children and adults is not as clear. Children can be said to be perceived as small people who react to their surroundings in a similar manner as adults.
Following this line of thinking children, like any other individual, can be introduced to the facts of life by watching the news. If they were to be protected from some news, it was not explained by asserting that children, as a special category of people, could not handle it, but by arguments that they could become frightened by the pictures in the same manner as an adult. Children were also said to have the capacity to regulate the time spent in front of the screen. This amount of time might, however, not always be in line with what the parents find appropriate. But in this case it is not presented as a notion of children as defenseless victims of the TV but that the children’s and the parent’s opinions about the amount of time are not the same.

In the reasoning both around whether or not children should be allowed to watch the news and in the discussions about the amount of time children should spend in front of the screen, the parents stress the responsibility of parents. The image that comes through is of children as projects. It is said that parents should make sure that children watch only programs that are sanctioned by the parents. Watching TV together with their children is seen as important, both to control what they watch but also to be able to explain. Parents should regulate the time spent in front of the screen, even some of the parents who do not present children as victims of the TV agree with this. Parents have to filter the information that is aimed at their children and make sure that their children are introduced to different kinds of activities. A notion of a well structured and effective childhood appears.

At the same time, however, there are discussions about times when children should be allowed to get away from adult control and demands. One activity which seems to be able to fulfill this need is when children are outside playing. As shown earlier, some parents also consider if children use TV as a way to escape adult demands. This, however, goes against the negative opinion of watching idly and that watching TV by definition is something bad, which I think makes it hard to say that watching TV is a good way for children to relax. There are occasions, though, in the interviews where this kind of watching is described and that is when parents tell about weekend evenings when the whole family sits and watches some entertainment together. This could be seen as idle watching but that is not commented upon. Perhaps this is a situation where a dilemma occurs. When talking about children’s TV-habits, one is concerned about children and that their childhood will be as good and fruitful as
possible; watching TV is then a negative element. On a Friday and Saturday night, however, when the whole family is tired, there are other factors that have to be considered than the wish of creating a pedagogic childhood. One factor might be the wish to do something together as a family, another is the need to create some peace and quiet, then watching TV might be a convenient activity.

An important aspect is that the different notions of children and childhood that have been presented are not mutually exclusive or static. The notions exist parallel to each other and one and the same parent might present different variations of them in different parts of the interviews. Seemingly conflicting notions may also appear at the same time. Sometimes, while talking the parents also seem to discover that their accounts are contradictory and start to reflect upon their ideas and the dilemma they are faced with. An example of this was the mother who reasoned with herself whether she thought children should watch the news or not. Other times the parents introduce a dilemma that they consciously deal with in their everyday life. As when parents talk about conflicts between their aims and daily life and how they have to compromise between more than one family member’s wish and their own plans. One other example was the parents who preferred that their children did not know about the events shown on the news, but since they believed that it was impossible to hide the knowledge completely, they preferred the second best alternative which was to watch some of the news together with the children to be able to explain.

The accounts that these parents present in the interviews are in many ways similar to the ideas presented in the public debates about children and TV. Statements like TV makes children passive or that children need to play instead of watching TV can be found both in research, media debates, in public actions against the perceived threat of children’s TV-habits and in these parent’s accounts. I think it is reasonable to say that parents’ ideas about children’s TV-habits have been influenced by the public debates. This study shows, however, that even though parents might agree to a statement such as: it is not good for children to watch too much television, the concrete implication of what that is said to mean in different families varies. In other words, the amount of time that is considered to be too much and what solution parents say is suitable differ in different families.
Another finding of this study is that there exist conflicting notions of children and childhood, and that parents relate to these in different ways. An example is the discussion about whether or not children should be allowed to watch the news. Some parents take one side and argue either that children should or they should not watch the news. This is motivated by accounts either that children are in need of protection or that they are a part of this society just like any other person. Both of these notions of children and childhood can also be found in the public debate about children. Some parents, however, do not take one side but find themselves in the middle of an ideological dilemma. On the one hand, they want children to be protected from frightening things, and on the other hand, they want to introduce them into the world.
References


The Department of Child Studies

Linköping University hosts an interdisciplinary Institute of Advanced Study known as the Institute of Tema Research. The Institute of Tema Research is divided into five separate departments, each of which administers its own graduate program, and each of which conducts interdisciplinary research on specific, though broadly defined, problem areas, or "themes" (tema in Swedish, hence the name of the Institute). The five departments which compose the Institute of Tema Research are: the Department of Child Studies (Tema B), the Department of Health and Society (Tema H), the Department of Communication Studies (Tema K), the Department of Technology and Social Change (Tema T), and the Department of Water and Environmental Studies (Tema V).

The Department of Child Studies was founded in 1988 to provide a research and learning environment geared toward the theoretical and empirical study of both children and the social and cultural discourses that define what children are and endow them with specific capacities, problems, and subjectivities. A specific target of research is the processes through which understandings of 'normal' children and a 'normal' childhood are constituted, and the roles that children and others play in reinforcing or contesting those understandings. The various research projects carried out at the department focus on understanding the ways in which children interpret their lives, how they communicate with others, and how they produce and/or understand literature, language, mass media and art. Research also documents and analyses the historical processes and patterns of socialization that structure the ways in which childhood and children can be conceived and enacted in various times, places and contexts.

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